

The Girl Who Hid: Campus Rumors and Legends of the Spring of 2020

ELIZABETH TUCKER

Binghamton University

When the fall semester started at Binghamton University in 2019, we had no idea that an unprecedented public health crisis was about to begin. As I found in researching my book *Campus Legends* (2005), health, hope for success, and awareness of risk are central issues for college students. Legends thrive on campuses most of the time, but they run wild when a crisis happens. In September I received an email from Kathryn Palmer, a reporter at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Had I heard, she asked me, that getting hit by a bus on a college campus guarantees a student free tuition? I told her that this was part of the rumor/legend complex that Jan Harold Brunvand named “The Suicide Rule”: if your roommate commits suicide, you will get an automatic 4.0 grade point average for the semester (1989:295–98). When I asked the students in my sophomore seminar whether they had heard the bus legend, most of them said yes. One especially perceptive student, Sophia Valerino, commented, “It’s mostly been said in a joking manner, though it’s kind of a dark thing to joke about, honestly. I wouldn’t want to sacrifice personal health for that, though” (Palmer 2019). None of us knew that personal health and public policy would take center stage in our lives before long.

Six months later, in March of 2020, students were panicking about a public health crisis that seemed worse than a collision with a bus. The first case of COVID-19 had been confirmed in New York March 1, and our university’s administration was holding daily meetings to figure out what to do about classes and residential living. A global pandemic was declared on March 11. All classes went online March 19, and an announcement March 23 explained that students who wanted to keep living on campus would be required to move to one residential community. Another announcement on March 23 informed everyone that “a member of the university community” had been diagnosed with the virus. Binghamton University’s Reddit, a social media platform where students shared advice, worries, and questions, became a forum

for rumors and legends. With all instruction going online, students worried about their grades; some wondered whether grading criteria would change. In mid-March a student posted on the Reddit: “If you think about it aren’t we basically guaranteed a 4.0 this semester?” Usually the university allowed no changes in grading protocol late in the semester, but this was a public health emergency. On March 30, the university announced that all students could change their grading options to pass/fail until the end of June. On the University Reddit, students celebrated: “OMG, we made them do it!” Amazingly, a campus legend about an unlikely grade outcome had become real.

During this discussion of grade options, dramatic dialogue about possible sources of contagion was happening on the Binghamton University Reddit, as well as in face-to-face conversations and on Twitter and other social media platforms. As Andrea Kitta explains in *The Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore* (2019), people who are in the midst of an epidemic want to identify “patient zero” (the original patient in a geographical area who infects others) and tend to use the terms “patient zero” and “superspreader” as “cultural designations that often are not supported by empirical evidence” (26). This argument helps us understand how people think in threatening situations and suggests the possibility that other kinds of typing may be taking place too. In this short article I will explore gender stereotyping of “patient zero” during the global pandemic in the relatively small community of students living on and off campus at Binghamton University in the spring of 2020. The first of these stereotypes is a male member of a fraternity, a character well known to legend scholars. The second, less familiar character is a female student who hides, attempts to continue with her usual routines, and tries to avoid apprehension by both health authorities and friends.

Early Rumors

Shortly after the March 23 announcement that a member of the university community had been diagnosed with COVID-19, a participant in the Binghamton University Reddit posted, “Heard a rumor that the new case in Broome County is a student at the university and that he is actively involved in Greek life (stop the parties already, it’s unsafe). Can anyone confirm?” A fellow student quickly replied, “Yeah, heard that too. Kid was in my building and pledging my suite mate’s frat.” Others responded with variations of that response: the ill student belonged to a “frat” (fraternity) in another residence hall across campus. He had pledged at least one frat. He had gone to multiple parties. He had gone home. He was still infecting others. At that moment, when rumors were running wild, this young man seemed to be everywhere. Because of his ubiquity,

warnings against social gatherings grew on the Reddit: “Stop your stupid party!”

Even though these rumors varied, they were all about male students. Diane Goldstein has analyzed legends about men going out to bars to deliberately spread disease (2004:104), but that kind of legend-telling has had less attention in the United States. By late March, people throughout the United States had learned that going to parties could greatly increase the likelihood of getting COVID-19. In campus folk culture, the best-known party goers tend to be fraternity members who throw big parties to bring others in. Therefore, it is not surprising to see stereotyping of a risk-taking party-goer as a fraternity guy. This kind of risk-taker is epitomized in the character of Bluto, played by John Belushi, in the popular movie *Animal House* (Landis 1978). Bluto seems to be drunk all the time, loves toga parties, and enjoys smashing cans of beer on his head. Although *Animal House* is an old movie, it still delights people who cherish the image of a hard-drinking, hard-partying frat guy.

The rumors in the spring of 2020 were not just about fraternity parties, however; they were also about initiations. For folklorists and students who enjoy listening to legends, the male who encounters danger during a fraternity initiation is a familiar character. Ernest Baughman (1945) describes the “Fatal Initiation” legend variant in which a fraternity initiate dies of shock after members of the fraternity simulate a stabbing (Motif N384.4, Fraternity initiate dies of fright). Simon J. Bronner analyzes a spooky “Fatal Initiation” legend that takes place in a haunted house (1990:162–63). In some campus legends an initiate dies because of excessive alcohol consumption combined with strenuous exercise. My book about campus ghost stories, for example, includes a story of a young man who dies while swimming in a lake as part of a fraternity initiation at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida (2007:77–78). This legend and others have a foundation in actual deaths of fraternity pledges, but some legends do not. Because it is well known that pledges have died on college campuses during their initiations, legends on this subject have spread actively, suggesting that joining a fraternity and participating in its activities involve risk and danger.

Fraternity initiation rumors on the Binghamton Reddit did not last long; soon the rumor mill’s focus shifted to female students. Both elusive and self-protective, these female students reflected the anxiety that the pandemic had caused. More specifically, however, they derived from earlier folklore that delineates gender expectations. Characters in legend and ballads have contributed to the characterization of a girl who hid, who emerged as a legend character in the spring of 2020. Some of these characters hide physically, but others hide knowledge about health

conditions that they do not want to share with others. Some insist upon doing what feels right to them, while others seem less confident.

Typhoid Mary and the Bride Who Played Hide and Seek

One legendary woman who hid her health status is Mary Mallon (1869-1938), better known as “Typhoid Mary” (Goldstein 2004:38–39; Kitta 2019:31). Born in Ireland, Mallon immigrated to the United States and made her living as a cook for affluent families. Unfortunately, some members of the families for which she worked fell ill with typhoid, and a few of them died. Doctors discovered that Mallon was an asymptomatic carrier of typhoid and asked her not to cook any more. That might have been the end of her story, but Mallon refused to accept the doctor’s recommendation. She changed her name to “Mrs. Brown” and kept on cooking, so more people came down with typhoid. When health authorities challenged her, she brandished kitchen implements and told them to go away. Because she had refused to comply with public health orders, she was forced to endure two periods of quarantine on North Brother Island in the New York City area.

Significantly, Typhoid Mary has become the central character of a popular ghost story. Some residents of Manhattan say that she haunts North Brother Island, which still has large, crumbling hospital buildings and a morgue. Even though the island has been found to be dangerous and is forbidden to tourists, some intrepid people who have heard legends about Typhoid Mary insist upon going there (Hertz 2018). Her story seems especially compelling now, as people debate the relative importance of personal liberty and public health restrictions. How much leeway should we have in relation to our health, when other people’s safety is involved? For that reason alone, it is not surprising that Typhoid Mary has become a well-known ghost.

It is also significant that Mary Mallon was a woman. In *Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public’s Health* (2014), Judith Walzer Leavitt argues that Mary Mallon became notorious because of prejudice against both immigrants and women. During the era when she was reviled and quarantined, there was prejudice against immigrants from Ireland, and it was not easy for Irish immigrants to find good jobs. Women also struggled to find gainful employment then, so being both Irish and female meant having to overcome a double barrier. If she had stopped cooking, would Mallon have been able to support herself? Although the answer to this question may quite possibly be “no,” she has a reputation for being defiant and refusing to care about other people’s health.

During the early twentieth century, several men were found to be asymptomatic carriers of typhoid, but Mary Mallon is the only asymptomatic carrier of typhoid who has become a legend character.

According to Jeannie Banks Thomas's "Gender and Ghosts" (2007), nineteenth-century women were influenced by social expectations expressed in Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House," which suggests that women's needs should be secondary to the needs of their husbands. This subordination of women's needs contributed to the rise of the legend character that Thomas calls the "Deviant Femme": an eccentric, possibly insane woman who insists upon making her needs known. Mary Mallon fits the pattern of the Deviant Femme well, both in her aggressive use of kitchen implements and in her concealment of health information that could have saved families from coming down with a serious disease. Besides fitting this pattern, she neatly subverts the expectation that women will provide healthful food and take good care of everyone in their household. While seeming to nurture family members with delicious food, she makes them ill and even, in some cases, causes premature death.

In contrast to Mary Mallon, the "Mistletoe Bride"—a character who originated in a literary ballad written by Thomas Haynes Bayly in the early 1830s and became famous through nineteenth-century broadside ballads—does not mean to harm anyone (Roud [n.d.]:2236). During her wedding celebration at Christmas in a stately home in England, the bride plays "hide and seek" with her husband and their guests. She finds an ideal hiding place: an old oak chest in the mansion's attic. Suddenly, however, tragedy strikes. The chest's heavy lid falls on her head, sending her into a swoon inside the chest and locking. Although the seekers search for many hours, they cannot find the lost bride. Many years later, her husband, now an old man, opens the chest and finds his bride's grisly skeleton inside it. In her *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales*, Katharine M. Briggs explains that "The Lost Bride" is not only a popular ballad but also a legend that is "fairly widely known in Britain and the United States" (1971:92). A variant of "The Lost Bride" in *Folktales of England*, co-authored by Briggs and Ruth L. Tongue, includes the line "And there her lay in her wedding gown, and her was just a skeleton" (1965:88). What a chilling realization! Because of the bride's choice of a perilous hiding place, her young life ends abruptly and the happiness that she has hoped to share with her husband never comes. The gruesome conclusion of the legend and ballad sends a shiver down the listener's spine, evoking feelings of both sadness and horror.

Why does the lost bride decide to hide in the chest, and how is this decision relevant to legends college students tell about the COVID-19 pandemic? Like college students of traditional age, the lost bride is beginning her life as an adult. It is ironic that at this point, on the cusp of adulthood, she behaves like a child, getting so excited about playing a game that she does not take precautions. When the chest's lid crashes

down on her head, her young life comes to an end. In this way, “The Lost Bride” warns young people to take care: think before you act and try to avoid making reckless choices. Such advice is especially necessary during crises, when it can be difficult to maintain one’s own safety and avoid adversely affecting others. When I was collecting college students’ legends for my book *Haunted Halls* (2007), I was surprised to see how many of the legends delivered a warning of some kind. Even when nothing major is going wrong, college students need to be careful to avoid such dangers as drinking and drug-taking. As we have learned recently, a global pandemic opens up a new range of risks and warnings.

The story of the lost bride has a distinctly numinous quality. Her sudden transition from presence to absence through the game of hide and seek makes her seem supernatural. In some versions of the ballad, the husband describes his new wife as a “fairy bride.” Perhaps she wants to get away from her husband and the other guests because she actually belongs to another realm, like the seal girl of British and Irish legends. Her disappearance after hiding in the oak chest seems both familiar and strange; this combination brings to mind Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” (1919), which deftly explains how closely familiarity is related to strangeness. In both “The Lost Bride” and certain legends about the COVID-19 pandemic, uncanniness elicits discomfort, fascination, and horror.

Too Scared to Get Tested

Two stories about female college students who hid their health status because they were scared of being identified drew my attention early in May. Both stories came from interviews by my students with friends. The first one, collected by a male student, was told by a male friend of his. Both he and his friend worked for an evening ride service on our campus, so they shared understanding of their work situation as well as worry about the pandemic.

I’ll tell you about my scariest shift working the ride service ever. I was working a pretty normal shift one night, up until about 1 am that night. Around that time, I picked up some dude from around lecture hall, and it’s just the two of us in the vehicle. You know how much I like talking to passengers during work, so I asked him how he’s feeling about the whole coronavirus scare starting to spread everywhere. The kid gets interested and asks me if I had heard the story of what happened recently in Dickinson. Obviously since we live in Dickinson, I immediately got super nervous. This dude proceeded to tell me how this girl who lives in O’Connor went home for the weekend, somehow got infected with

coronavirus, then came back up to school. Once she found out she had the virus from symptoms, she tried to hide it from everybody, but her friends eventually found out and got into a huge conflict with her. Apparently, she was too scared to get tested. Eventually her friends called the cops and soon after an ambulance full of people wearing hazmat suits arrived and made the girl come with them to get tested at a hospital. Nobody really knows what happened next. He told me he heard this information from his friend who lives in O'Connor who has seen the girl a few times.

This narrative relies on “friend of a friend” sources and presents a spooky scenario in an intriguing way, so it is clearly a legend. At the beginning, the narrator promises to tell his friend about his scariest shift ever, so we can guess that he has horror story and/or movie conventions in mind. He emphasizes the lateness of the hour (“1 am”) and gets our attention by saying “it’s just the two of us in the vehicle” after the pickup of “some dude from around lecture hall.” Anyone who has ever heard a “Vanishing Hitchhiker” legend knows that eerie things can happen when a stranger gets into your car late at night. As Jan Harold Brunvand’s *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* (1981) and other studies have shown, people enjoy telling such stories around the world. In this legend, as in some of Brunvand’s variants (30), the hitchhiker or rider does not disappear; instead he shares a revelation or a prediction with the driver. In this legend the “dude” who gets picked up tells the driver a story about a female student in Dickinson, the one residential community where students are still allowed to stay during the pandemic. Because students who have remained at Dickinson worry about a “patient zero” being revealed in their community, this story has powerful potential to shock and alarm them.

Two focal points of this legend are the place where the girl gets infected—at home, not in her relatively safe residential community—and the stigma that she fears she will incur if she stops hiding her symptoms. In New York State during the spring of 2020, a large proportion of the COVID-19 cases were diagnosed “downstate” (in the New York City/Long Island area, where many Binghamton University students’ families live), so students and administrators felt worried about contagion spreading from the City and its environs to the university campus. It is interesting that this legend describes a female student who gets infected downstate and “trie[s] to hide it from everybody.” Earlier rumors about an infected male fraternity member had not mentioned him concealing his symptoms or getting into an argument with his friends about what he should do. Having observed groups of female friends working out conflicts with each other, I conclude that this legend about

the girl who was too scared to tell the truth reflects the dynamics of female friendships. For young women at college, friends' advice matters—but is that advice influential enough to override fear of getting exposed as a “patient zero”? At the time when this story was told, people were talking worriedly about who might have the virus, and they are still doing that now, in the summer of 2020. When family members die, some families' announcements in newspapers specify that their loved one died of “natural causes” or “non-COVID causes” in order to avoid the stigma of COVID-19 infection. Fear of stigmatization and worry about going to places where contagion seems likely have remained strong since February of 2020.

There is, however, a possibility that the male narrator of this legend emphasizes the central character's fear because she is female. In Linda Dégh's early article “The Haunted Bridges Near Avon and Danville and their Role in Legend Formation” (1969), she observes that when teenagers visit haunted places in southern Indiana, girls act scared so that boys will comfort them. Those visits to haunted places took place a long time ago, but American culture still has some vestiges of the gender-related expectation that it's all right for girls to express fear but less acceptable for boys to do so. A male college student may feel more hesitant to express fear than a female student does. We should note, however, that the male teller of the above legend openly admits that the night when he heard the story of the girl who hid from her friends was the “scariest shift” he had ever had. In the midst of a truly frightening global pandemic, he was terrified by a story that seemed to be true.

Toward the story's end, the girl's friends call the cops, and “an ambulance full of people wearing big hazmat suits” makes the girl come to get tested at a hospital. Because “nobody really knows what happened next,” it is not clear whether the girl stays at a hospital and whether she is actually found to be contagious. Official confirmation of her status does not seem to be very important at this point; her friends' insistence on testing and the sudden arrival of the ambulance bringing people in “big hazmat suits” seem to offer enough evidence that she is a source of danger for others. In particular, white hazmat suits, which were prominently featured in television coverage of the Ebola epidemic in 2014, confirm the presence of danger. The ambulance's presence in this story can be explained by a post on Binghamton University's Reddit in April: “Does anyone know what happened with all the police/ambulances on campus this week? It looked pretty concerning and no one has said anything about it.” Actual ambulances, police cars, and worry about a possible “patient zero” stimulated storytelling during this time period. Andrea Kitta explains what happens after identification of people whose infection of others has been confirmed: “Patient zeros and

superspreaders quickly move to legendary status, and the details are no longer important to those hearing and telling them because the particulars represent something bigger than the actual person; they become the illness itself” (2019:33). Even if a “patient zero” has not been confirmed and is only suspected, dramatic details can become representative of an illness that members of a community fear.

It is interesting to see what happens to the girl who hid at the end of this story. Nobody knows for sure what happened to her, but the narrator’s friend who lives in Dickinson has “seen the girl a few times.” The girl who hid from her friends seems like a ghost or a cryptozoological creature: something to be spotted and discussed with friends during an evening of scary story telling. She has become spectral, unclear, and frightening: a perfect symbol of the pandemic that has been so worrisome and difficult to understand. To some extent she resembles the lost bride of the nineteenth century, whose disappearance is so eerie and upsetting. Whether this campus legend will continue remains to be seen.

Handling the Entire Building’s Packages

A second narrative from April of 2020 addresses the difficult subject of contagion in a different way. Collected by one of my female students from her female friend, this narrative is not a full-fledged legend; instead, it is a personal experience story with the potential to be told as a legend. It also does not fit the pattern of a ghost story, since it has plenty of practical details but none that seem numinous. Both this story and the first one express an intense interest in staying safe from contagion.

My friend was sick for a while, so he quarantined himself following the CDC guidelines, waiting until his fever was gone for 72 hours and other symptoms were gone and then took himself out of quarantine. He got better, but then about a week later he got sick again with a fever and other coronavirus symptoms so he went home and got tested, turns out it was positive and he had corona. He lived in my apartment building, largely populated with students, which informed its residents to contact them if they got tested positive so they could tell the residents someone had it and allow them to do a deep clean. Knowing he got tested positive, we were waiting for an email but never got one. We asked him if he sent the email and he said his roommate, who worked in the office for the building, advised him not to and said that it was not necessary, which me and my roommates knew was incorrect and pulled up the email to show him. He told us his roommate did not want him to because she did not

want to quarantine herself and wanted to keep working in the office. So she wanted to work in the office, handling the entire building's packages, risking getting everyone in the building sick instead of quarantining herself for two weeks because of the large possibility she had caught it, living in his apartment while he was very contagious. My other roommate, who is closer with them all, confronted her and said she should not be risking people's lives like that, but she did not answer the text, so she proceeded to call the office of our apartment with the permission of the kid who tested positive, telling them he had it and that we were concerned. They confronted her and got her out of the office for two weeks because of how ridiculous it was to risk everyone, yet the girl still sees no wrong in what she was doing and their apartment will no longer speak to mine.

When I first read this story, I noticed its central character's resemblance to the notorious Typhoid Mary. Like Mary Mallon, the girl who distributes packages insists upon continuing to do her work, even though she has been exposed to a dreaded disease. The line "she did not want to quarantine herself and wanted to keep working" applies equally well to Typhoid Mary and this unnamed girl, a potential "Covid Carrie." Both women put their own wishes above public safety, but both of them need to work; Mary needs to earn her living as a cook, and Carrie needs to keep her job as a package distributor for her building. There is a big difference between their levels of eccentricity, however; Mary throws kitchen knives and forks, but Carrie just insists that she wants to keep working. Both of them are eventually forced to give their jobs up, but neither of them admits to having done anything wrong.

There is also a similarity between the girl who distributes packages and the bride who plays hide-and-seek. Both of them seem immature, focussing on their own desires rather than public health and safety. The lost bride pays for her immaturity with her life, but the girl who admits no wrongdoing simply has to suffer from friends in another apartment refusing to speak to her. These friends help figure out what needs to be done to restore the building's safety. In effect, friends serve as the social conscience that the girl distributing packages lacks, suggesting that groups of concerned people may succeed better at keeping everyone safe than self-oriented individuals do. This message comes from both male and female friends who work together to get the possibly infected young woman out of her building's office.

Although the story of the package-distributing girl is not a fully developed legend, it has a connection to the "Welcome to the World of AIDS" legend analyzed by Diane Goldstein (2004:100–115), in which a

young man or woman has sex with someone he or she does not know well and then receives a message from the recent sex partner saying “Welcome to the world of AIDS.” This message arrives either in a package or in lipstick on a mirror. In some variants of the package legend, the box containing the horrifying message is shaped like a coffin (100–102). The female student who works in an apartment office does not send messages to other people in packages, but if she becomes COVID-19-positive, she may send COVID-19 to fellow students without realizing what she is doing. Since she knows that she is risking others’ health, her choice to continue working seems selfish. This is one of many scenarios articulated since February in which personal choice clashes with a duty to help others, sometimes with unclear boundaries and outcomes.

A Look Ahead

Campus folklore of the pandemic that began in the spring of 2020 has expressed shock, confusion, fear, and adherence to familiar moral values. Like other campus legends, legends of the pandemic have warned listeners: be careful! Protect yourself, and don’t forget to safeguard the health of other people too! As the pandemic has grown and become more alarming, campus legends on this subject have grown and changed as well.

Now that students, professors, and administrators are preparing for the fall semester of 2020, a new wave of campus legends is about to begin. Will the “girl who hid” continue to be a meaningful character, or will she fade into the background as other legends grow? Will members of fraternities appear again in online rumors? Will cultural and gender stereotypes arise in stories about people who seem to have been infected by the virus? Around Halloween, will students enjoy telling ghost stories about this strange era that has taken us by surprise, or will they avoid the subject of the pandemic with a shudder? We will know the answers to those questions fairly soon. I hope that everyone on college campuses will stay safe and healthy.

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