Hook Man (Urban Legend)

The story always starts the same. A couple is making use of a ‘look-out’ point when they hear something outside the car. Inevitably, the girl is scared by this. The couple will argue because the boy doesn’t want to leave just yet, but the girl may become slightly weepy from fear, so the boy will shift into gear and speed off. The couple may not speak to each other for the entire ride home. With some semblance of chivalry, the boy will get out of the car to open his girlfriend’s door for her, but her door handle is stuck! In it is a bloody hook. At this point the story ends without any indicator that the boyfriend apologized for not acknowledging what was proved to be a very legitimate fear.

Because of the setting, a deserted lover’s lane, the story may have started as a cautionary tale to teenagers to prevent them from going to places where their hormones may get the better of them. *(FA 01 18)* Other than that, the story is scary to listeners while they are hearing it, but if the story is actually dissected it does not make a lot of sense. Why is this man attacking? Why does he have a hook instead of a fake hand? How did he get all the way to a remote parking place, and why did he choose that area instead of a more practical location for nefarious purposes if he is truly so criminally insane that he attacks the first people he sees?

The story does not just reside in Utah folklore. *(FA 01 431)* Legends of the Hook Man are consistent from Massachusetts to California. The only difference that comes from the location is the name of the place where the couple is parked. Most major differences in the story exist because the individual story tellers mashed another story inelegantly into the Hook Man mythos in an attempt to shock their audience.

The most commonly conglomerated tale is of a boy and girl whose car breaks down or runs out of gas, depending on the tale, and the boy gets out of the car to go for help. The girl stays in the car with the door locked and only hears the sound of a tree scratching the window. She may fall asleep at this point, or is merely closing her eyes because her boyfriend asked her to for some inexplicable reason. Either way, she completely misses any action that happens outside of the vehicle.

A policeman finds the girl and escorts her out of the car. He tells her not to look back, but she can’t help herself. The thing that had been scratching her window was her boyfriend’s foot. He is hanging, dead and mauled in a tree. At this point, a hook is added somewhere to connect the two stories, despite the fact that it really does not make sense for the Hook Man to leave his murder weapon behind.
One of the things that adds or detracts from the story’s effectiveness is the location of the telling. (FA 01 131) Stories of the Hook Man are most successfully told in homogeneous groups at sleepovers or camp-outs. There is some credence lent to the tale if the teller is able to claim that the event occurred at or near the point where the group currently resides or if the audience is very young. The atmosphere at the time of the telling largely affects the amount of belief instilled in the listeners. Even then, none of the sources of the tale appear to believe that it holds even a spark of truth, so it is likely that any belief that a listener holds while caught up in the tale is forgotten soon after. Still, the story is told again and again, varying only occasionally. Something about the original story is consistently exciting to people who love to tell stories. However, it is not really that great of a tale when it comes to scaring people. While both the boyfriend and girlfriend survive it may caution teenage couples, it is not the sort of thing that will impress a campfire surrounded by scouts. The original tale makes the most sense. But sense is not always the goal. Several alternate versions exist that are a great deal more violent. In the search for sensationalism, sense is discarded. The hook and the car are the only consistency.

In one version, a woman goes to the gas station, and when she pays, the cashier goes into the back to call someone and then tells her that her card was denied. The cashier asks her to come back into the office, and when she refuses he grabs her and pushes her into the room. He pulls out a gun, and she screams. The gun is not for her. The brave cashier neglects to wait for the police whom he spent the effort of calling in advance and moves towards the woman’s car. In the back is the murderous Hook Man who had crept into the back of the vehicle while its owner was pumping gas. The cashier then shoots the man, for his crime of existence and the story ends before the police can show up to rule if it really counts as self-defense if the Hook Man did not actually do anything beyond stowing away.

Another version concerns a murderer who would hide under women’s cars and hamstring them when they stepped out. Afterwards neatly slicing through the back of her ankles, he would pull the woman’s body under the car and finish murdering his victim with his hook. This cautionary tale was a bit too short to be a proper ghost story, but apparently existed to encourage lone drivers to check underneath their cars before getting too close to them.

In yet another variant, the Hook Man dismembered a girl scout who had wandered away from her camp. The only connection this variant has to the other stories is the Hook man’s inexplicable urge to leave his hook behind as some sort of signature. Not only a waste of good prosthetic, but not likely the murder weapon, as few hooks have the power to cut through bone. Again, it is more of a
cautionary tale to campers, because it discourages loner behavior which can be more dangerous in mundane ways during a trip in the wilderness.

The Hook Man, in all its iterations, is a cautionary tale. Whether for morality, or vehicle safety, the vague sense of unease the fabricated stories produce are used to great effect in the fight against bad behaviors.

Projects Referenced:
The Hook (FA 01 18)
The Legend Of “The Hook” (FA 01 131)
Collection of Hook-Man Stories (FA 01 431)