

Seven Ghost Stories from American Folklore

Retold by S.E. Schlosser

Axe Murder Hollow (Pennsylvania)

Susan and Ned were driving through a wooded empty section of highway. Lightning flashed, thunder roared, the sky went dark in the torrential downpour.

"We'd better stop," said Susan.

Ned nodded his head in agreement. He stepped on the brake, and suddenly the car started to slide on the slick pavement. They plunged off the road and slid to a halt at the bottom of an incline.

Pale and shaking, Ned quickly turned to check if Susan was all right. When she nodded, Ned relaxed and looked through the rain soaked windows.

"I'm going to see how bad it is," he told Susan, and went out into the storm. She saw his blurry figure in the headlight, walking around the front of the car. A moment later, he jumped in beside her, soaking wet.

"The car's not badly damaged, but we're wheel-deep in mud," he said. "I'm going to have to go for help."

Susan swallowed nervously. There would be no quick rescue here. He told her to turn off the headlights and lock the doors until he returned.

Axe Murder Hollow. Although Ned hadn't said the name aloud, they both knew what he had been thinking when he told her to lock the car. This was the place where a man had once taken an axe and hacked his wife to death in a jealous rage over an alleged affair. Supposedly, the axe-wielding spirit of the husband continued to haunt this section of the road.

Outside the car, Susan heard a shriek, a loud thump, and a strange gurgling noise. But she couldn't see anything in the darkness.

Frightened, she shrank down into her seat. She sat in silence for a while, and then she noticed another sound. Bump. Bump. Bump. It was a soft sound, like something being blown by the wind.

Suddenly, the car was illuminated by a bright light. An official sounding voice told her to get out of the car. Ned must have found a police officer. Susan unlocked the door and stepped out of the car. As her eyes adjusted to the bright light, she saw it.

Hanging by his feet from the tree next to the car was the dead body of Ned. His bloody throat had been cut so deeply that he was nearly decapitated. The wind swung his corpse back and forth so that it thumped against the tree. Bump. Bump. Bump.

Susan screamed and ran toward the voice and the light. As she drew close, she realized the light was not coming from a flashlight. Standing there was the glowing figure of a man with a smile on his face and a large, solid, and definitely real axe in his hands. She backed away from the glowing figure until she bumped into the car.

"Playing around when my back was turned," the ghost whispered, stroking the sharp blade of the axe with his fingers. "You've been very naughty."

The last thing she saw was the glint of the axe blade in the eerie, incandescent light.

Bloody Mary (Pennsylvania)

She lived deep in the forest in a tiny cottage and sold herbal remedies for a living. Folks living in the town nearby called her Bloody Mary, and said she was a witch. None dared cross the old crone for fear that their cows would go dry, their food-stores rot away before winter, their children take sick of fever, or any number of terrible things that an angry witch could do to her neighbors.

Then the little girls in the village began to disappear, one by one. No one could find out where they had gone. Grief-stricken families searched the woods, the local buildings, and all the houses and barns, but there was no sign of the missing girls. A few brave souls even went to Bloody Mary's home in the woods to see if the witch had taken the girls, but she denied any knowledge of the disappearances. Still, it was noted that her haggard appearance had changed. She looked younger, more attractive. The neighbors were suspicious, but they could find no proof that the witch had taken their young ones.

Then came the night when the daughter of the miller rose from her bed and walked outside, following an enchanted sound no one else could hear. The miller's wife had a toothache and was sitting up in the kitchen treating the tooth with an herbal remedy when her daughter left the house. She screamed for her husband and followed the girl out of the door. The miller came running in his nightshirt. Together, they tried to restrain the girl, but she kept breaking away from them and heading out of town.

The desperate cries of the miller and his wife woke the neighbors. They came to assist the frantic couple. Suddenly, a sharp-eyed farmer gave a shout and pointed towards a strange light at the edge of the woods. A few townsmen followed him out into the field and saw Bloody Mary standing beside a large oak tree, holding a magic wand that was pointed towards the miller's house. She was glowing with an unearthly light as she set her evil spell upon the miller's daughter.

The townsmen grabbed their guns and their pitchforks and ran toward the witch. When she heard the commotion, Bloody Mary broke off her spell and fled back into the woods. The far-sighted farmer had loaded his gun with silver bullets in case the witch ever came after his daughter. Now he took aim and shot at her. The bullet hit Bloody Mary in the hip and she fell to the ground. The angry townsmen leapt upon her and carried her back into the field, where they built a huge bonfire and burned her at the stake.

As she burned, Bloody Mary screamed a curse at the villagers. If anyone mentioned her name aloud before a mirror, she would send her spirit to revenge herself upon them for her terrible death. When she was dead, the villagers went to the house in the wood and found the unmarked graves of the little girls the evil witch had murdered. She had used their blood to make her young again.

From that day to this, anyone foolish enough to chant Bloody Mary's name three times before a darkened mirror will summon the vengeful spirit of the witch. It is said that she will tear their bodies to pieces and rip their souls from their mutilated bodies. The souls of these unfortunate ones will burn in torment as Bloody Mary once was burned, and they will be trapped forever in the mirror.

The Brothers' Revenge (Wisconsin)

The blizzard was raging fiercely around them as the brothers stumbled down the long road. They were miles from any farm, and knew they had to seek shelter or freeze to death. So it was with gratitude that the two brothers spotted a saloon and pushed their way through the door.

Every eye in the room turned upon them, as the boys ordered coffee with the last of their money. As the bartender went to fetch the hot drink, most of the regulars returned to their conversations. But one man continued to stare: a massive butcher with a mop of red hair and a long red beard who was the worse for drink.

“You’re looking at me funny,” the butcher slurred, looming over the two boys.

“We weren’t looking at you,” said the older boy. “We were just warming ourselves by the fire.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” he shouted. Around the room the crowd grinned; they loved a good fight.

“We didn’t say that,” said the older boy quickly, waving his hands and accidentally striking the butcher on the arm. That did it. The butcher grabbed the boy by the collar. “No one hits me and gets away with it,” he roared and threw the boy headfirst into the huge fire raging in the hearth.

There was a moment of stunned silence in the saloon, and then the elder boy screamed in agony as the flames engulfed him from head to toe. The younger lad shouted in terror. The older boy stumbled out of the fireplace, as the little brother tried to beat out the fire with his small hands.

The butcher loomed above them, grinning sadistically as the flaming boy lost consciousness, his screams dying away.

“Your turn,” the butcher said to his brother. The younger boy gasped in fear and fled for his life out into the raging snow. The boy’s little frozen body was not found until the spring.

One evening, a decade after the death of the two young boys, a burly man with a long red beard came strolling down the road once taken by the brothers. The butcher had heard rumors of a ghost but had discarded them as so much poppycock and tavern talk.

As he meandered down the road, he became aware that a silence had fallen. In the odd silence, he heard the footsteps of a large animal. They walked when he walked and stopped when he stopped. Pulse pounding madly, the butcher turned. Behind him, large as an ox, stood a black dog with blazing blue eyes and sharp teeth. The butcher had seen those blue eyes once before, gazing at him from the face of a young boy trying to save his burning brother.

The black dog growled softly and took a step forward. The butcher whirled around to flee and found himself face to face with a tall figure covered from head to toe in flames. The burning boy reached out toward the butcher with hands withered and blackened by fire. The butcher gave a terrified scream and fell, blood gushing from eyes and nose. He was dead before he hit the ground.

To this day, the black dog and the flaming figure still appeared in that vicinity to harass travelers and speed them on their way.

Dispatched (South Carolina)

There was something odd in the tone of the dispatcher’s voice when he called to tell me a person needed picking up at Bramlett Road late one summer night in 1947. I shuddered when I heard the name of the street. I did not want to go anywhere near that area, especially at midnight. But I drove a Yellow Cab, and it was my job to pick up a call when it came. So I swallowed and headed toward Bramlett Road and the slaughter yards.

I’d been out of town when “the incident” happened. I call it an incident, but it was murder, plain and not so simple. A fellow by the name of Brown who drove a cab with our company was robbed and stabbed to death in his cab. Next day a man named Willie Earle was picked up by the police the very next day and put in jail for the crime, though he denied doing it.

Then a bunch of hotheads who drove cabs for our company gathered together, passed around a bottle of whiskey and talking about “getting” the fellow who’d stabbed Brown. One of the men went out and borrowed a shotgun, and the mob drove to the jail, grabbed Earle and threw him in the back of one of the cabs. The hotheads took him to the slaughter yards and they dragged Earle forcibly from the cab and started beating him. A man pulled a knife and waded into the mob with it, and Earle shouted: “Lord, you’ve killed me!” That’s when the fellow with the shotgun put a bullet in his head, reloaded, and shot him twice more.

When the mob was sure he was dead, they climbed back into their separate cabs and fanned out, each heading back to the city by a different route. Eventually word got out and thirty-one fellows were arrested for the crime. But they were all acquitted by a jury of their peers.

After the incident, the slaughterhouse section of Bramlett Road got a bad reputation. No one in the cab company much liked driving there, especially at night. Folks claimed it was haunted by the ghost of Willie Earle.

I shivered as I pulled onto Bramlett Road and slowed down to look for my passenger. No one was there. I parked the cab and got out to have a quick smoke while I waited.

All at once, the temperature around me plummeted. I froze in place, suddenly terrified, as someone moaned in terror from the other side of the road. The sound scraped my nerves raw. I could hear the unmistakable thud of hammering fists and the darkness was filled with swirling black silhouettes pounding on something . . . or someone. I fumbled for the icy-cold door handle as a man shouted in agony: “Lord, you’ve killed me!” I threw myself inside the cab as a gun exploded, cutting off the man’s cries. The shot was swiftly followed by two more.

I squealed the tires as I spun the cab around. A tall, battered figure that glowed just enough for me to see its lolling head, the blood-stained, dead features, the knife-torn clothes blocked the road in front of me. I gasped, floored the gas pedal and swerved around it, heart hammering so hard it hurt my ribs.

I was still trembling when slammed into the office a few minutes later and told the dispatcher I was quitting. Then I grabbed my things and headed for home lickety split. There was no way I was going to Bramlett Road ever again. And I never did.

Don’t Turn on the Light (Maryland)

She commandeered the room in the basement of her dorm as soon as she realized she would have to pull an all-nighter in order to prepare for tomorrow’s final exam. Her roommate, Jenna, liked to get to bed early, so she packed up everything she thought she would need and went downstairs to study . . . and study . . . and study some more.

It was two o’clock when she realized that she’d left one of the textbooks upstairs on her bed.

With a dramatic sigh, she rose, and climbed the stairs slowly to her third-floor dorm room.

The lights were dim in the long hallway, and the old boards creaked under her weary tread. She reached her room and turned the handle as softly as she could, pushing the door open just enough to slip inside, so that the hall lights wouldn’t wake her roommate.

The room was filled with a strange, metallic smell. She frowned a bit, her arms breaking out into chills. There was a strange feeling of malice in the room, as if a malevolent gaze were fixed upon her. It was a mind trick; the all-nighter was catching up with her.

She could hear Jenna breathing on the far side of the room-- a heavy sound, almost as if she had been running. Jenna must have picked up a cold during the last tense week before finals.

She crept along the wall until she reached her bed, groping among the covers for the stray history textbook. In the silence, she could hear a steady drip-drip-drip sound. She sighed silently. Facilities would have to come to fix the sink in the bathroom . . . again.

Her fingers closed on the textbook. She picked it up softly and withdrew from the room as silently as she could.

Relieved to be out of the room, she hurried back downstairs, collapsed into an overstuffed chair and studied until six o'clock. She finally decided that enough was enough. If she slipped upstairs now, she could get a couple hours' sleep before her nine o'clock exam.

The first of the sun's rays were beaming through the windows as she slowly slid the door open, hoping not to awaken Jenna. Her nose was met by an earthy, metallic smell a second before her eyes registered the scene in her dorm room. Jenna was spread-eagled on top of her bed against the far wall, her throat cut from ear to ear and her nightdress stained with blood. Two drops of blood fell from the saturated blanket with a drip-drip noise that sounded like a leaky faucet.

Scream after scream poured from her mouth, but she couldn't stop herself any more than she could cease wringing her hands. All along the hallway, doors slammed and footsteps came running down the passage.

Within moments other students had gathered in her doorway, and one of her friends gripped her arm with a shaking hand and pointed a trembling finger toward the wall. Her eyes widened in shock at what she saw. Then she fainted into her friend's arms.

On the wall above her bed, written in her roommate's blood, were the words: "Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?"

La Mala Hora (New Mexico)

My friend Isabela called me one evening before dinner. She was sobbing as she told me that she and her husband Enrique were getting divorced. He had moved out of the house earlier that day and Isabela was distraught.

I called my husband, who was on a business trip in Chicago, and he agreed that I should go stay with Isabela for a few days to help her during this difficult time. I packed a small suitcase and got right into the car. It was late, and it would take me at least four hours to drive from my home to Santa Fe. Isabela was expecting me to arrive around midnight.

As I traveled down the dark, wet highway, I kept feeling chills, as if someone or something were watching me. I kept looking in the rear view mirror, and glancing into the back seat. No one was there. Don't be ridiculous, I told myself, wishing fervently that I was home in my bed instead of driving on a dark, rainy highway. There was almost no traffic, and I heartily wished that I would soon reach Santa Fe.

I turned off the highway just before I reached the city and started down the side roads that led to Isabela's house. As I approached a small crossroads, I saw a woman step into the street directly in front of my car. I shrieked in fright and slammed on my brakes, praying I would miss her.

The car shuddered to a halt, and I looked frantically around for the woman. Then I saw her, right beside my window, looking in at me. She had the face of a demon, twisted, eyes glowing red, and short pointed teeth. I screamed as she leapt at my window, her clawed hands striking the glass. I put my foot down on the accelerator and the car leapt forward. For a few terrible moments, she ran along side the car, keeping up easily and striking at me again and again. Then she fell behind and in the rear view mirror I saw her growing taller and taller, until she was as large as a tree. Red light

swirled around her like mist, and she pointed after me, her mouth moving, though I could not make out the words. I jerked my attention back to the road, afraid what might happen to me if my car ran off the street.

I made it to Isabela's house in record time and flung myself out of the car, pounding on her door frantically and looking behind me to see if the demon-faced woman had followed me. Isabela came running to the door and let me in.

"Shut the door! Shut it!" I cried frantically, brushing past her into the safety of the house.

"Jane, what is wrong?" she asked, slamming the door shut. She grabbed my hand and led me into the living room. I sank onto the couch and started sobbing in fear and reaction. After several minutes, I managed to gasp out my story. Isabela gasped and said: "Are you sure you were at a crossroads when you saw her?"

I nodded, puzzled by her question.

"It must have been La Malhora," Isabela said, wringing her hands.

"The bad hour?" I asked.

"This is bad, Jane. Very bad," Isabela cried. "La Malhora only appears at a crossroads when someone is going to die."

Ordinarily, I would have laughed at such a superstition, but the appearance of the demon-woman had shaken me. Isabela got me a cup of hot cocoa, brought my luggage in from the car, and sent me to bed. She was so concerned for me that she didn't once mention the divorce or Enrique.

I felt much better the next morning, but I could not shake the feeling of dread that grew within me all day. Neither of us mentioned La Malhora, but we were both thinking of her when I told Isabela that I wanted to go home. Isabela insisted on accompanying me. I flatly refused to drive after dark. I was afraid I would see the demon-woman again when I passed the crossroads.

We left the next morning, and we hadn't been home more than twenty minutes when a police car pulled into my driveway. I knew at once what it meant, and so did Isabella.

The officers spoke very gently to me, but nothing could soften the news. My husband had been mugged on the way back to his hotel after dinner last night. His body had not been found until this morning. He had been shot in the head and was killed instantly.

Screaming Jenny (West Virginia)

The old storage sheds along the tracks were abandoned shortly after the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad was built, and it wasn't long before the poor folk of the area moved in. The sheds provided shelter-- of a sort-- although the winter wind still pierced through every crevice, and the small fireplaces that the poor constructed did little to keep the cold at bay.

A gentle, kindly woman named Jenny lived alone in one of the smaller sheds. She had fallen on hard times, and with no family to protect her, she was forced to find work where she could and take whatever shelter was available to someone with little money. Jenny never had enough to eat and in winter her tiny fire barely kept her alive during the cold months. Still, she kept her spirits up and tried to help other folks when they took sick or needed food, sometimes going without herself so that another could eat.

One cold evening in late autumn, Jenny sat shivering over her fire, drinking broth out of a wooden bowl, when a spark flew from the fire and lit her skirt on fire. Intent on filling her aching stomach, Jenny did not notice her flaming clothes until the fire had burnt through the heavy wool of her skirt and began to scorch her skin. Leaping up in terror, Jenny threw her broth over the licking

flames, but the fluid did nothing to douse the fire. In terror, Jenny fled from the shack and ran along the tracks, screaming for help as the flames engulfed her body.

The station was not far away, and instinctively Jenny made for it, hoping to find someone to aid her. Within moments, her body was a glowing inferno and Jenny was overwhelmed by pain. Her screams grew more horrible as her steps slowed. She staggered blindly onto the tracks just west of the station, a ball of fire that barely looked human. In her agony, she did not see the glowing headlight of the train rounding the curve, or hear the screech of the breaks as the engineer spotted her fire-eaten figure and tried to stop. A moment later, her terrible screams broke off as the train mowed her down.

Alerted by the whistle, the crew from the station came running as the engineer halted the train and ran back down the tracks toward poor dead Jenny, who was still burning. The men doused the fire and carried her body back to the station. She was given a pauper's funeral and buried in an unmarked grave in the local churchyard. Within a few days, another poverty-stricken family had moved into her shack, and Jenny was forgotten.

Forgotten that is, until a month later when a train rounding the bend west of the station was confronted by a screaming ball of fire. Too late to stop, the engineer plowed over the glowing figure before he could bring the train to a screeching halt. Leaping from the engine, he ran back down the tracks to search for a mangled, burning body, but there was nothing there. Shaken, he brought his train into the station and reported the incident to the stationmaster. After hearing his tale, the stationmaster remembered poor, dead Jenny and realized that her ghost had returned to haunt the tracks where she had died.

To this day, the phantom of Screaming Jenny still appears on the tracks on the anniversary of the day she died. Many an engineer has rounded the curve just west of the station and found himself face to face with the burning ghost of Screaming Jenny, as once more she makes her deadly run towards the Harpers Ferry station, seeking in vain for someone to save her.