

Season 5 Bonus Episode: Normal Gossip Investigates: The Poop Story

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kelsey: Hello and welcome to a bonus episode of Normal Gossip, the show where we usually bring you an anonymized gossip from the real world. Uh, today we are not going to do that. Today we are here to do a special story that I know nothing about. So, can't wait to find out where this is going. Um, here with me is Alex, co-creator of this podcast and our head producer, Alex, say hello.

alex: Hi!

kelsey: And Jae, our associate producer, is also here. Hello Jae!

jae: Hello!

alex: Yay!

kelsey: They have brought me something and I'm scared. Before we get into it though, I just wanted to remind everyone that we are going on a very tiny mini tour in March. You can get tickets for that at normalgossiplive.com. We will be going to Atlanta, Durham, and theoretically DC, but that show is sold out. So hello, DC, I love you.

alex: Can't wait to see you.

kelsey: Many of you may be asking: when will the real podcast return? Please! My family! They're starving! They need gossip. And I do not have an exact date for you yet, I'm so sorry, but we will be back in April—April—I promise.

One last thing before we get into whatever they're about to do. Our editor Justin has demanded we put a content warning at the top of this, so Justin, take it away!

justin: Hey there Normal Gossip listeners, this is Justin. Don't be like me and make the mistake of listening to this episode while trying to eat. Enjoy!

kelsey: Thank you Justin. [laughs] Um, okay. Alex and Jae, you're in charge now.

alex: Hello! We are so excited to be here. We have a really important piece of investigative journalism to share with you.

kelsey: Oh my—okay, Sarah Koenig. Lay it on me.

jae: So today we are here to talk about the poop story

kelsey: Oh! Dun dun dun!

jae: Do you remember what we mean by that?

kelsey: So after season one or two, I don't remember which one, probably after season two.

alex: It's all a blur.

kelsey: We did a bonus episode where people called in their gossip and then we responded to it. And one of the stories that was in that episode was a story that we refer to as the poop story.

jae: Would you like to tell us the poop story, Kelsey?

kelsey: Oh my god, yeah, I can do my best. What do I remember about the poop story? Um, it's a girl who, she goes on a date with this guy. Maybe they've seen each other a couple of times. She goes back to his place. She spends the night. He lives in a fancy kind of like high, not super high rise, but kind of high rise apartment that has like fob door entry and not like a real key. Um, and that's important because he leaves early because he has some business job or something, goes to the airport, and so she's there all alone.

And then she takes a massive, absolutely huge poop. In his toilet tries to flush it and it will not flush and she's like, Oh, this is bad. And so instead of doing any normal thing, like calling a plumber, calling the landlord, calling a friend, um, she uses a Ziploc bag to remove the poop from the toilet with the intention to take the plastic bag with her somewhere? Question mark. Um, but then she does not. In fact, she leaves it on the counter

alex: With a note like saying, like, I had a great time. Let's do this again.

kelsey: Oh, that's right.

alex: She accidentally leaves the poop on the counter with the note and the door automatically locks behind her so she can't get back in.

kelsey: Yeah. So the poop is in there with the note. Um, and then, I don't remember what she does. In my memory, she just like dies, basically. Like she's like, well, this is the end for me. Goodbye. Um, and does not really make any efforts. And I remember saying, pull the fire alarm.

alex: So that story was horrifying. And I remember like, every time I read it, I screamed. And when we played it for you, I also screamed, even though I'd heard it like five times at that point, because it was so horrifying. Um, The thing is when this episode came out, we heard from so many people, we got Instagram comments, we got DMS, we got messages individually. We got emails to the Normal Gossip account. We got emails individually. They said, this happened to my friend. I've heard this story before. I saw this on a commercial. This is an urban legend.

kelsey: Yes, which is like the true range of a response to any gossip, right? Is either it happened to me, or this is all a lie, right? Like, those are, that's like the spectrum

jae: And it's interesting that the emails, there was definitely a wave after the episode came out, but like they have kept coming over the years. People find that episode, they still have these strong reactions, they still want to tell us that they think they heard a version of the poop story on Letterman eight years ago

kelsey: Yeah. I mean, I do think it's the kind of story that is so iconic and so well paced, right? Like how many of our stories do I actually remember? The fact that I can like recount kind of beat for beat what happens in this story two years after we recorded it is kind of astounding. It makes sense that if you had heard this even once, you would be like, I've heard this story before.

And in the same way that like all viral stories happen, a well told story will maintain its shape. So if you have heard this, You heard it in this order, and so you say, well, then my friend told it to me, and therefore this is a lie.

Alex: Yeah.

Jae: Yeah.

alex: So, we got really curious about this. This is something that we have wanted to do—

kelsey: I love it when you two hyperfixate. I think that's beautiful.

alex: —ever since we got, started getting these emails, we were like, what if we did journalism? What if we did journalism for gossip?

kelsey: As trained journalists, what if: phone calls?

alex: Exactly. So, Jae and I have spent the last month or so—

kelsey: Okay.

alex: —creating what is essentially a giant bulletin board covered in red string

kelsey: Yeah, you're like that *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia* meme of Charlie like pointing.

jae: Yes, we are both Charlie.

kelsey: And then on the board is just photos of poop.

alex: Our hope was to track down the original protagonist of the story. Okay, I'm going to give you a spoiler right now. We did not do that.

kelsey: It's crazy how when you don't have the funding of Serial, you can't track down the teller of an original story, but yeah, go ahead.

alex: But, but we did talk to several people and this story spans several decades, three different countries, two continents, and so many people.

kelsey: Beautiful.

[music/ad break]

jae: The first person you're going to hear from is Lizzie. Lizzie is the person who originally sent us the poop story.

kelsey: Oh, great. Good storyteller.

jae: Her version happened around 2019 in a northeastern city in the US.

[beep sound]

alex: Wow. I'm so glad that we have you here, Lizzie. You, you are the source of it all. Do you remember the first time you heard it?

lizzie: So I was trying to think about this. I remember who told me, but what's funny is I've retold the story so many times because I find it so entertaining and felt like I could share because I'm a couple of degrees removed from who I understood, um, was the main character, so I can't visually place where I was the first, first time that I heard it. I was in my current city and I'm gonna guess this was probably 2019 when I heard it. I, I don't know if I even thought about when it happened.

alex: Who do you believe it happened to?

lizzie: So I understand the main character of the story to be not my friend Charlotte, but her friend's friend. Someone who, who I don't know, but I should be able to believe is real, if that makes any sense.

alex: Yeah, it's far enough away that you're safe, but close enough that, like, you can trust that it's real. Um, did you have any idea that your story that you sent in had sparked this uproar?

lizzie: So it's actually, I think about it all the time. I remember the first time after the episode, um, aired. And I saw people in the comments saying like, this isn't true or whatever. And I was so nervous that, oh my gosh, you know, people probably think that I'm lying. And not that you could even identify that it was me, but I was just so guilty, like, oh, I'm out here telling a lie, and I don't even know it's a lie, and everyone's upset. I just felt really nervous about it. I don't know. Mostly because I didn't intend to give you bad information or a bad story.

alex: Well, I mean, the problem is you gave us a great story.

lizzie: That is a good way to look at it.

[beep sound]

kelsey: Okay, so I have a few thoughts. So I want to start with the last thing she said, actually, which is this, like, fear upon seeing people say, like, this isn't true, this is made up, that, like, maybe you did lie, right?

And I, I just want to push back on that for one second, because to lie requires intent. Right? In the same way that, like, if you want to win a libel case, you have to prove that someone intended to tell a dishonesty or a lie against you.

And I have a kind of fascination, with the mindset that, like, we should be concerned with exactly what the right story is here, right? And she says, right, she heard this story in 2019. Fourth-hand is what she says, which means already you should be taking this with, like, a Morton's box of salt, right?

Like, that is three years after she claims it happened from four different people. So that is, like, You should be skeptical of that story. And I'm sure we're going to talk about urban legends at some point in this conversation, but I think part of the reason a story like this in particular spreads is one, it's crazy, two, it's really fun, but three, it's kind of like a warning shot. Right? Like there is an aspect to it that is like, remain vigilant, never let your guard down.

alex: It's a cautionary tale.

kelsey: It's a cautionary tale, exactly. And they're kind of creating a cautionary tale as like a moralism in the same way that like an Aesop's Fable would function.

alex: Okay, so our next person we talked to is somebody named Tori and actually texted us during one of our live shows

kelsey: Wow, Tori, hello!

alex: For people who haven't been to our live shows, uh, we have a feature where we invite people to text us their secrets, uh, live in the room.

kelsey: It's normalgossiplive.com.

alex: And, um, Tori texted us. It's pretty much verbatim, the poop story. And I texted her from on stage, I was like, oh my god, I'm gonna follow up with you. I have questions to ask. Um, so we finally talked to her. She lives on the east coast in a city, and she says that she heard the story around 2015 and in the Chicago area

kelsey: Okay, so this is already interesting because 2015 is before Lizzie says she heard the story. So we have someone reporting on the story from before the story in theory existed.

[beep sound]

alex: I guess to start off, could you just tell me the version of the story that you know?

tori: Yes. I named her, I think in my text, Mandy was, um, a senior in college and her biggest crush in the world, Greg, they went to school together and she had always been into him and nothing ever happened. When I think it was like the last week of school, they finally, um, and go home together one night and it's an amazing night.

So he leaves to go to class and apparently she has had to go to the bathroom for like 20 minutes and she's like, okay, he's gone. Now's my chance. And she goes to flush the toilet and it is not being flushed. What do I do? Like... So she grabs a bag, she grabs her business. Um, and she's like, I can't throw this away here either. So she's like, I also can't. I don't have poo in a bag in my hands in the hallway of this apartment.

So she leaves to go scope out a quick, quick path to the trash can. She finds it. She's like, this will be great. No one will detect me. I'll go, I'll go in and out. So she goes back to the apartment, but it was an automatic locking door. So the door is locked. The poo is in the bag, like in the apartment on the counter, I don't know, somewhere not Um, and she never spoke to, or texted, or talked to Greg ever again.

And they graduated, and it has joined the legions of, of dating folklore, I guess

alex: I like, I know how this story ends, and I was still like, oh god, no!

tori: You try and, like, debunk her thinking throughout, but It checks out at every stage, like, yeah, I would do that also, yes, I would do that also. So, yeah, high stress, high, high anxiety. My roommate and good friend, Jill, who I asked if I could say her name, and she said, I encourage it. She told me this, probably our senior year of college. A friend had told her, and she told me.

alex: Does Jill remember where she got the story from?

tori: So I asked her, knowing that this was gonna happen, and she was like, no paper trail, like, I don't remember who told me. She has no idea who told her. She's trying to remember, but so far no, no luck

alex: How many times do you think you've told this story?

tori: I mean, at least a handful when I first heard it, um, I'm sure. But then it didn't. It didn't come to my brain for a while until I was, um, sitting and watching the show and the text, like, text your gossip story, and I was racking my brain, and then poop in a bag came to my brain, and I was like, yeah, so, of course, this is the one I'm gonna tell you guys about.

alex: Oh man, I, I want you to know that like, when, when I got that text, I was on stage and I was like, Oh my god, somebody sent a poop bag story. Oh my god.

tori: Another one.

alex: Yeah. It's like so exciting!

tori: I hadn't heard that episode. So I went and I was listening and I was like, okay, so the, you know, the college part wasn't there. And like, This wasn't there, but the core of the story is exactly the same. And it's like, where did this come from? What is the true—

alex: Yes. That's what we're trying to get to the bottom of.

tori: I'm so excited to see the journey and see if there is a pot of gold at the end of this proverbial rainbow

[beep sound]

kelsey: Okay, so it's younger in this version, which does actually make more sense to me. Makes more sense to me that you would make this choice as a college kid in general.

jae: Right. Scared of toilets. Just panicking.

kelsey: Scared of people helping you. Scared of

alex: Also, student housing tends to be automatic locks.

kelsey: Yeah, exactly. Like all of that makes a little more sense to me. One thing that I'm already finding interesting here is that at some point, we hit a person who cannot remember where they got it from.

alex and jae: Yeah. Yeah.

kelsey: And I think that that's really interesting for, like, several reasons. The first is that a story that permeates far enough You will hear from enough people that you will no longer remember who gave it to you. Right? Which means that it just, like, exists in the culture. But also because that's not important to the enjoyment of this story.

Like, it's not really important where it came from. And it's not really important exactly who told it the first time. Right? Like, all you need is one girl to have pooped and put it in a bag for this story to be quote unquote true. And like there are 6 billion people that exist. Right? Like, it seems completely possible that this has happened at least once, if not more than once.

alex: Yeah. The thing that's, um, that makes this story work is not the identity of the girl. It doesn't matter who she is. She could be anybody. She could be anywhere. It's like the drama of what happens in the story.

jae: Yeah, like all we have to do is reframe the question a little bit like, is it true that when you're dating somebody new and it's really promising, it would be terrible if they saw your poop? Like most people would be like, yes, that would be terrible, that is a nightmare

kelsey: That is true.

jae: Somebody contacted us with an update on the poop story. They were like, I know more.

kelsey: Iconic. Okay.

jae: And this was months after the episode came out. And unfortunately we were not able to track this person down to ask them more questions. So this is all we've got.

[beep sound]

anonymous: 15 years ago, I went to a World Toilet Day event. That's a real day. Look it up. And some friends had organized an event around World Toilet Day as a fundraiser. I'm in my mid 20s. I've got nothing better to do. But it was great, and one of the most memorable moments was the storytelling part of that evening and it was this story. I remember it and it haunts me to this day. So I'm so excited to give you some more information on that. Two details that were missing from the first storyteller Was that these silly asses went on one of those dinner dates that has ten courses in the meal. Most of us know not to do that. Why? Because you have a huge shit the next day. As our protagonists found out. Another detail that's missing is it wasn't actually a Ziploc bag. It was one of those single use shopping bags, the plastic kind.

So it was much bigger to work with and she could kind of put her hand in it, inside out, reach in Jesus, grab the poop, tie it up. Um, it, it's more efficient. But it's honestly a more disgusting image. Because of just kind of the lo-fi-ness of the plastic bag. Um, but maybe not as bad because it's not clear like a Ziploc.

Anyway, here's the update. Couple years later, uh, she's moved past her shame. She did not indeed hear from this date ever again. She's seeing a new guy. Things are going really well. They've been dating for a couple of months. And they get into this conversation one night about what's the worst, most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to you on a date. She tells this story. He interrupts her near the very end and says, Oh my god, that was you? That was my roommate. You're amazing. And I'm happy to report, they got married. Anyway, enjoy y'all.

[beep sound]

kelsey and alex: What?

alex: What the fuck?

jae: Right? I have questions

kelsey: Okay

alex: Wow

kelsey: So, I'm thinking about a piece of gossip that has been circulating recently in the world, um, that I heard truly secondhand, like my friend knows someone that this happened to.

And so I have watched this piece of gossip travel far, far, far and wide, um, and I have watched it iterate. And one of the things that's very Interesting about watching a piece of gossip that you, like, have an original voice memo from the event of Iterate is that you notice which details get added and which ones stick.

So, like, what is it about something that makes it an important detail, right? So, like, this person starts us off by saying, like, Two important details. One, it was a 10 course dinner. Two, it was a single use grocery bag, which is like, hysterical, because neither of those details changes the plot of the story at all, right?

Like, there is nothing in those details that would make you be like, oh, this must be the right story, right? Like, it's But to the listener, that is an important distinction, like they're saying it's important that it's in a non transparent bag because that is a weirder message and it's also grosser and like it would stink more, right?

And you would have to open it, right? There's like levels to the single use grocery bag that makes it a more interesting prop in the story. So that's all very fascinating and I love that. Um. The update sounds, not to be like true or false after I just went on a rant about true or false, the update sounds fake as shit to me.

And like, it's a beautiful bow to tie on a story, but like, often things that happen in the real world sound fake. Because like, truly the truth is stranger than fiction. Like the emails we get are weirder than any novel I've ever read. Like, they're all so strange. People are so weird. And, I don't know, I find that really fascinating, that like, in this version of the story, You get a happy ending. And in the other versions of the story, you don't.

jae: Yeah, it makes me wonder about, you know, the context of World Toilet Day. We don't want to leave people feeling horrified. We want to leave them feeling like there's hope.

kelsey: Right. We don't want people to believe that toilets are their enemy. We want them to believe that toilets can bring them true love.

alex: Oh my god.

jae: Learn more about toilets!

alex: It's actually a plot from Big Toilet, all along

kelsey: This one's actually just made up by, like, Kohler.

alex: Oh my god.

jae: Next, you will be hearing from Jen. Jen was one of the people who wrote to us letting us know, very kindly, that, uh, this was an urban legend. And as I was emailing more with Jen, uh, it turns out that Jen knows this because she has her own long history with this story.

kelsey: Oh!

jae: It sounds like Jen first heard this in the early 2000s in England.

kelsey: Okay, great.

[beep sound]

jae: Do you happen to remember, like, when you first heard this story?

jen: I actually do, yes. So, I have an older cousin, like, she's probably about, like, six or seven years older than me. My family is very good at, like, storytelling. It's like, there's always, like, a couple of people in the family who are, like, the ones that will hold court. Not that I'm myself like that, obviously. But, um, but she's definitely one of those people. And I remember being probably about, like, like early teens I reckon, or maybe like year 12 or something, and her telling this story that it happened to a like friend, I think like friend of a school friend was her, was, was how she'd heard of it and very much like it was true.

So that was probably, probably about like, yeah, like 18 years ago I reckon I first heard it around, around then. I think when I went to uni, and you're all sat around having pre-drinks and stuff before going out and, uh, like, all telling these, like, wild stories, and then I'm pretty sure it would have been around, around then.

I'd be like, oh, this crazy thing happened, and then someone else would be like, hmm, that's an urban legend. And I was like, I'm from a small town going to the big city where everyone knows that my stories are trash.

jae: In versions that you've heard over the years, have you ever noticed any differences? Do people put their own spins on it?

jen: The straightforward one is just, she leaves the poop on the side and then leaves. Like, whereas it's good to have a little bit more pizzazz to it of like, so there's variations in whether, whether the poop was left in a box or a bag. There's like a Tupperware version. I don't know. I think I know the Tupperware version. Yeah, like, um, yeah, like a lunchbox. Yes, oh my god, there's definitely a lunchbox version. Yes, there is. That's wonderful because that means that somewhere along the line somebody has decided

that a lunchbox is funnier, or that a bag is funnier, which absolutely hats off to them because it's arguable which one is better.

I have a lot of respect actually for, and I think my cousins like this, for somebody who will hear a story like that. Know that it's probably an urban legend, or know that it's probably not true, and still tell it anyway. I absolutely love that. I'm like, that's, yeah. Because what a delight that gave me until I realized that everyone had heard that story on, on, Reddit, Reddit is to blame for this.

I think before Reddit, we could all go around and pretend that it actually was our cousin's schoolmate's friend. I hope there is somebody out there. Who is like, this happened to me, to their, to their best friend, I hope that there's somebody out there that's just whole cloth stealing it as if they did it. That's unhinged.

jæ: That's the dream.

jen: You can find the ur-person, you can find the original, who's like, yeah, I just lied to all my friends that I did a shit on someone's counter.

[beep sound]

kelsey: First off, I do want to say that like, I know that you warned me up top that we don't have all the answers here, right? That like, we have not found the ur-person. Um, but as, uh, someone raised and bred a blogger, um, I believe in the iterative process of journalism, if you are the person this happened to, it's normal gossip@defector.com. Like, if you can get us closer, we will take that. And like, please call 2679-GOSSIP. Like, let us know. Because I think that like, the desire is to talk to her, right? That is always going to be everyone's desire is to like, hear it from her. So like, If you can get us there, help us, thank you. Um, couple things. Things can happen in multiple countries. That's not illegal. People can make the same stupid mistake in England and in America. Um, so that's not an issue.

But I also think that like, her going to uni and telling this story and being told it's an urban legend is like an interesting point here, right? Because like, just because you have heard a story, Doesn't mean it's not true, right? Just because a gossip is widespread doesn't mean it isn't real. In the same way that, like, we tell a story on this podcast every single week, and, you know, half a million people hear it.

So now you've all heard that story. But, like, that doesn't mean it's an urban legend, right? Like, this is, where is that line exactly is a question that I'm sure we'll come back to. Um. But if you're telling this story at uni at some pub, that means you're telling this story to like 20 people you barely know who are then gonna go tell that story to 20 more people they barely know.

So it's like the tree of who knows this story becomes infinitely wider tellings. And so like, yeah, if you told this story to someone at uni and they're from America and they come back and tell it. Their friends from high school are going to be like, I'm not saying uni, I'm not doing that, I'm saying college, right? And now it's an American story, right? Like that, that's all it takes is like that one shift.

jæ: And, like, the difference between this and like one of those old school chain letters, you know, or email forwards is just that this is good.

kelsey: Yeah. Yeah. Right. There's something to like, it doesn't survive unless it's good.

jæ: Yeah.

alex: So the last person we talked to, uh, is somebody named Adrian Parks.

kelsey: Okay.

alex: We did a lot of research into the story and Jae actually found a Snopes article about the story. Which, um, quick explainer for the youths who maybe don't know about Snopes. Snopes is a like fact checking debunking site that like debunks myths.

Um, and so this page referenced a short film from 2007 as the potential source of this story. So the film is called. Sure Lock—S U R E—Sure Lock: A True Poo Story.

kelsey: Incredible. Great tagline.

alex: The film opens with the words, *Based on a true story*. So, we tracked down Adrian, who is the director of the film, and this is what he had to say.

[beep sound]

adrian: Yeah. So it all started with, uh, Sean Hazell, who's listed as the producer in it. He was working in advertising. I was working in the film business and, uh, Sean wanted to create this, uh, website called AdBakery. It was basically a platform for, uh, creatives, writers, directors, cinematographers, editors to have a platform to post their stuff for ad agencies to sort of see what they could do.

So Sean wanted to make something that was relatable, shareable, and funny. And he told me this story. Sean and I were old friends, we went to high school and university together. And he told this story in the context of it happening to a mutual friend of ours.

So it was, it was sort of made as this, uh, Film to launch this advertising website as a comedy film, you know We thought we'd get maybe if we were lucky a thousand people would see it eventually, and I think in a day or two we had a thousand people and it just grew exponentially. It was a viral hit. The original post had over 8 million views, and we actually ended up selling it to American Standard Toilet Company. And for them, we, uh, got another several million views, so it has over 10 million views. And we ended up winning a Canadian comedy award for it. Very proud to have an award that has the word poo in it, uh, etched in glass.

[beep sound]

alex: So, this version of the story happened in the early 2000s in Canada, so we are now in our third country, and, uh, and the thing is, Adrian told us that he actually had a run in with a, like, similar story at that time.

kelsey: Huh.

alex: So, I'm gonna play the second clip.

[beep sound]

adrian: We'd sort of had our, our movie online for several months, maybe, maybe a year, less than a year. And again, we'd had a great response, a viral sort of hit. And we got to a certain point where a lot of people were stealing it and reposting it. And we became very concerned about, you know, stop stealing our film. And we were trying to track people down and all that kind of thing. And another film, uh, came online, I believe, um, that was basically the exact same thing. Opened: based on a true story. There was some like even shots that were very similar.

Um, and we were like, what the heck, these people have just remade our film. And, uh, that, so we, you know, we tracked them down, we got in touch with the filmmakers and we had this argumentative conversation back and forth where We accused them of stealing our film, and they accused us of stealing their film.

And cooler heads prevailed. And as we sort of talked about it, I think it was, we, we discovered the fact that they had made, they were making the film at basically the same time. It was premiered at a festival, maybe around the same time that we went online or something like that, and it would have been impossible for either of us to have seen each other's films. And we realized that we just had, we'd heard the story of a story, um, like a friend of a friend had told this story. And it was, so it was, it was an urban legend when it was created.

And so I think we went back to, Sean possibly went back to the, the person he'd heard the story from, we thought it was the story of a mutual friend and she was like, oh no, it's a friend of a friend, and it's, it didn't happen to me, it was someone else and, and, and it was, it became very foggy and we're like, oh, we realized that, we didn't even realize that we'd made, uh, a story of an urban legend, you know, we thought it was real and it wasn't. And I think that's happened several times.

If you guys ever track down one person who says, yes, this happened to me, please tell me, I'd love to find out.

alex: Same.

kelsey: I mean, same. Truly same.

[music/ad break]

kelsey: Two things that are really interesting about urban legends is that when we tell urban legends, like, people who study urban legends have found that it is always from a friend of a friend. You never say, like, I got this 17th hand from a newspaper in San Antonio, right? It is, uh, this happened to a friend of a friend.

And it is always local, so it's not a library somewhere is sinking under the weight of the books in it, it's our library. Always. So like, that is how an urban legend functions, is by imbuing this story with more veracity by saying it came from nearby and it came from someone close to us, right?

And like that allows everyone in the vicinity to be like, we suspend all judgment. Which is like a fascinating thing that we see happen here, right? Like he said, Oh, it happened to your mutual friend. And then they go back to that girl and she said, No, no, no, no, no, it happened to a friend of a friend of mine.

And it's like, okay, well then now, if we asked that person, where did they get it? It's like we end up nowhere.

alex: Yeah, I actually have a question here before we go any further, which is, how would you define an urban legend?

kelsey: Ooh, I would define an urban legend as a story that is told in many places as if it is proximal to that place. In which the details are the same and researchers might like people who study urban legends, um, full time—which there are a lot of folklorists in the United States, especially—would say that it's a spectrum, right? The line between what gossip is and what is an urban legend does not exist, right?

It is just a gradient on your way to urban legend, right? Like once a story has been told enough, it is an urban legend. So like, in some ways, this is both. Right? The codifying of gossip makes it an urban legend. I think an urban legend has something to do with how many people are talking about it in general.

alex: It's ubiquitous in a way.

kelsey: It's ubiquitous and there's a difference in an urban legend and a legend, right? Like a legend, like fucking *The Odyssey* is something that we all agree happened somewhere else at some other time, right? And we're like, maybe that's fiction. An urban legend you believe is true initially, which is part of what's important.

jae: Yeah. This was, this was a question that I had as we talked to more and more people. It was like, how does the intent piece of it work. Like it started to feel to me like there was a little curse on this story. Like when you hear it, you're fated to retell it. You think it's amazing. Like, wow, this is perfect.

alex: Yeah.

jae: I know that that happened to me

alex: This happened to us.

kelsey: Yeah.

jae: It happened to us on the podcast. And then eventually you learn this is a little bit broader than that, or this is an urban legend. And so I was wondering like, are all urban legends kind of cursed in that way? Where you understand it to be personal at first, and when you tell it, you're not necessarily thinking that you're telling a tale, or like putting on a show?

kelsey: Yeah, I think it's, I would push back on that a little bit, right? Like, I think you do understand that you're putting on a show. Like, I think if you tell a story like this at a bar, you know that you're like, giving it the razzle dazzle, right? You're adding that door click, you're making it a plastic bag instead of a Tupperware. Maybe not intentionally. But you're doing that because you're on the stage of storytelling, right? And that is what people do. Like, we have, there are studies that show that like, storytellers who went from town to town in ancient, you know, ancient Mesopotamia or ancient, uh, Greece, would change their story every single time. But when you asked them what they had told, they said it was always the same.

alex: This is literally how we talk about the live shows.

kelsey: Yeah!

alex: We, we say we tell the same story every time, and in theory we do, but it's different every single time.

kelsey: Yeah, exactly. But the thing is. Because before, if you are an oral storyteller, you are not writing your story down and then reading from a script. You are telling it based on what you remember. And our memories are faulty. So it's not necessarily true that like, people are intentionally deceiving you by telling this story. And I think that that is kind of what I balked at in the initial response to this story was people being like, you lied. Like you intentionally told us an urban legend as a tale. And I'm like, no, I mean, it's my fault that I bought this story like hook, line and sinker upon being told it, but I didn't intentionally—we didn't intentionally include it in the podcast because we thought we could pull a ruse over people, right? Like, we included it because we were like, this is nuts.

jae: Yeah, it was so funny. It was one of my first experiences working on the show. I had just been hired as a baby, like, assistant producer, and I was helping find, you know, the, the, like sort through the submissions for that episode. And I remember after it came out, and we started to see all the comments, like, I felt so bad. I was like, Oh, I thought I was supposed to be more savvy. Like, I wish I had recognized this. Like, I wanted to make a good impression at this job. But now Alex and Kelsey are gonna think that I don't know anything.

kelsey: Okay, but like, The Licked Hand is a perfect urban legend that like, goes into this category, I think, which is—

alex: I don't know the story.

kelsey: Oh, jeez, okay. Let me fucking—Okay. So, The Licked Hand is a horror story. It is also called, um, The Doggy Lick or Humans Can Lick Too.

alex: Ew.

kelsey: Depending on where you hear it. It is a very, very common, um, slumber party horror story because it is about, like, a young girl who is at home with her dog and she hears on the radio—and she's maybe blind in the story—and she hears on the radio that like, there's a killer on the loose. And the dog is like licking her hand to comfort her and then by the end of the story she realizes it's not a dog, right, like, it's the killer.

alex: Oh my god. Jesus. That's scary.

kelsey: But this is like a very common urban legend. I think it was told, hold on one second.

alex: Humans can lick too. [laughs]

jae: [laughs]

kelsey: It's been found in print editions as early as the 1980s, but like I heard it when I was a kid growing up and thought it happened in Texas. Because like somebody told it at our slumber party. I'm pretty sure it's told on an episode of The L Word also—

alex: Wow.

kelsey: —so there's like, there's a, that's another level, right? That like once something is told in a like popular media consumptive option, it just enters your consciousness and lives there, right? And you don't really know where it came from.

alex: Something I'm kind of wondering is, I'm wondering about that feeling of letdown when you realize that the story has been out there.

kelsey: Yeah.

alex: And, and, like, a lot of the people we've talked to have said that they had this moment of disappointment. Um, when they, when they heard or they realized that like other people had heard the story before or that they were not the people who were relaying it for the first time. Interestingly, I didn't really have that feeling when this came out. Um, my, my response was more of a like, oh, that's interesting. And I'm like, really curious about this.

Um, but I am, I just, I feel like I want to talk about that response of disappointment. And like, what is it that we're actually hoping to get when we're telling these stories or engaging with them that we're not getting when we find out that the story has been in the world before?

kelsey: Hmm. I mean, Jae, you said that you felt kind of bad. Do you feel like you felt disappointed?

jae: Well, I think there were two layers of that. Like, one of them was just like, you know, like, did I just mark myself as super naive or did I do something bad to the show? Like the, the job side of things that I shouldn't have been worried about because y'all have been extremely nice the whole time that I've worked here.

And then there was the side of it where, like, before the episode came out, like, after I had, like, listened to all these submissions, and I was, like, on a high of just, like, mainlining all this gossip, I went to a brewery with some friends, and, like, I told them the poop story. I was like, I listened to this today, like, it's a banger, like, I want to, I want to share, um, and I have never, like, followed up with them and like admitted like what happened. I was just like, Oh, I hope, hope they didn't see the Instagram comments.

alex: Well, does it feel different to you? Like, does, does that, do you feel like you need to follow up with them? Cause from my perspective, I'm like, they still got the experience of a good story. Like what—you know what I mean?

kelsey: Yeah

jae: Oh, I mean, they had a great time, you know, like they really, they were laughing so much. I was so pleased with myself. Um, I think the part that I lost was the feeling of having told somebody a secret.

kelsey: Yeah

jae: I guess of there being like an inside and an outside to the story and like, the, the feeling of being on the inside of something was gone.

alex: Hmm.

kelsey: Yeah. So I was going to say that I think there are like two things at play here. Right? And the first is like, what are you trying to get out of telling this story?

Right? Like, there is a version of telling this story that is like buying a lottery ticket to have a conversation about what you would do with it. Right? Where you're just like, I'm gonna prompt everyone at this table by giving you this story and we're gonna discuss it, right? And that is the value I'm bringing, right?

And when you do that, if that is your intention in sharing it, it doesn't matter if it's an urban legend or not, right? Because you have presented a story and everyone freaks out and then you discuss with like ways she could have done better, right? You moralize like the decisions that she made and that's the intention of it.

alex: Yeah. The value is equal in the moment of telling the story.

kelsey: Exactly.

jae: And this is why Big Toilet would love it, because the answer is, you know

kelsey: Yes. Plumbing. Um, but I think that you're right, Jae. There is, I think that disappointment comes from the use of gossip to create divisions between people, right, which is, I know this information that other people don't know.

jae: Mm hmm.

kelsey: And if everyone knows it, then it holds less value, right?

jae: Yeah

kelsey: And so I think it depends on like how you approach the gossip itself. Like, are you using it to draw people closer to you? Because if you're using this story as a way to make people trust you more, and then it turns out to be an urban legend, you're in trouble.

jae: Wow, Kelsey. Feeling really exposed in my Scorpio spidery tendencies right now.

kelsey: Like, like that's, that is an issue with gossip storytelling, right? It's like sometimes you do it as an intention to like bring people in because sharing a secret makes people closer. So it's like you've created an in group and an out group and if it is revealed that the story you told is actually everywhere then you didn't bring anyone closer to you, right?

They will drift away again. So I think that's part of the disappointment. I also think it is frustrating to realize that a story you know, something you thought was yours and special is actually everyone's, right? Like in the same way that like, I mean, we used to make fun of quote unquote hipsters for doing this with music and like the 2010s where it was like, Oh, are you mad that the band that you like is popular enough to afford their rent?

But it was like, no, what they were mad at is that it wasn't theirs anymore, right? That it was everyone's. And that like the minute something you loved becomes for everyone, it changes. And so I think there's something of that there too, right? It's like, I thought I had this special little story that I told my friends where she scooped it out with a ladle and put it in a Tupperware box, and now I have to question whether or not that's true. Right? And like, I do, I would be disappointed too, if I thought it was my special little story.

alex: That's such a good point. And it's like something that brings me to the, to the really nihilistic place of like, well, nothing is truly ours. If I know a story that didn't happen, to me, then like, so many other people know this story too, already. And it like, you know, what does it matter, man? And now I'm going to go smoke weed in a field for the rest of the week

kelsey: Okay. Bye. Have fun, girl! We'll miss you.

jae: Take me with you!

kelsey: No, I, I think you're right though. I don't, I don't think it's nihilistic to say, like, it doesn't matter if the story is true or not, and it doesn't matter where it happened, because, like, the enjoyment of the story doesn't come from the fact—like, nothing in this story means that it had to have been in America. You don't lose anything from learning that it was in England or Canada or—

alex: It could have been anywhere.

kelsey: Like we have heard this from multiple sources that it was around as early as the early aughts, which means that like over the course of 30 years, don't you think that it's possible that this happened to more than one person? Right? Like—

alex: That's so upsetting.

kelsey: Like, it doesn't, like, it's a horror story, but it's not the kind of horror story that is like so specific and so unique that it's not replicable.

alex: Mm hmm.

jae: Yeah, no, it's so true. And as we were chasing different leads for this story, like, Alex had to pull me back because I was going down some weird rabbit holes. Like somebody was like, there was an episode of Chelsea Lately with Olivia Wilde—

kelsey: No, do not bring Chelsea Lately into this

jae: —and so I was like going into the archives trying to find this episode, couldn't find it. And then, you know, I was finding other articles of like somebody getting stuck in a window cause she was trying to throw some poop outside. It just felt like there were a lot of echoes of this story out there, or just poop stories in general, like ranging from news articles to other urban legends.

kelsey: I don't know, I think a lot about, like, things that are, like, uniquely human, right? And, like, one of them is, like, making music and dancing, right? Like, it's, like, very silly when someone is dancing as, like, to try and persuade someone to do something else. Because it's like, oh, haha, like what is, it's so weird to be a person. Like you're doing a dance to try and convince your sister to come to the club with you. Like, is that going to work? Um, but I feel that way about storytelling too, where it's like, this is something that like only we do.

Like, telling stories verbally is something that, like, only humans can do, that we know of. And so, like, there's something kind of beautiful to me about the idea that this story is iterating and echoing and, like, changing in different spaces. Spheres because like, yeah, that's how it works, right? Like that's in the same way that like you see similarities between the Bible and the Norse gods and the, you know, the Torah and you see similarities in all storytelling all the time because there's only so many stories and so many people and like things are just the same everywhere at all times. I'm just like

alex: Jesus.

kelsey: I'm sober, incredibly.

alex: Um, well, in conclusion, make sure to take your probiotics.

kelsey: Mm hmm. Yeah, in conclusion, um—yeah, what other conclusions are there here?

jæ: We don't care if it's true, but also if it happened to you, we do care a little bit. Please tell us.

kelsey: Yeah, and you know, if you find yourself in this situation I really think a fireman would help you. Like, like, I really think a fireman would burst down that door.

alex: Yeah. Also, like, I feel like you could really get past this by just being honest. Like—

kelsey: Do not go home. Do not open your door.

alex: Yeah, like, let me go in first. I did something really embarrassing and just like, own it. And like, you don't have to tell them yet. You can tell them eventually. And I think like, if you own that, that's, that's fine.

kelsey: That's beautiful. Wow. Thank you so much for bringing this to me. It was, uh, terrifying and delightful.

alex: It was our pleasure.

jæ: A little present in a Tupperware

kelsey: A little treat.

alex: Oh God

kelsey: Let me unwrap this single use bag. What's in here?

alex: Jesus.

kelsey: Thank you so much for listening to Normal Gossip. A huge thank you to everyone who was willing to talk to us about the poop story, especially Lizzie, Tori, Jen Pritchard McDonald, and Adrian Parks. If you have a gossip story to share with us, you can email us at normalgossip@defector.com, especially if you are the person who put the poop into the Tupperware, single use bag, or Ziploc. Or you can leave us a voicemail at 2679-GOSSIP. If you love this podcast and want to support us, become a friend or a friend-of-a-friend at supportnormalgossip.com. You can follow the show on Instagram and Tiktok at @normalgossip. You can follow me on all social media at @McKinneyKelsey. This episode was produced by Jae Towle Vieira. Alex Sujong Laughlin is Defector's Supervising Producer and Normal Gossip's

co-creator. Justin Ellis is Defector's projects editor. Jasper Wang and Sean Kuhn are Defector's business guys. Tom Ley is our editor in chief. Abigail Segel is our intern. Dan McQuade runs our merch store, which you can find at normalgossip.store. Tara Jacoby designed our show art. Thank you to the rest of the Defector staff. Defector is a collectively-owned, subscriber-based media company, and Normal Gossip is a proud member of Radiotopia. Normal Gossip is hosted by me, Kelsey McKinney, and please remember, you did not hear this from me.