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Folklore and the Internet

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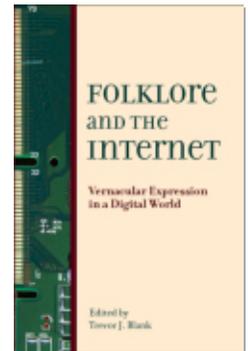
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Chapter 2

Guardians of the Living: Characterization of Missing Women on the Internet

ELIZABETH TUCKER

As Richard A. Lanham suggests in *The Electronic Word*, the World Wide Web facilitates information-sharing that is both fluid and democratic (1993, 106). One important kind of information-sharing occurs on websites devoted to women who have disappeared, probably because of violent death. Since the Internet became popular in the early 1990s, it has served as a locus for predation and consolation, as well as expressions of confusion and resolution. The Internet theorist Sherry Turkle explains that all of us who spend time on the World Wide Web become “dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along” (1995, 10). So it is not surprising that websites about missing women have developed folkloric patterns. Rumors about sightings of the missing woman comprise one form of folklore. Another pattern is the “missing woman” or “missing child” hoax. A website about the disappearance of the nonexistent girl Penny Brown, for example, is still available on the World Wide Web (“Missing Child”). Articles about University of Wisconsin student Audrey Seiler, who faked her own abduction in the spring of 2004, contribute to the impression that one should not necessarily believe what one reads online.

Other folkloric patterns have emerged as well. The subject of this chapter is the relationship between websites’ renditions of missing women’s stories and legends about the ghosts of murdered women that describe violent death followed by benevolent haunting of the place where the woman died. One section of my book *Haunted Halls* (2007)

analyzes “wailing women” ghosts, who warn living women to steer clear of the dangers that led to their own demise. These dangers include men’s predatory behavior, isolation from others who can help, and over-indulgence in alcohol. Stories about places haunted by wailing women teach both women and men to be careful, while also offering them a good scare, especially around Halloween.

I could tell many legends about female college students who died in troubling circumstances, but the two that have the closest connection to the subject of this chapter are the stories about Shelley Sperling at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York, and Elizabeth at the State University of New York at Cortland. Shelley Sperling died after her boyfriend assaulted her in Marist College’s dining hall in 1975. More than twenty years after her death, students in her residence hall complained that Shelley’s spirit was turning their lights and TVs on and off. I interviewed a former resident assistant for the hall, Christina Hope, who created a website in memory of Shelley because she felt it was very important for other students to know how Shelley died. While working on the website, Christina Hope saw an apparition of Shelley in her residence-hall room. Once the website was finished, signs of Shelley’s presence diminished. In contrast to this complex of narratives, stories about the ghost of Elizabeth at SUNY Cortland show no evidence of being founded on a historical death. Students in Cheney Hall say that Elizabeth, who died after being pushed downstairs by her boyfriend, haunts Cheney’s staircase to protect other women’s safety. Her own tragic death makes her a guardian of current students; Elizabeth has, according to recent narratives, saved women who have drunk too much alcohol from falling downstairs (Tucker 2007, 134–52).

Many websites for missing women include stories about how individual women disappeared and how they lived before their disappearances. There may even be several postings by people familiar with the circumstances that preceded the disappearance. Often these writers consider how morally and safely the woman conducted her life beforehand. Did she work hard? Did her recreations involve risk-taking? Once a woman has disappeared, even small daily decisions may seem significant. Gathering details of this kind is part of the interactive storytelling that happens in cyberspace.

This storytelling follows patterns established by *legend*, a conversation-based genre with a close connection to the stresses and strains of everyday life. Ghost stories comprise one subcategory of the legend genre. Elliott Oring defines legends as “narratives which focus on a single episode, an episode which is presented as miraculous, uncanny, bizarre,

or sometimes embarrassing" (1986, 125). Jan H. Brunvand explains that legends get readers' or listeners' attention through "a strong basic story-appeal, a foundation in actual belief, and a meaningful message or moral" (1981, 10). One legend that scares adolescents is "The Boy Friend's Death," which luridly describes the murder of a young man who hikes down the highway to get gas after leaving his girlfriend in his locked car. According to Brunvand, this legend warns young people to avoid danger but also "reveals society's broader fears of people, especially women and the young, being alone and among strangers in the darkened world outside the security of their home or car" (1981, 11). Such widespread fears often come to the surface in people's interactions on websites for missing women. Through characterization of women who have disappeared, storytellers share their concerns with fellow users of the World Wide Web.

Some listeners accept ghost stories and other legends as true stories, while others question their veracity. The liveliness of legend circulation depends upon believers, skeptics, and other people who take a stance in between those two extremes (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1973). By questioning the truth of a narrative, people enhance its potential significance. Elliott Oring explains that whether such narratives are true or false is not important; what matters is the process by which "the art of legendry engages the listener's sense of the possible" (1986, 125). Even if we feel reluctant to accept a story at face value, we may enjoy pondering its potential significance.

Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1975) have explored how people with common interests transmit folklore through social conduits: one interested individual shares a story with another; as transmission continues, the story grows and changes. Gary Alan Fine (1979) applies the hypothesis of multiconduit transmission to boys' storytelling in Minnesota. In my own research on ghost stories, I have found that a shared interest in supernatural events stimulates storytelling in small or larger groups. The Internet offers exciting potential for story transmission. Those of us who study supernatural narratives are just beginning to understand how people share legends and develop legend characters through the Internet.

Ghost stories feature certain kinds of characters. Jeannie Banks Thomas delineates typical male and female legend characters: the "Extreme Guy" and the "Deviant Femme." Violent, angry, and wild, the Extreme Guy wreaks havoc on innocent people. The Deviant Femme chooses to live by her own eccentric rules rather than accepting society's restrictions on women's behavior (2007b, 91–102). Her daring rejection

of “safe” rules for women makes her a fascinating person. Some Deviant Femmes become eccentric and violent because of the Extreme Guy’s influence; an example of this kind of character is Mary of the “Mary’s Grave” legends on Long Island in New York. After Mary is raped and beaten by her father, she kills her baby and slaughters farm animals in a satanic ritual. Finally, she kills herself and then lingers at the place where she died to shock and frighten adolescent visitors (Tucker 2007, 201–02).

After visiting numerous websites dedicated to missing women, I have come to the conclusion that the characterization of some women who have disappeared fits Thomas’s Deviant Femme concept to a certain extent. Website visitors’ stories about missing women tend to highlight any daring, deviant behavior of theirs before their tragic disappearance. In some cases this behavior pattern seems relatively low-key, while in others it becomes sensational, with strong moral overtones. While legends provide the main pattern, folktales—narratives about events in a fictive realm that offer some guidance for real life—also offer a framework for portrayals of missing women.

In addition to highlighting daring or deviant behavior, the characterization of missing women in newspapers, on television, and on the Internet has focused on women of privileged backgrounds. *Washington Post* reporter Eugene Robinson suggested that the media “[choose] only young, white, middle-class women for the full damsel treatment” (2005). “Full damsel” refers to the well-known image of the damsel in distress: a lovely, imperiled woman who desperately needs to be rescued. This term brings to mind suffering princesses and other female characters in traditional folktales, as well as P. G. Wodehouse’s novel *A Damsel in Distress* (1919). On a CNN program in 2006, Sheri Parks, a professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland in College Park, invoked the phrase “Missing White Woman Syndrome” (“Diagnosing ‘Missing White Woman Syndrome’”). This term has become so well accepted that it has its own acronym, MWWS, and its own article in Wikipedia (“Missing White Woman”). That article mentions a corollary term, “Missing Pretty Girl Syndrome,” commonly known by its acronym MPGS.

Keeping in mind that legends focus on worries about women who take risks and push the envelope of acceptable behavior, I suggest that some Internet sites for missing women tend to emphasize a previously unnamed subcategory of MPGS: “Missing Party Girl Syndrome.” As perceived by journalists and website participants, the “Party Girl” has too much fun and does not take enough precautions. Stories about her behavior before her disappearance tend to emphasize her failure to do certain things that might have given her sad story a different conclusion.

Among the many available websites about missing women, I have chosen several that characterize missing young women as “Party Girls” who have taken too many chances. These websites follow the MWWS pattern. In contrast, I have also examined a website about a number of young and older women of different ethnic backgrounds who tragically disappeared and were, in some cases, found to have become victims of a mass murderer. All of these websites invite visitors to express opinions and tell stories of their own in response to information and photographs. By examining postings on a number of sites, it is possible to trace elements that show the influence of traditional legends and folktales.

Disappearance in Aruba

Some of the most frequently visited websites are the ones dedicated to eighteen-year-old Natalee Holloway, who disappeared in Aruba in the spring of 2005. Many of these websites welcome comments from anyone. “Blogs for Natalee,” for example, has an open chat room and postings from registered visitors; it also offers a “Shout Box” and a “Virtual Hope Quilt for Natalee Holloway.” About.com, which covers a wide variety of topics, has encouraged interactive conversation about Natalee Holloway’s disappearance (“News and Current Events”); so has TripAdvisor.com (2005), which lets travelers exchange positive comments and warnings.

One of the most interesting interactive sites, Scared Monkeys, has a section that posts information on a long list of women who have disappeared (“Scared Monkeys Missing Persons Site”). The portion of this site devoted to Holloway includes numerous articles by journalists, interview transcripts, photos, videos, and other material. Each missing woman has her own forum, on which active members, known as *Monkeys*, can post material and discuss Holloway’s case; non-Monkeys can also participate in the discussion. Many Monkeys identify themselves as women who are eager to help solve Holloway’s case. On this website and others, women tell stories, chat, and commiserate with each other. Men also participate, but not as frequently.

During the two-and-a-half years since Holloway’s disappearance, reports on television and on the Internet have provoked countless comments. Early media coverage focused on the last time Holloway’s friends saw her; the fact that she was drinking at the bar Carlos and Charlie’s and then left with three young men became the basis of her sad story. Private detective Charles Montaldo summarized what happened: “Witnesses said Natalee was last seen leaving a nightclub in a car with three males”

(2008). This brief description identifies the missing young woman as a "Party Girl" who wants to have fun but does not take precautions. A focus on the young woman's unwise separation from her friends mirrors the legend's didactic emphasis on terrible consequences suffered by women who go out into the world without proper safeguards.

Two frightening consequences of isolation in an unsafe social environment can be overindulgence in alcohol and exposure to dangerous drugs. Visitors to interactive websites such as "Blogs for Natalee" have discussed these subjects in detail. On 23 July 2007, for example, a male "Blogs for Natalee" participant with the screenname "MIP6" commented that "[Natalee] was drinking 151 shots on her own long before doing shots at C and C" and was "so hammered she had to be helped back to her room the night before." This posting's harsh tone provoked a rapid retort from "Granny Toad," who wrote, "Shame on you . . . So, MIP6, your position is that the victim drank and drugged herself to death then disappeared herself." Her response's sarcasm put MIP6 in his place, reminding him that Holloway was a victim who had tragically and mysteriously disappeared.

Date-rape drugs and nonconsensual sex are other disturbing subjects. Andrea Greenberg authored the earliest study of legends that combine drugs and sex (1973), while Fine and Johnson's essay on the "Promiscuous Cheerleader" focuses on adolescent males' legend telling (1980). Jan Brunvand analyzes "Spanish Fly" narratives (1984, 133–34), and I have collected a number of legends about "roofies" (rohypnol) given by men to young women in clubs (2005, 98–99). Fear of men preying on women through date-rape drugs has encouraged the spread of legends on this subject, as well as warnings passed from one woman to another.

Website visitors' comments on Holloway's tragic disappearance have included expressions of sadness, anger, and support for members of her family, as well as accounts of personal experiences. While these stories vary, their common theme is worry about Holloway and other missing women. A married woman's posting to TripAdvisor's "Aruba Forum: Alert" in June 2005 describes an encounter in the bar where Natalee was last seen: "When we saw her leave she left by herself. No one was with her, but we did notice some local guys talking with her while she was in there." Notice that the phrases "by herself" and "no one was with her" highlight her aloneness as a figure in a legendlike scenario that is mysterious, uncertain, and dangerous.

A posting on an About.com message board five months later suggests a more hopeful but unconvincing outcome for Holloway's story: "On November 5th 2005 a friend and I went to a night club in Manhattan

Kansas where I do believe I seen Natalee Holloway. She was not 21 yet around 5'9 or 5'10 about 130 to 140 lbs (maybe). She might of met this guy on her trip and come back to Kansas with him" ("News and Current Events"). Still other reports place her in Mexico, where kidnapers have taken her. These and additional rumors have fed the dialectics of Holloway narratives. Some narrators believe in their sightings, while others do not; what ties them all together is their hope for a positive or at least a clear conclusion. Both "true" and "false" Holloway figures contribute to this process.

Psychics' investigations of Natalee Holloway's disappearance have also added intriguing material to websites. Accounts of their work have some similarity to ghost stories about haunted places, including college buildings, but these accounts focus more on the psychic's efforts to contact a spirit than the spirit's own attempts to be recognized. Marie Saint Claire (2005), a psychic with an Internet following, posted her investigation on the website Underworld Tales. Saint Claire had three psychic experiences while seeking to contact Natalee Holloway's spirit. The first was a "vision that nearly grew into a full remote connection" in which the girl, wearing a swimsuit, "looked beautiful under the water, her long blonde hair flowing around her like an angel's." The second communication involved rough male voices, "Over here" and "Turn around," interpreted as vocalizations by Holloway's killers, and the third included a view of Holloway running on the beach followed by a glimpse of her killer's face.

Saint Claire's discussion of her contact with Holloway's spirit includes messages from readers who want to help solve the case. One message from a citizen of Aruba suggests three interpretations of the word "Mont," which came to Saint Claire as a clue. Another message mentions the reader's own visions of Holloway, which include "pink flags," "a dab of purple," and "a strong odor of seafood." This reader, who concludes that Holloway died on a beach and was transported on a boat, added: "I hope I'm wrong. I hope she's just sitting on an island somewhere having a good time before she goes to college." This wistful statement shows how important it can be for a website visitor to envision the folktale's "happily ever after," although available evidence discourages that conclusion.

On Court TV's "Missing in Paradise," which aired on 29 June 2007, psychic profiler Carla Baron and medium John Oliver visited Holloway's high school and a beach in Aruba, communing with her spirit and deciding that she might have been drugged, raped, and left to die on the beach. Although none of these suggestions added new material to public

media speculation, the dramatic enactment of Holloway's death made her spirit's presence seem real; viewers' comments show that a significant number of TV watchers took the show seriously. "Truthsoflife," for example, wrote: "Carla, I swear I saw Natalee morph in your eyes for a brief moment in the back of the car. You were reading about the drug she was given. I have the chills" ("Talkback").

Websites dedicated to Natalee have frequently mentioned her mother, Beth Holloway. Shortly after hearing about her daughter's disappearance, Beth Holloway (also known as Beth Holloway Twitty) gathered photographs from home that could be used in a search. Realizing that media reports of the disappearance might not portray her daughter fairly, she requested a copy of her daughter's high school transcript (2007, 11). In her book, Holloway's description of Natalee as a successful student, dance team member, and scholarship recipient has provided a counterweight to the persona of the "Party Girl" who separated herself from American friends. This negative characterization, presented both in media reports and in legends, has had an educational impact, but Beth Holloway has found another way to encourage young people to stay safe. She has given many lectures at schools, churches, and other organizations on how to travel safely and her International Safe Travels Foundation website (2007) offers valuable help to young website visitors and their families.

Dancer with No Shoes

In contrast to Natalee Holloway, whose disappearance started a tidal wave of publicity, another woman who disappeared in 2005 got a relatively small amount of attention from the mass media. Lynn Moran, a Massachusetts childcare administrator and former dancer, vanished in the harbor area of Portland, Maine, on Columbus Day after leaving her shoes, cell phone, and purse in a male acquaintance's apartment. Local news reporters covered this event, and Moran's family offered a \$10,000 reward.

Like Natalee Holloway, Lynn Moran disappeared in the midst of festive socializing. Both women were drinking, and both were in the company of men. There, however, the resemblance ended. Natalee Holloway was eighteen years old, while Lynn Moran was a twenty-four-year-old professional woman who had worked with children. Holloway vanished in Aruba, where the judicial system was unfamiliar to most Americans, while Moran disappeared in the comfortably familiar harbor district of Portland, Maine.

Comments on “Scared Monkeys” shortly after Moran’s disappearance show the impact of journalists’ emphasis on her clothing at the time when others last saw her. The article “Lynn Moran, 24: Missing in Portland, Maine” (2005) notes that a “witness told police Moran was alone and wandering around the Old Port shopping district barefoot and wearing a men’s long-sleeved shirt”; she “had left her purse and cell phone at her friend’s apartment.” This focus on aloneness, transgender clothing that suggests a man’s presence, and lack of a cell phone for protection rapidly generated dialog among women who were reading “Scared Monkeys” postings.

On 26 October, “Jillian in Boston” posed a brief but important question: “Why the hell are we losing so many girls?” The next day an answer came from “icey”: “I guess we have always lost so many girls, but our focus before Natalee was not as intense as it is now.” In a second paragraph, she surmised: “I hope and pray Ms. Moran is OK, but the witness sighting is very troubling. It almost sounds like she could have been drugged and perhaps ran away from where she was at (men’s shirt and no shoes).” Her third paragraph offered a lesson for young women: “We have to be more proactive in life. If the ‘passerby’ mearily [*sic*] approached the girl and asked if she needed help, perhaps there would be no disappearance to report!” This three-paragraph statement goes from answer to interpretation and ends in a moral. As in many horror legends, instructive content predominates.

Lisa, another participant in the “Scared Monkeys” blog on Lynn Moran’s disappearance, posted the following answer to Jillian’s question on 27 October: “It does seem to [be] a lot more missing women reported and in low crime areas; Portland, ME, Thunder Valley Casino, etc.” After this brief but reflective reply, Lisa offered some firm words of advice: “Hate to say this, but in some of these cases, the women were promiscuous [*sic*] and took chances with men they barely knew. With the advent of date rape drugs, women should really be on guard and travel with some ‘real friends,’ not the ones who would leave you for a guy.” This sequence—an answer followed by a lesson to be learned from a tragic situation—mirrors the order of icey’s earlier posting.

As on websites about the disappearance of Natalee Holloway, women’s discussions about Lynn Moran on “Scared Monkeys” show the influence of horror legends about women in unsafe social situations. While no available information suggests that date-rape drugs caused Lynn Moran’s disappearance, reports of her unusual behavior suggest this possibility. Mysterious circumstances generate conversations in which legends influence people’s reflections and concerns.

While some comments on Moran's behavior show the influence of folk legends, others indicate that the folktale has some impact as well. Media reports and website conversations emphasize Moran's kindness and interest in children, her talent as a dancer, and her mysterious, inexplicable choice to go outside on a rainy night without cell phone, purse, or shoes. Like Cinderella, deserted by magic after midnight, Moran seems lonely, unprotected, and unconnected to conventional sources of help. She is a "damsel in distress," with no fairy godmother to keep her safe.

The discovery of Moran's body in Portland Harbor on Halloween 2005 resulted in a verdict of accidental drowning after excessive drinking. Although some perplexed conversation continued on websites, there was little further reporting and no psychic investigation that could generate ghost stories. Her quickly resolved disappearance did not have the wide media appeal of Natalee Holloway's case, but in both situations the description of an attractive, not sufficiently careful young woman who went out alone has had didactic value.

Vancouver's Missing Women

Unlike websites dedicated to young women who disappeared after going to parties or bars, "Vancouver Eastside Missing Women" sadly commemorates the lives of sixty-two women whose involvement in dangerous lifestyles resulted in premature death. These women disappeared from the east side of Vancouver during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Alcohol, drug use, and prostitution had put the women at risk. The size of this group makes the extent of these dangers clear. The group is multicultural, including Black, Native American, and white women. They do not fit the pattern of "Missing White Woman Syndrome" or "Missing Pretty Girl / Party Girl Syndrome," but they have received a large amount of coverage in the media.

One of the reasons why this website has received so much attention is its focus on the tragic details of a mass murder. In 2002, pig-farm owner Robert Pickton was charged with the deaths of twenty-six Vancouver women; he was convicted of six counts of second-degree murder in 2007. DNA analysis gradually revealed which women had become Pickton's victims, but the case remained mysterious. Drug use and prostitution seemed to be part of the matrix that had led to the women's deaths, but details were hazy. A few women whose names and pictures had appeared on the website were found to be alive, and other missing women were added to the list ("Vancouver Eastside Missing Women").

Grieving relatives and friends posted comments on this website's guestbook for the whole group of women ("Vancouver Missing, Guestbook"). Many guestbook visitors expressed sadness, outrage, and an insistence on the improvement of living conditions for women in Eastside Vancouver. A guestbook on a second website gave concerned visitors another opportunity to express their feelings. A recent posting to that site from Vancouver resident "Marianna" includes both personal storytelling and a call to action:

I am very sad to see Michelle Gurney. She is my niece, my son's cousin. I met her when she was a little girl; she lived with her mom and brothers near Commercial Drive. I think she was about five; the cutest little girl. It is unbelievable that in Canada, in Vancouver, there are no homes for these street women to be safe, to find help, to live and get the counseling and support they need. What is wrong with our society that we just treat young women as worthless, just because they have become involved in the drug and prostitution lifestyle, usually because they need some help?? We still don't have any centres for First Nations young people who are on the street! Why don't we have resource centres to serve people's needs? I grieve for Michelle. (E-GuestBooks.com 2008)

Marianna's compelling statement makes the need for better support for women very clear. She identifies the source of the problem as society's neglect of women who have broken rules for proper moral behavior through involvement in "the drug and prostitution lifestyle." These women have, to some extent, followed the Deviant Femme pattern identified by Jeannie Banks Thomas (2007b); they have pushed aside society's rules for proper conduct. Marianna observes, however, that this rejection of those rules probably occurred because the women "need[ed] some help." Marianna's sad story, followed by her insistence on change, follows conversational legend patterns in that it links personal experience and interpretation with a lesson for others. The story does not, however, invoke the negative characterization that became an issue on websites for Natalee Holloway. The gravity of mass murder seems to have decreased that kind of characterization, making kinder interpretations more frequent.

"Vancouver Eastside Missing Women" deliberately portrays the softer side of the women who disappeared and died. Steve Mertyl's (2006) essay about Brenda Wolfe, a woman who disappeared from Alberta in 1999, identifies her as a "Downtown Eastside guardian angel" who was "not afraid to roust rowdy drunks—male or female." A friend of hers, Maggy Gisle, remembers Wolfe "in the midst of three

men, whaling on all three of them at once" and protecting prostitutes from people who tried to make them pay for using street corners. Gisle explains that she "got scared straight" after hearing stories about the disappearance of her street friends.

Like the ghosts of murdered women that allegedly haunt some institutions of higher learning, Wolfe is depicted as a strong person who tried to protect others before becoming a victim of violence herself. Since she used drugs and worked as a street enforcer in a rough neighborhood, her story on the website reminds women to take care and stay clean. Although she is not precisely a ghost, Brenda, as a character in others' narratives, becomes a representation of risks that women should avoid. Her power as a protector of prostitutes and a beater of three men makes her a hero similar to "John the Bear" (Thompson 1968, 3–8) in European folktales. A "guardian angel" while alive, Brenda expresses concern for other women after her death by her role in stories told about her.

None of the other women depicted on the "Vancouver Eastside Missing Women" website seem quite as formidable as Brenda Wolfe, but descriptions of many of them by friends, relatives, and reporters emphasize positive characteristics. Mandy Blakemore, for example, was "a fun girl who always smiled; she never had a bad word to say about anyone." Marilynne Neill, "a good person with a big heart who truly cared about people," was "trying to get out of [drug using] and change her life when she went missing." This sad sequence of attempted change followed by disappearance also emerges on other websites about missing women, including Jessie Davis, who disappeared and was found murdered in the spring of 2007 (Montaldo 2009). The lesson here seems to be that trying to change is not enough; only immediate transformation of a risky lifestyle will keep a woman safe.

What, then, is the relationship between ghost stories and narratives that characterize missing women on websites? Although most missing women are not portrayed as ghosts, their stories bear a haunting resemblance to legends about women who die violently and return as ghosts to protect others. In the renditions I discuss here, ghosts are not the guardians of the living; the real guardians are the women who share rumors and legends, including, in some high-profile cases, rumors and legends about ghosts of women who have vanished. Women's storytelling about risks that result in death relies on legend patterns, with some inclusion of folktale characteristics. Many descriptions of women's lives before their tragic disappearances emphasize their angelic qualities, including kindness and concern. By hearing such narratives, women learn how important it is to go out in groups of friends, to avoid dangerous areas,

and to watch how much alcohol they drink. Although some material posted on the Internet seems dubious and untrustworthy, these narratives for women's education have the ring of truth. Websites keep such cautionary narratives circulating, reminding people of the strength and power of caring women.

At the beginning of this chapter, I cited Sherry Turkle's assertion that all of us are "dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along" (1995, 10). Examination of websites dedicated to missing women makes it clear that visitors to these websites not only invent themselves as teachers of important lessons, but also participate in creating characters that have meaning for large groups of people. Future studies of such websites can yield insights into Internet identity formation and community-building, as well as efforts to facilitate social change. Doing their best to save young women from harm, future users of the Internet will tell stories that merit close attention.