

# Gassed and robbed: An emerging motif?

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## Introduction

This paper examines a previously under-explored theme in contemporary legend research; it involves stories of thieves using some kind of gas to render people unconscious and steal their possessions. Writing in *The Observer* newspaper Tom Hall answered a reader's question about stories she had heard of robbers gassing people on night trains in Europe. The journalist did warn readers about theft on trains but assured this particular reader that "rumors of the kind you've heard are wide of the mark" (Hall 2007:8). I published a short piece in *FLS News* (Anderson 2007:6) raising the possibility that such stories had a legendary side to them, and, in turn, this query elicited several other similar stories. In the November issue of *FLS News*, David Hopkin recounted memories of being robbed on a train in Italy in 1988 and said that the use of gas was suggested to him at the time (Hopkin 2007:6).

These stories reveal considerable variation, and are not restricted either to time or in the type of gassing agent used. Jacqueline Simpson noted in *FOAFTALE News* a story of nuns fleeing their convent in Belgium during the war. They reported that during their exodus some kind of soporific powder was thrown over them by spies dressed as women. As Simpson suggests "they were exhausted, but at the same time trying desperately not to fall asleep out on the open road and they 'projected' their own overwhelming urge to sleep by

imagining the powder” (Simpson 2007:2). Simpson’s conclusion was that these fears were “just an illusion born of fear, hunger, exhaustion, possibly building on a basis of rumour” (J. Simpson, personal communication, August 25, 2007).

### **Gassing and urban legend scholarship**

Although the accounts quoted are first hand and hence not typical “friend of a friend” legends there has been some consideration of gassing stories by scholars such as Bengt af Klintberg and Arthur Goldstuck. Klintberg (1986) quotes an article in a Norwegian newspaper with the headline “Train passengers made unconscious by robbers”. The quoted story tells of well-organized bands of robbers from Italy, Yugoslavia and North Africa that drill a fine hole into train compartments to gas and rob the passengers travelling to Paris (1986:183). Another story, which Klintberg calls “Chloroformed and Robbed”, was collected from one of his students. A girl who slept heavily one night in an Italian train station woke up feeling refreshed, but soon discovered she had been gassed and robbed (1986:182). A similar story Klintberg collected from one of his students was of an Albanian man travelling on the train who told the student that he slept with a knife under his pillow and locked the door with a rope, because thieves gassed passengers and robbed them (1986:182).

Goldstuck reported similar stories of people being gassed in their South African homes in his book *The Aardvark and the Caravan* (1999). One such story concerns a couple who fell asleep watching television on their foldout couch in the TV room. They stated when they awoke after the burglary “they were slightly nauseous and their eyes were swollen” due to the aftereffects of being gassed (1999:190). Goldstuck suggests that with security an increasing issue in the suburbs of South Africa these stories are commonly told. He quotes a South African newspaper which reported that “a brazen gang of burglars is putting its victims to sleep before ransacking their homes” (1999:194). At least fifteen cases have been reported (in a three-month period), and the police report they have “no idea what sleep inducing substance is used by the gang” (1999:194).



### Gassing panics

Several gassing panics were reported in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s (Bartholomew 2001:3). These are now interpreted as cases of mass hysteria (2001:95). The terms “imagination” and “mass hysteria” were mentioned in the reporting of the events (Johnson, 1945:175). These stories were confined to particular locations and doctors, at the time, were highly sceptical of their occurrence and a hypothesis of hysteria was put forward (1945:178). Unlike the gassing stories presented in this paper, these gassing events were not associated with robbery. One such case occurred in rural Virginia in 1933-34, where reports of the time identified someone “sneaking up to a home at night and spraying the occupants with a sickly sweet noxious gas” (Bartholomew 2001:81). Police were baffled and unable to identify a single solid clue. It appeared that jittery citizens were smelling odours that were traceable to mundane sources. As the news spread, other people reported similar symptoms. *The New York Times* described Virginia’s phantom “gas thrower” on the front page on January 22, 1934. The article states that families in the county had been “terrified by a stealthy marauder who hurls gas into rooms, overcoming his victims or making them violently ill” (Bartholomew 2001:88).

*The Chicago Herald-American* (September 1944) had an article on its front page titled “Mattoon gets jitters from gas attacks”, about a similar spate of gassings in Mattoon, Illinois (Bartholomew 2001: 102). Melodramatic reportage is likely to have fuelled public anxiety over this “Mattoon Gasser”. The *Chicago Herald-American* article noted “bewildered citizens reeled today under the repeated attacks of a mad anaesthetist who has sprayed a deadly nerve gas into 13 homes and has knocked out 27 known victims” (Bartholomew 2001: 102). Symptoms reported from these panics have included feeling “groggy”, “severe choking sensation and nausea”, “headaches” and “numbness and feeling dizzy” (Bartholomew 2001:89 and 98). Symptoms of this sort often occur in cases of mass psychogenic illness (MPI) which has been defined as the “collective occurrence of physical symptoms and related beliefs among two or more persons in the absence of an identifiable pathogen” (Colligan and Murphy, 1982:33-52).



The Mattoon gassing panic occurred at the height of the Second World War, when public fears over the possible use of poisoned gas also peaked (Ladendorf and Bartholomew 2002:54). This particular gassing panic broke out during a burglary wave and a hunt for an escaped Nazi from a nearby camp (2002:54). It is now felt that coverage in the *Mattoon Journal-Gazette* was instrumental in creating the gasser scare (Ladendorf and Bartholomew 2002:52).

Since the First World War, the use of chemical weapons has been a long-standing fear. Recently, gas has been used both *by* terrorists such as in the Tokyo subway system in 1995 and *against* terrorists in the Moscow Theatre Siege in 2002. The *fear* of being gassed by chemical weapons is far greater than the actual capacity or possible killing power (Jones, Palmer and Wessely 2008:1313). Similar misconceptions are held by the general public concerning issues associated with the fear of crime occurring; “perceived vulnerability to crime is often greater than actual probability of victimization” (Reid, Roberts and Hilliard 1998:313). The current gassing and robbery stories being discussed in this paper have similar characteristics to the examples discussed so far.

### **Systematic analysis of media reports**

The article in *The Observer* newspaper (Hall 2007), noted previously, is not an isolated occurrence of this story. There are accounts of people being gassed in other vehicles such as caravans and motor homes (Gas gangs hit Brits 2006), trucks (Clarke 2002), as well as villas (Family’s gassed and robbed fear 2006) and hotels (Crowley 2003). The reports suggest that some kind of gas had been pumped into the sleeping area, disabling the occupants and thus allowing them to be robbed. The location is usually in Europe: France (Gas gangs hit Brits, 2006), Southern Spain (Family’s gassed and robbed fear, 2006) and Belgium (Clarke 2002). However there are some reports outside of Europe, for example in the Philippines, where shoppers were disabled and robbed in a mall (Atencio 2006:1) and in Turkey where the location was a hotel (Vance 2006:17).

Stories that appear in the media are often sensationalized. For example, there is a story involving Patrick Vieira, a professional soccer player, and his family being gassed (see Table 1). *The Sun*



newspaper reported that gas was “pumped into the air conditioning system” (Flynn 2006:1) of the villa in the south of France, the three occupants rendered unconscious. . . (2006:1). “They woke the next morning. . . [with] shocking headaches” (2006:1). Vieira was described as “groggy”; “doctors examined him before giving him the all-clear to train” (2006:1). The report does not question the gassing. However, much detail is missing from the story. The article stated, “forensic police were able to confirm gas had been pumped in” (2006:1); however, no details are given of how this was established and what kind of gas was used.

In the various stories examined, the use of a specific gas is often mentioned and this is summarized in Table 1. This table contains an overview of the basic characteristics of stories that were found. Nitrous oxide is explicitly mentioned in *The Daily Record* (Nos. 9 and 10 in table) (Fullerton 2005; Vance 2006).

Stories of gassings in hotels are less common than those about caravans, trucks and villas but one story concerned a former chief executive of an insurance firm who claimed that “intruders sprayed them with a toxic gas” (No. 15 in table) in an exclusive hotel in a French resort in 2003 (No. 3 in table). The article in *The Daily Telegraph* did not say what the symptoms were and there is no mention of what kind of gas was suspected. In their statement to the police the couple did not mention gas being used. It is also reported, “they left the door of their room unlocked because they assumed they would be safe inside the hotel complex” (Crowley 2003:15).

Another story, which concerned being gassed and robbed in a hotel, was from the *News of the World* regarding an incident in Turkey. This takes on a slightly different slant as the article said the “tourists were robbed after gas was sprayed in their faces” in a Turkish hotel (No. 10 in table) (Vance 2006:71). This would suggest that they were conscious at the time of the assault and the gas was sprayed directly in their faces, so they may have seen their attackers. There seemed to be confusion regarding their statement, which they say was mistranslated, stating they had not locked their hotel room, which seems to be similar to the other hotel story from France. Again a lack of details in the report leaves many questions unanswered.



N	Date	Country	Location	Perpetrator/thieves	Gas used	Gassing realisation Self/other
1	2000	Belgium	Truck	Unknown	Unknown	Self
2	2002	Belgium	Truck	Unknown	Unknown	Other - Tourist
3	2003	France	Hotel	Unknown	Toxic gas	Self
4	2004	Spain	Truck	Unknown	Unknown	Self
5	2004	Spain	Villa	Eastern Europeans, Russians Ex-special forces commandos	Chl-type gas	Other - Police
6	2004	Spain	Caravan	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
7	2005	Holland	Motorhome	Unknown	Disabling gas	Unknown
8	2005	Spain	Villa	Albanian gangs, Romanian gangs	Unknown	Self
9	2005	Spain	Villa	East Europeans Ex-Kosovan military & police officers	Nitrous oxide	Other - Security guard
10	2006	Turkey	Hotel	Unknown	Nitrous oxide	Self
11	2006	France	Caravan	Albanian gangs	Ether-based	Other - Police
12	2006	Spain	Villa	Columbian gang Eastern Europeans	Anaesthetic gas	Other - Neighbours
13	2006	France	Villa	Unknown	Unknown	Other - Police
14	2006	France & Spain	Motorhome	European immigrants	Ether based substance	Self
15	2007	France	Campervan	Unknown	Sedative gas	Other - Police

Table 1: Systematic analysis of gassing and robbery media stories 2002-2008



Other stories about being gassed and robbed include those told by truckers travelling from Britain to other European countries and being robbed of the goods they are transporting. For example, in 2004 a trucker was reported as being “gassed then robbed twice in just a matter of hours” (‘Don’t relax in the Spanish sunshine’, 2004:5) (No. 4 in table). This is misleading as on reading the article one discovers he claims he was only gassed once but was robbed twice in that time period. He stopped to sleep in a lay-by in southern Spain; he woke up ten hours later with “my head bulging” (2004:5). He reported, “I knew I had been gassed. . .” (2004:5). This article in *Truckstop News* states that he reported what had happened and saw a local doctor but no more details are given (2004:5). There is nothing said about whether it was confirmed that he had been gassed but the report would suggest he was convinced that this was what had happened. Another trucker with a similar story in the *Aberdeen Press & Journal* stated he woke up during a robbery “to find a man rifling through his belongings . . . tried to give chase but was too groggy” (No. 2 in table) (Clarke 2002:1).

*The Birmingham Post* (2006) describes how the British Powerboat Champion Steve Cook and his fiancée were “gassed by Euro-bandits” (No. 14 in table) (Smith 2006:1). They were robbed at service stations in France and Spain as the article stated, “after an ether-based substance had been pumped into their motor home” (2006:1). Another story with the theme of people being gassed and robbed is found in an article from outside Europe in the *Manila Bulletin Online* (Atencio 2006). The article claims that the gang involved sprays some kind of anaesthetic mist in the faces of the victims which

. . . will temporarily paralyze the victim although he will remain standing and conscious of his surrounding. The victim can see and feel everything being done on him but the gas temporarily prevents him from moving or talking or shouting for help. After a minute or two the victim regain(s) his senses and consciousness (Atencio 2006).

Although not specifically referring to this cluster of narratives, Oring notes that “the proliferation of versions of a story about the same or a similar experience tends to undermine the truth of a legend account”



(2008:152). We might expect such stories to be unique happenings – such as the boyfriend's death or the lost/stolen grandmother. But many different versions of a story might make a listener skeptical about whether the story actually happened at all. The gassed and robbed story has multiple versions but this is a common theme in folklore especially when considering crime legends. Oring (2008) goes on to make the suggestion that criminal acts often are repetitious in their nature and, therefore, crime legends recurring in this way would lend weight to the argument that they are actually occurring just as real crimes would. A different version of the same story supports people's belief of another version of the story as evidence that the narrative is true. Instead of what appears to be a fantastical story it would appear to be something commonly experienced—"the extraordinary becomes somewhat ordinary" (2008: 152).

This can be seen in traditional oral transmission of this story as well as media reports and internet discussion groups, and, as Bennett and Smith note, internet dissemination allows the stories to spread in a far faster way than in the past (Bennett and Smith 2007:15). Discussions on the Eurosoc website ([www.eursoc.com](http://www.eursoc.com)) question the type of gas that could be used for these activities and notes the increase in the sales of "narcotic alarm" devices for use in caravans. Similar stories involving motor homes and caravans are a rich topic of conversation on caravanning websites and on their discussion boards. Some postings discount gassing as a "myth" and others say that these events have happened to people they know. Frequently contributors will ask whether this is an urban legend and question the advertisements they have seen in caravanning magazines for devices to detect "sleeping gas" to deter gas attacks. Some suggest that this may be marketing hype by the gas alarm companies, questioning whether there have been any fatalities reported.

### **Official recognition**

The stories outlined above are reported as first- and second-hand accounts. Sometimes the topic of having been gassed either comes from the victims themselves or is suggested by another (see Table 1). The question arises whether it would be physically possible to



gas and rob someone. It would appear that the British Foreign Office believe it is possible as they give advice on their website concerning this.

Mugging incidents have occurred at isolated rest areas on some French motorways, usually those without petrol stations and caf  terias. There is also a continuing problem of burglaries taking place during the night whilst travellers have been asleep in their caravans, mobile homes or other vehicles. Thefts have occurred in rest areas on the A25 (Dunkirk to Lille) and A16 (Calais-Dunkirk) motorways. In some cases, victims had first been rendered unconscious by the thieves using gas. Try to avoid parking in isolated or dark areas of camping grounds or car parks, and consider installing an alarm in your caravan or mobile home (Travel advice by country: France, 2007).

The warning for travelers to France is given official recognition of the reality of this through the agency of the British Foreign Office's own webpage, including advocating the purchase of an alarm. The alarm companies have taken advantage of this, as well as the stories reported in the media, to sell products which claim to protect from such "gas attacks". The websites selling gas detectors for caravans sell the usual kind of safety gas detectors, the kind which allows the caravanners to make sure that their own gas supplies/cookers and equipment are not leaking dangerous emissions. However, one website has a section on "gas stories in the news" and they have special equipment for sale to protect caravanners from being attacked with gas ("Gas stories in the news", 2007). Other websites selling alarms also have stories about drivers and truckers being gassed, for example ([www.gasattackalarm.com/](http://www.gasattackalarm.com/)). Some contributors to discussion websites suggest that the people who are robbed may want an excuse for exposing themselves to danger when perhaps the reason for not waking up during a robbery has been due to alcohol or fatigue. Victims may find the suggestion of having been overcome with gas a suitable explanation for why they did not wake up when the robbery was in progress, and it may be less embarrassing. Discussion websites have also raised the subject of what looks best on an insurance report, forgetting to lock a door or being the victims of a gas attack?



**Specialist knowledge**

In trying to determine the truth of these stories, it seems important to establish whether there actually exists a gas or other substance which can render the victims unconscious in the way the stories suggest. Anaesthetists propose that pumping ether, for example, into a sleeping area would be difficult. Other agents mentioned in the stories include chloroform, nitrous oxide gas, sleeping gas and carbon monoxide but firm evidence of their use is lacking. There is seldom any reference to tests carried out to identify any gas which could have been used during a robbery. Another factor is the lack of medical evidence, with no one reporting having hospital treatment as a result of being gassed. On one of the discussion boards on a caravanning website ("Gassing: A letter from the experts", 2007), a statement from The Royal Society of Anaesthetists' (RSA) clinical adviser, Professor David Hatch, notes the following:

I can give you a categorical assurance that it would not be possible to render someone unconscious with ether without their knowledge, even if they were sleeping at the time. Ether is an extremely pungent agent and a relatively weak anesthetic by modern standards and has a very irritant affect on the air passages, causing coughing and sometimes vomiting. It takes some time to reach unconsciousness, even if given by direct application to the face on a rag. The concentration needed by some sort of spray into a room would be enormous. The smell hangs around for days and would be obvious to anyone the next day (D. Hatch, personal communication, May 9, 2007).

Hatch's comments are in line with the scientific literature. Bovill (2008) states "Ether is a colourless, volatile and highly inflammable liquid with a characteristic pungent smell" (133). Hatch's medical opinion would seem to rule out the possibility of ether being used. This is confirmed by consultant anaesthetist, Gilbert Park, who suggested in an article in *Practical Caravan* that in a caravan "it is difficult to believe that a concentration of ether sufficient to put someone to sleep could be delivered by spraying it through a ventilation plate" (Park 2007:21). He goes on to say that the smell of ether is pungent and would still be present in the morning. He suggests buying an alarm anyway which might deter attackers.



This raises questions about other substances which could be employed. Victims in the collected stories have used different descriptions of the gas involved, such as noxious fumes, nerve gas, chloroform, noxious nitrous oxide gas, anaesthetic, an ether based substance and sleeping gas. Other suggestions include carbon monoxide and non-gaseous anaesthetics. Symptoms reported have included: "tried to give chase (to thieves) but was too groggy", "a blinding headache", "my vision was blurred" (Clarke 2002:1), "stinging eyes and a sore throat" (Family's 'gassed and robbed' fear, 2006; Crowley 2003:15), "thumping headaches", "horrible bitter taste in our mouths" (Vance 2006:17), "my head started to buzz", "I was asleep before my head hit the pillow", "I was sneezing loads" (Smith 2006:1), "woozy and groggy" (Smith 2006:1, Beckford 2007:11). No one mentions coughing or vomiting, or that they could smell any gas or other substance when waking. These kinds of symptoms have similarities with some of those reported in cases of mass hysteria such as dizziness, weakness, headache and nausea (Small and Nicholi, 1982). Bartholomew and Victor (2004) reanalysed the "mad gasser of Mattoon" looking at the fear caused by the rumour and perceived threat. They suggest that this increases stress, therefore causing a physical change in "an individual's somatic reactions, so that expectations of feeling sick result in symptoms of sickness" (229). Although this is discussed in reference to collective "mass hysteria" it could also be applied to the gassing stories.

In communication with Professor David Hatch the question was raised about the possibility of being gassed in a caravan. Hatch stated that:

I can assure you that neither ether, or chloroform or any of the known volatile anaesthetic agents, including halothane, would be able to "gas" people in motor caravans in the way described. Of the other agents you mention CO & NO<sup>2</sup> are both poisons from which the victims are unlikely to survive. The other important point to remember is that general anaesthetics are potentially very dangerous, which is why they are only administered in this country by doctors who have undergone many years of post-graduate training in the subject. Unsupervised patients are likely to die from obstruction of the airway by their tongues. Despite



the frequent reports of gassing in France, and the warning put out by the foreign office, this college remains of the view that this is a myth (personal communication, September 11, 2007).

Dr. Gordon Drummond from the Department of Anaesthesia at The Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh has stated:

(there is) no simple blood test post poisoning: only if there was a good idea what it was (the gas involved), the sample was taken quite soon and expertly analysed in a specialist lab. They would need to be looking for a specific agent, need gas chromatography with a specialist extraction method. That would be something unlikely to be available or possible for police. If robbers were to gas occupants of a train carriage, hotel room or caravan, there would seem to be a danger of not just temporarily disabling the victims but killing them in the process. The difficulties in safely anaesthetising someone include taking into account the amount of gas needed (and therefore the volume of the space), the number of people to be gassed and other factors such as their body weight (personal communication, August 29, 2007).

Professor David Hatch remarks that:

Unsupervised anaesthesia, which is what we are really talking about, is very dangerous. In the Moscow siege about 20% of victims died from asphyxia, because their airways were unprotected. If the reports you talk about are true I would have expected a significant number of deaths or cases of serious brain damage to have been reported (personal communication, September 11, 2007).

The specialist knowledge from these experts highlights the lack of medical evidence in the gassed and robbed stories. None of the stories mention police or anyone else testing for a gas having being used during the robbery and in fact according to the experts this would require specialist laboratory equipment to identify what type of substance could have been used to render victims unconscious. None of the victims in the stories appeared to have had or required any hospital treatment resulting from being gassed. It seems that there have been no fatalities from what experts describe as unsupervised and, therefore, extremely dangerous anaesthesia. Instead the symptoms bear resemblance to those reported in cases of mass



hysteria. So, although the stories have been given credence by the British Foreign Office issuing advice about being gassed and robbed, there seems to be a lack of evidence which calls into question the plausibility of gassed and robbed stories in light of these expert opinions.

### **Psychological view**

From a psychological point of view we can empathise with the victims of crimes such as robbery; stories involving gas may be perpetuated as a warning to others and there may be some benefit psychologically for the victims too. Like other serious crimes, the effects of a burglary or robbery can produce psychologically uncomfortable feelings of embarrassment, guilt and self-blame. As with other incidents of crime, burglary victims may be desperately seeking a reason as to why this has happened to them and how to deal with the guilt of the situation. Therefore they may be more open to possibilities which reduce the horror of the circumstances or lead to assuagement of guilt. The disbelief that someone could invade their space, especially when they are sleeping and vulnerable, makes people feel violated and unsafe. When the possibility of having been gassed comes up, it allows the feelings of guilt to be assuaged somewhat. Gassing could be used as an "excuse". This may allow the victim to feel that, as this has happened to others, they are not uniquely stupid or careless and it can act as a warning to others.

Another possible psychological influence could be the power of suggestion. The idea of gassing appears in some cases to originate from the police. However, in some circumstances there may also be a simpler reason for not being woken by the robbers. People seek an explanation and when the possibility of having been gassed is suggested this may mean they are in some way absolved of responsibility and guilt about the crime.

### **Power of suggestion**

The power of suggestion theory is evidenced by the victims themselves in their testimony. A story from the *News of the World* by caravanners suggests where the idea of gassing might originate from, with victims reporting "police told us we'd been gassed by Albanian



gangs” (“Gas gang hit Brits”, 2006:37). The idea of having been gassed may be suggested to the victims, by authority figures such as the police, as a reason why they did not wake up when the robbery was in progress. They may then believe they have been gassed, not because they have experienced symptoms of gassing but because it has been suggested to them. This reliance on and trust people have in supposed “experts” is well documented in the psychology of persuasive communication. This may also lead to errors in people’s judgment and perception of their experiences if they are susceptible to the power of suggestion by such experts as local police in a foreign land. Oring makes the point that “experts are not necessarily witnesses to the events reported but authorities in the subject matter of the narrated event” (2008:143). People who may not actually be witnesses to the events they are describing have heard such a story from a source they consider to be reliable and trustworthy and may enthusiastically defend such a story they have told even if they have doubts about the story themselves.

A number of the stories contain clear evidence that the victims did not mention gassing until the possibility had been raised by others. Phrases include “didn’t know they had been gassed until it happened again” (Smith 2006:1); “I don’t know who suggested that the thieves had used gas (specifically chloroform) – perhaps the train guard or a fellow traveller” (Hopkin 2007:6); “Mr. Donner said he did not suspect that he and his wife, Patricia, had been drugged until after they spoke to police” (Crowley 2003:15). Mr. Donner also said, “At the time I was with the police I did not realise that we had been attacked with a toxic gas. But when we came back, my wife and I had similar symptoms” (2003:15). The *Scarborough Evening News* tells of a couple who had been robbed in Spain and their contact with the authorities: “police asked us if we thought we had been gassed” (“Couple gassed and robbed”, 2005:1). The police and others might suggest this story to victims in order to make them feel less guilty and upset about the crime. Perhaps it might also lower people’s expectations of finding the criminals responsible, therefore relieving the pressure on authorities to find the perpetrators. Having a reason suggested to them, the victims may latch on to such an explanation which may in some way be advantageous as a coping strategy for the theft they have experienced. In times of stress it is easy to imagine



how stories come about, perhaps due to the fear and anxiety. In the stories gathered here there has also been no mention of police finding any of the equipment that would be necessary to carry out such criminal activity – gas canisters, tubes or tools, which would surely be needed in order to gas occupants of villas, caravans or train compartments.

### **Legend scholarship**

These gassed and robbed stories involve crime and theft, which is a theme in many urban legends such as those in Donovan (2004). Donovan suggests that a crime story “simply expresses commiseration over a world grown chaotic and confusing and testifies to the breadth and depth of fear about crime in society” (4). Best suggests that such crime-legends “are responses to social strain, shaped by the perception of the threat” (1985:488).

Most of the stories found in the British media are about British people travelling abroad. It might be assumed that the perpetrators would be native to the country where the crime was committed. However, in a number of cases this is not so. For example some of the types of people mentioned as possible perpetrators in stories are Eastern European gypsies, European immigrants, North Africans, Albanians, Yugoslavs, Colombians and Italians (the last operating between Scandinavia and France). Many contemporary legends deal with encounters with strangers. Here the “foreignness” of the other person is doubled: encounter in a strange country with someone from another strange country. The “legendary” nature of the identification of the thieves is enhanced by the fact that the protagonists of the stories (the victims) do not actually come face to face with the criminals. In this respect, the gassed and robbed stories differ from the “crime stories” of Eleanor Wachs (1988), for example, where they are generally face-to-face encounters between the victim and the perpetrator of the crime. Instead, with the gassing stories the victims do not see the thieves and their identity is inferred either from their own prejudices or from suggestion by others.

Investigating these stories leads to the provisional conclusion that they have survived and grown in a way analogous to urban legends. Can the gassed and robbed stories be regarded as an urban



legend? Unlike classic urban legends, being gassed and robbed appears to occur more in first-person narratives than in third-person ones. As such they may be regarded as what Brunvand refers to as “secular memorates” (1986:161). The existence of some third-person versions suggests that they may eventually emerge as fully fledged legends. Perhaps these first-hand accounts can be viewed as “memorates”, although this would involve treating the term not in a relatively precise way (Dégh and Vazsonyi 1974) but in the broad sense currently adopted by most American folklorists (Sisson, Zacher and Cayton 2006).

That these stories are not supported by medical evidence suggests that, like urban legends, they survive by performing some useful psychological function. These stories would seem to mesh environmental factors with the anxiety of a strange situation, a foreign land and the fear associated with the possibility of crime. One of the “uses” of the story may be to warn others in the same kinds of “communities”, i.e. travellers to foreign lands. As well as the fear of being robbed there is also a deep-seated fear being tapped into, that the victim is unconscious at the time the crime is being carried out. The unconscious victim motif echoes other stories to do with victims being drugged and raped. It also taps into an apprehension about being unconscious and vulnerable to harm such as when being anaesthetised by doctors or dentists.

Burgess, Donovan and Moore (2009) argue that there is a heightened perception about the risk of drug-facilitated sexual assault (DFSA). There have been previous suggestions that this crime story is an urban legend. Burgess et al. suggest “that the drink-spiking narrative has a functional appeal in relation to the contemporary experience of young women’s public drinking” (2009:848). The similarities are obvious between the gassing stories and the crime fear of DFSA, as both would appear to have “prompted the creation and distribution of ‘risk products’” (2009:849). A range of devices have arisen which claim to limit drink spiking which are advertised targeting young women. As discussed previously, there are websites selling gas detectors for caravans to protect caravanners from being attacked with gas. The evidence presented here would suggest that it is improbable that this is a widespread crime warranting such



devices, with no evidence of their thwarting any attempt by thieves to gas and rob possible victims.

Creating such devices lends credence to the story and its plausibility, as some might assume that by their very existence these products show the story is true; otherwise there would be no need for them. These products may increase the fear appeal of the stories and capture people's imagination. Increasing people's belief in the story may also increase their beliefs about how often they believe this type of crime is occurring. People's perception may be that this is something that may be more likely to happen than would be realistic compared to the more ubiquitous everyday risks that are faced (Zinn 2008). This activation of people's imagination when hearing urban legends may also be fuelled by the recounting of these stories via film and literature.

### **Film and literature**

Hobbs (1987) noted that urban legends appear in films and literature as well as in media stories, including stories featuring gassing and robbery. For example, the theme of gassing is used in James Thurber's autobiographical story "The Night the Bed Fell" from *The Thurber Carnival* (1983):

Then there was Aunt Sarah Shoaf, who never went to bed at night without the fear that a burglar was going to get in and blow chloroform under her door through a tube. To avert this calamity—for she was in greater dread of anaesthetics than of losing her household goods—she always piled her money, silverware, and other valuables in a neat stack just outside her bedroom, with a note reading: "This is all I have. Please take it and do not use your chloroform, as this is all I have" (Thurber 1983:148).

There are other examples from earlier literature where this motif also shows up. In Richard Chase's collection of the folktale "Jack and the Doctor's Girl", the lead character Jack was set a task of stealing "twelve horses out from under twelve men" (Chase 1943: 121). Jack did this by giving the men alcohol laced with chloroform. Chase relates how Jack "had gone down to the drugstore and got a little cholryform to put in that likker" (1943:121). Again there is a similarity in this story with modern gassing stories in that there



is a motive of theft. There are other examples of films and stories, which have used the subject of gassing in their plots, such as the James Bond film *Goldfinger* (Directed by Guy Hamilton 1964).

The links between gassed and robbed stories in films and literature and urban legends circulating may be leading to their becoming more widespread and familiar to us. A contemporary legend circulating concerning college students in the US is that of "The Anesthetized Roommate" (Brunvand 1999:431). A student becomes aware, after visiting his doctor because of unexplained pain, that his gay roommate had been secretly anaesthetizing and sodomizing him.

There are similar contemporary legends with the theme of being incapacitated, both older versions and those currently circulating. There is a recent legend story that warns about women being accosted by strangers in shopping malls and asked to sample perfumes. The "perfume" is actually chloroform (or ether), and the women are then incapacitated, abducted, or robbed (Scratch and Sniff, 2008). Other legends featuring the theme of gas but without the robbery motive are seen in the well-known legend of the babysitter gassing the children she is looking after to keep them quiet. A cautionary message is the story where children are given "just a whiff" of gas by a teenage babysitter left to look after them (Gashouse Lullaby 2008).

## Conclusion

This discussion of the contemporary legend circulating concerning being gassed and robbed when abroad demonstrates another example of what can be considered a crime legend. There are examples of first-hand accounts and it would appear that third-hand accounts have subsequently developed. As Goldstuck (1999) points out, this story "is believed in the form of an urban legend that is passed on as the experience of a friend of a friend, and as an explanation of individuals' own experiences at the hands of burglars" (1999:193).

Examining previous examples of gassing panics and mass psychogenic illness events can inform our understanding of the current gassing stories, allowing us to look at elements which are similar in these stories. In regard to the gassed and robbed story there may be an additive and reinforcing effect from media reports and official recognition from the British Foreign Office and authority figures



such as the police giving credibility to the possibility of being gassed and robbed. However the specialist knowledge from experts would suggest that there is little or no medical evidence and little possibility that such gassings would occur as reported in the stories.

The gassed and robbed story provides a social and psychological function of warning others as well as justification for those to whom this has happened. Another function of this could be the assuagement of their guilt of not waking up when a robbery was in progress – the reason being they were unconscious from being gassed. The spaces in which these crimes are committed can be considered extensions to our home environments – caravans, train compartments, villas and hotel rooms. Here is a place of convenient sanctuary, some kind of personal space away from our normal home environment where we can rest and sleep for a short while. In this story that sanctuary is violated by robbery and taps into a fear and anxiety of not being in control of a situation. It may also tap into the fear of strangers we hold, especially with regard to organised crime and “nomadic outsiders” (Pettitt 2005:61) such as the possible perpetrators named in some of the stories which include European gypsies, European immigrants, North Africans and Albanians.

It will be interesting to follow the progression of this story and if followed over a number of years we may discover it has a cyclical nature appearing in the summer or autumn holiday times. A fuller exploration of this topic could include contacting victims and seeking corroboration of the story, such as accessing police reports or medical records. It would be of interest to contact insurance companies to ascertain whether this gassed and robbed story is ever mentioned in insurance claims and what view the insurance companies take of it. Whether legend scholars consider this gassed and robbed story as an urban legend, and their suggestions of its interpretation, evolution and significance, will be of interest.

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