THE VANISHING HITCHHIKER IN ROMANIAN URBAN LEGENDS

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Abstract: The 'vanishing hitchhiker' or the 'phantom hitchhiker' is one of the most popular urban legends. The common version involves a driver who picks up a girl standing alone by the road. She usually indicates an address, but, at some point, she disappears before reaching the destination, or, in some stories, after she gets off the car. The following article is an analysis of several versions circulating in Romania in point of characters, setting, functions of this urban legend.

Keywords: vanishing hitchhiker, urban legend, cautionary tale, ghost, suspense

The *vanishing hitchhiker* or the *phantom hitchhiker*[1] is one of the most popular urban legends. The legend circulates throughout the world and, though the most popular and published examples come from the United States and Great Britain, there are cases in Europe, Africa and Australia as well[2]. The story has several variants, but the best known is that about a lonely young woman wandering by the road who is taken by a driver in his car. Usually, the girl sits on the backseat; sometimes she is quiet, sometimes she tells the driver an address she wants to be taken to. At one point, she vanishes without a trace, either from the vehicle in motion or after she arrives at the destination. The intrigued driver's later investigations reveal that she was a supernatural entity, a ghost.

The first thorough studies on the legend of the vanishing hitchhiker belong to the American anthropologists Richard K. Beardsley and Rosalie Hankey who, in early 1940's, published "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" (1942) and "A History of the Vanishing Hitchhiker" (1943). Their research was based on a corpus of 76 stories collected from 60 different locations in the United States of America. Initially, the authors had intended to connect the legend to a real incident. They failed and so did their attempts to identify the 'original' story.

[1] The Anglo-Saxon terminology imposed such terms as "vanishing/disappearing hitchhiker", "ghostly hitchhiker/phantom hitchhiker".

[2] On the east coast of Africa, the hitchhiker takes the shape of a young woman who is given a ride by truck drivers. At a certain moment, the truck driver looks at his beautiful companion and notices that the girl is actually a jinni, her feet are goat hooves, at which point she laughs and disappears. In Australia, the legend speaks about a group of teenagers who go out for a ride every weekend in search of girls and fun. One night, they see a girl hitchhiking by the road and offer to give her a lift home but, when they arrive at a deserted intersection, she asks them to stop the car. They refuse, the girl starts to scream and vanishes and the youths have an accident at the crossroads. Soon after, the owner of the car decides to sell it because he cannot get the nagging smell of decay out of the vehicle. In other versions, hitchhikers are young men (one who has wet clothes as if he had fallen into the river nearby he hitchhikes vanishes from the vehicle leaving behind a puddle of water on the backseat). In some French versions, before disappearing from the car, young female hitchhikers warn the drivers about a dangerous intersection ahead; in the end, it is revealed that they lost their lives in car crashes at that very spot. In another legend, a boy gets on a doctor's automobile and shows him the route he has to follow to reach the destination. He drives a few kilometres up a mountain road and, while the boy becomes increasingly agitated, hears people screaming. The boy asks him to stop and points to a steep. A school bus had crashed and the children needed help. Eventually, the rescue team finds that the only one who didn't survive was precisely the boy taken by the doctor in his car.

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Unable to find anything similar in the old folk tradition, Beardsley and Hankey concluded, in 1943, that the legend was new, a product of the previous 20 years: "a story that is in no sense a survival from an outdated culture, but stands as a fully-fledged representative of the contemporary tale" (Beardsley, Hankey, 1943: 16). While analysing the corpus of stories, the authors proposed four types of variants (Beardsley, Hankey, 1942: 305). In version A stories, the ghost gets in the car, indicates an address and disappears. The driver goes to that address and here he finds that the passenger has in fact been dead for several years. This first model comprises stories which Beardsley and Hankey consider to be closest to the 'original' legend. In version B, the traveller offers to give a ride to an old woman who, during the journey, issues a warning or prophecy and vanishes from the car. Later on, the motorist receives information that she died some time ago. Version C deals with a young man who meets a girl at a dance and offers her a ride; she asks to be left at a graveyard and disappears. The driver learns that the girl is dead, which is confirmed by some personal objects being left on her grave. Finally, in version D legends, a mysterious old lady with a basket in her hand is given a ride and disappears, with the driver later discovering that his passenger is a Hawaiian goddess.

The typology suggested by Beardsley and Hankey failed the test of time. Apart from the fact that they considered the legend to be dying out (Beardsley, Hankey, 1943: 22), the four categories are maybe too restrictive and complicated. Folklorist Gillian Bennett argues that, alongside the apparitions identified as ghosts in the stories they collected, nowadays there are texts in which hitchhikers are aliens, angels, demons, evil spirits, Jesus, Virgin Mary, etc. (Bennett, 1998: 4).

In the decades that followed the publication of Richard K. Beardsley and Rosalie Hankey's studies, many researchers focused on the legend of the vanishing hitchhiker. Of them, we should mention the American folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand whose debut volume, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (1981), a collection of contemporary legends having as central piece precisely that under discussion (as suggested by the title itself), significantly contributed to bringing this story to the attention of the public at large.

A Fulbright scholar in Romania in 1970, Jan Harold Brunvand would indentify in the classic urban legend *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* the existence of three elements specific to the Romanian tradition: *two* women are offered a ride; the driver accidentally leaves a personal object in their apartment; when he comes back to recover it, he finds the apartment locked and is told that the women died a long time ago (Brunvand, 2001: 357). According to Brunvand, the existence of this legend was attested in our country by its appearance in literature. For example, in the first chapter ("Marea roşie") of the novel *Vânătoarea regală* (written by Dumitru Radu Popescu and published in 1973), the character-narrator, who had been involved in an accident, got in the car with two old women and found they were planning the murder of another character (Horia Dunărinţu), that had disappeared some time before. The narrator was then invited to tea and, upon departure, he left his cigarette case in the two ladies' apartment. He came the next day to retrieve it but found, with overwhelming amazement, that they had been stabbed to death 12 days before.

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In Romanian urban legends about the vanishing hitchhiker[3] the passenger is, without exception, female. In most cases they are young women and what draws attention is that

[3] The analysis of this motif has considered the following versions (the English translation belongs to the author):
1. A normal working day for a taxi driver in Giurgiu. At some point, a chick in a wedding dress gets in and tells the driver to take her to Nicolae Titulescu street and leave her in front of an old house. Once they arrive there, the chick gives the cabbie her wedding ring because she has no money on her. His shift over, he shows the ring to a friend who, on learning the chick's name, says she has been dead for dozens of years, that she killed herself when her husband got run over by a car on coming out of the church they had been married. Not believing this story, the cabbie and his friend go to the place he took her earlier and noticed a deserted house. The taxi driver's friend advised him to bury the ring in the place the two spouses were buried in the Smârda cemetery, otherwise he will be cursed for life. (http://mituriurbane.vira.ro/mituri-urbane/79/taximetristul-blestemat/)
2. In Trivale, a neighbourhood in Piteşti, Argeş county, urban legends speak about an abandoned house, in the forest nearby the quarter, haunted by a dead bride, a ghost, that committed suicide because her husband got run over by a car and died on their wedding day. This cabbie is said to have taken the bride deep into the woods, at that particular house, where she gave him her wedding ring for she had no money, but he should wait until she went in and brought it to him. That she was coming from her wedding party, with her ring on her finger, she had no place to keep her money, in her dress. The taxi driver suddenly fell asleep and woke up hours later in front of a block of flats in Trivale, far from the forest, with the car engine stopped. He entered the building to investigate the circumstances that had brought him there, to find out if the bride had lived there before the wedding. The wedding, the cabbie learned, had actually happened 10 years earlier, not the previous day as he had thought. He concluded his client was a ghost, went to the car to look for the proof, namely the shiny wedding ring wrapped in a handkerchief, only to discover a finger in a state of advanced putrefaction with a ring that was time worn, resembling a piece of iron freshly dug out.
(http://mituriurbane.vira.ro/mituri-urbane/79/taximetristul-blestemat/)
3. In the middle of the night, a taxi driver in Bucharest takes a thin, pale and very sad young woman who asks to be given a ride home. Upon arrival, the girl confesses she has no money and begs him to accept a ring. The ring on her finger. He accepts. The following day, thinking about the girl's sadness, pity overwhelms him and decides to return the ring. The man goes to that address, knocks at the door and an old man opens. The cabbie reveals why he is there and hands in the ring. The elder looks at it with amazement, then he turns white and starts to falter. Whispering, he asks the cabbie to describe the girl, listens and murmurs: "It is my daughter you took last night… And this is her ring. But my daughter has been dead for ten years…" (http://mituriurbane.vira.ro/mituri-urbane/79/taximetristul-blestemat/)
4. Bucharest, the 90's. Late at night. A cabbie yawns exhausted and looks at the watch. Soon his shift will be over. A slight knock on his window makes him come to his senses. Two old ladies decently dressed get in and tell him the address. During the journey, one of the women gets sick, faints and starts bleeding from the nose. The driver stops at the address and helps the ladies climb the stairs. Grateful, they invite him in for a cup of coffee. As he is tired, the cabbie accepts gladly. While coffee is being prepared, he goes to the bathroom, takes off his watch to wash his hands and face, then he has his coffee, thanks the old ladies and leaves. Once he is at home, he realises his watch is missing and remembers he has left it in the women's bathroom. He gets in his car, returns there, knocks, but there's no answer. He rings the bell several times. Still no answer. A neighbour comes and asks who he is looking for. The two old ladies living there. "What old ladies? No one's been living here for years!" Another neighbour, a woman, comes with the keys of the house. She has been keeping them for some heirs that live abroad. She unlocks. The house, filled with thick cobwebs, the furniture covered with dusty with sheets. On a small dusty coffee table the driver sees a cup with some fresh dregs in it. He enters the bathroom, and, under the thick layer of dust and spider webs, finds his watch. He exits, troubled, making the sign of the cross, gets in the car. On the backseat a strap of white cloth is shining: a handkerchief stained with a few drops of blood.
(http://forum.desprecopii.com/forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=28817&ARCHIVE=true&nm=Legende-urbane-Buhuhu)
5. This is said to have appeared in newspapers. It happened in Craiova. Around 11 p.m., a taxi driver picked up a woman and, on the way, she started bleeding from her nostrils. The boy offered her a handkerchief and, when they arrived, the woman left her wedding ring telling him the number of her apartment. 15 minutes later or so, the boy rang at the door and the woman's husband opened. They started an argument, the man calling the police for he said the ring belonged to his wife who had been dead for three years. People say that, 8 months later, he obtained an exhumation order and found the woman's skeleton without the wedding ring but with a handkerchief in her hand. (Cristina B.)
6. A taxi driver took a young lady from the cemetery at 2 at night… He drove to the address indicated. Once they arrived, the girl didn't have money to pay so she gave him her gold chain as a guarantee she would return with

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almost all wear wedding dresses, while the narrator insists on their attractiveness: 'an extraordinarily beautiful girl' or 'a bride of unrivalled beauty'. In some versions her ghostly features are alluded to: 'a thin, pale and very sad young woman' or 'two ghostly figures'. As for the other protagonist of the story, more often than not he is taxi driver. His job provides a perfectly logical excuse to take anybody in his car, however strange they might look, and drive them any place, no matter how bizarre he might find it.

The action takes place, almost always, late at night or in the evening for the unusual incident requires a mysterious, even sinister setting, particularly when the listener learns that the cabbie takes his customer deep into the forest, or that she requires to be driven to or from

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the money. Waiting about a quarter of an hour or so, the cabbie went to the gate and started shouting angrily. Some time later, a woman came out, rather scared, asking what was happening. He replied he was waiting for the girl to pay the fare and showed the chain that had a picture in a heart-shaped locket, saying the girl had left it as a guarantee. When she saw it, the woman, stupefied, said that was her daughter who had died 2 years before in a taxi cab crash. I've heard this story from my uncle, who is a taxi driver. (Petra Ş.)

7. I work as a cab driver. One night, I was in my car at the stand waiting for customers, listening to some music. Suddenly a woman got in and asked to be driven to Dumbrava Cemetery and I should wait for her there for 5 minutes. Twenty minutes later, the woman came out of the cemetery, and told me to take her to a house (naturally, that house seemed to have been abandoned a long time before) and wait for her again. 10-15 minutes later, she came out of the house and asked me once again to drive her to the cemetery and again wait for no more than 5 minutes. Indeed, 5 minutes later she came out and told me to take her again to that house we had been to half an hour earlier. Once we were there, she said she had no money to pay the fare but she would give me her husband's gold wedding ring in exchange… I thought the ring was worth more than the fare and accepted. Anyway, 3-4 weeks later, I took an order to go to that deserted house… a gentleman with an impressive stature got in and saw 'that' ring on my finger. Naturally, he recognised it as his name was engraved on it, asked where I had it from and I replied that, 3 weeks before, I had taken a lady from the cemetery to that house and back several times and, since she had had no money to pay, she had offered me the wedding ring. What that man told me was a shocker. He said that wedding ring was from his wife, but his wife had been dead for two years… (http://www.pixme.org/despre-orice/povesti-cu-fantome/211/comment-page-6#comments)

8. An extraordinarily beautiful girl hitchhikes in a less-travelled area. A man, who is unmarried, offers her a ride. The girl screams in terror at some point, the man brakes and crashes the car into a footbridge or a rock while the girl mysteriously vanishes from the backseat. The man goes to the police and declares what has happened. They show him some photos in which he recognises the beautiful hitchhiker and finds out that she's been actually dead for some time, losing her life in a car crash in precisely that location where he had the accident

9. A cabbie takes an order to go and pick up somebody from a wedding. A younger colleague, unmarried, asks to be given the order as it is his last race that evening. Nobody knows what happened, but the young cabbie died that night in a car accident. Witnesses who saw him before he died say they noticed someone on the backseat, a bride of unrivalled beauty.

10. Soon after the Revolution, an activist from the former women's Communist Party Organisation went for a meeting in a village on the Someş valley, Letca or Lozna, I do not know exactly. The official meeting was followed by a more informal one with cakes, coffee and some palinka, then the peasant women went on gossiping, feeling glad they had been given the chance to get away, even for a short while, from the household activities. It was dark when they called it off. As the storyteller had some relative in Dej, the propaganda team did not return to Zalău, for the distance was longer and the road was bumpy, but went up the valley. Next to the village of Rus there is a junction where one can turn right and cross the bridge to Simişna or Zalha. If one goes straight on, there's the railroad and the Someş river on the right and an endless steep slope with a thick forest on the left. From whatever point one comes, once they reach the bridge and see the open space of the meadow beyond, they feel a burden get off their chest and take a breath of fresh air.

Well, it is here, at this junction, that they saw two ghostly figures in the headlights, waving at them to stop. The driver intended to stop, but the other passengers asked they should went further, it was too crowded in the car, it was late and they were rushing to Dej. When they passed the hitchhikers, they heard clearly some wailing voices asking repeatedly: 'Take us too! Do not leave us here!'

The driver got very scared, accelerated and rushed, leaving the nebulous creatures behind. On arrival in Dej, they told their kinsfolk what had happened and learned that it was indeed something out of the ordinary, for in that particular place a horrible car accident had occurred a few days earlier and two people had died. (Caiete silvane, 33 / October 2007, pp. 42-43.)

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a cemetery. There is however a version which sets the story on a 'normal working day' significantly, in my opinion, for two reasons. First, because nothing hints at a potential abnormal situation and the audience will be all the more surprised by the odd events. Second, because, at night, senses are numb (in a story the cabbie 'yawns exhausted'), therefore it is possible for the nocturnal driver to confuse natural with supernatural objects; in broad daylight, all is clear and thus the storyteller means that "it is impossible that this should not have truly happened". In other words, he validates the *truth* of the events about to occur. Then, there are details which point to location - the name of the city, neighbourhood, street, - that emphasise authenticity, give veracity to the event.

Once characters presented and setting established, the audience is introduced into the plot: the two arrive at the destination, the girl claims she has no money and offers the driver her wedding ring (or any other personal object, usually a piece of jewellery), as a guarantee, with the promise that she will return shortly with the money. So far, nothing out of the ordinary. But when the passenger fails to appear, the cabbie goes to claim his payment. He knocks at the door and is confronted with a troubling situation: the customer had died a long time before. Those who make the disclosure are frequently members of the family: a father, mother or husband, who identify the jewel brought by the driver as having belonged to the woman. In the version where the girl vanishes from the vehicle in motion and the cabbie is involved in a car crash, he learns from the police that the hitchhiker had long died in an accident precisely in that place where he wrecked his car.

It is now that the listener finds what caused her death: more often than not, the girl committed suicide because her husband died in a car accident on their wedding day (which explains her garments) or she herself fell victim to such a violent occurrence. Sometimes, this information is missing. Either way, the unexpected revelation is the climax of the story, amplified by the contrast between the common, explicit details in the beginning and the disclosure regarding the identity of the passenger.

As for the material evidence left by the ghost, the Canadian researcher Gail de Vos states that "it is not the actual disappearance of the ghost that distinguishes this legend from other ghostlore. Rather, it is the explanation for the disappearance and the physical evidence that is left behind" (de Vos, 1996: 342). For modern society to accept that a supernatural encounter takes place, concrete evidence must be provided; and these are, alongside data on the location of the incident, those precise objects which credit the event.

In the legend about the passenger getting sick and with the bleeding nose, the handkerchief offered by the driver is found on the woman's grave, in the skeleton's hand, after exhumation. In another story, the driver unwraps the handkerchief in which he put the new shiny wedding ring and finds 'a finger in a state of advanced putrefaction with a ring that was time worn, resembling a piece of iron freshly dug out'. The cabbie who leaves his watch in the two old ladies' apartment discovers it, the next day, under a thick layer of dust and spider webs. These are *horror* details given by the narrator to make an impression on his audience and thus reach his goal: the listener is afraid, the legend triggers feelings of anxiety, suspense.

The *vanishing hitchhiker* legends picture the image of an innocent victim. Though there are innocents involved, death picks these people randomly. In Gillian Bennett's words, "they have had their life ripped from them by injustice, violence, or accident; they have died

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separated from their homes and families; and, above all, they have died 'in the fullness of life,' on the threshold of a new joys yet cheated of life's promise" (Bennett, 1998: 11). The ghosts are girls who died on their wedding day or shortly before, therefore before they could enjoy life's simplest pleasures. They probably reappear in an attempt to live these pleasures that were denied to them, hence to fulfil the purpose of life.

Ghosts know exactly where they want to go: home. They do not find their peace because violent accidents separated them from the loved ones and now they seek to re-enter their family circles. This may suggest how important it is for a human being not to die alone, far from their family and without the chance to say goodbye. Therefore, one of the functions of this legend is to suggest an unfulfilled life.

The fact that someone close to the dead provides the revealing information emphasises the sadness of an untimely death and, at the same time, undermines the audience's potential scepticism regarding the supernatural character of the driver's encounter with the ghost (after all, a parent could not mistake their child's identity).

Sometimes, two people witness the incident (the storyteller and the taxi driver). Thus, the narrator gives more weight to his words. Alone and with reduced visibility, it would have been easier and even explainable for the driver to have imagined it all or hallucinated. There is a rational alternative for the supernatural explanation. With at least two witnesses, this alternative becomes less plausible, "as it would assume that more than two or more persons simultaneously had the same hallucination (Main, Hobbs, 2012: 29).

Hence, another function of the *vanishing hitchhiker* legend, that of validating the supernatural, accepting the supernatural as the only logical explanation for the related incidents.

Ghosts are not good or evil, they are rather neuter. Nevertheless, there are legends which reveal that the apparition entails negative consequences: the drivers get injured or die. One such example is the legend about the *Troiţa Miresei* or *Troiţa Margaretei*, a cross-shaped monument built on National Road 7, in the vicinity of Găeşti, a town in Dâmboviţa County. Legend has it that, in the 1930's, a young bride died here on her wedding day. Margareta was the daughter of a boyar from Câmpulung Muscel and daughter-in-law of architect Ion Mincu. The newlyweds were returning from the religious ceremony that had taken place in Bucharest, and were going to Câmpulung for their wedding party. On the way, the tragic event happened: a car accident with only one victim, the bride. In her memory, her father had a cross built. Since then, many accidents have happened even though the road is straight, so people believe it is the soul of the dead bride that keeps looking for the lover she was separated from. The victims of these tragedies are frequently men. In only one year (2008-2009) 12 youths died, especially unmarried men. Survivors do not remember much either, but some witnesses say they saw the ghost of a woman in bridal garments.

A similar story is that of the bride of the Radovan Forest (Dolj County), only now it deals with a very beautiful young woman who hanged herself on the branches of a tree because, on the eve of her wedding, she was raped by her employer. Unable to bear the burden of shame, she committed suicide. They say her soul wanders about in the forest where she found her death for here the number of car crashes is inexplicably and suspiciously large since the road is straight and smooth.

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In conclusion, the legends about the vanishing hitchhiker become cautionary stories which function as warnings about the dangers lurking on the road, especially at night (warnings such as "do not stray from the path", "keep your eyes wide open" or "do not take strangers in your car"). Furthermore, as we have seen, they suggest an unfulfilled life that was prematurely ended. And, finally, they say that not only does the supernatural exist, but we should fear it. It is human to fear what is *beyond*, what we cannot understand and is not subject to the natural laws. After all, it is but natural to fear death.

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