



# UNUSUAL DEATHS

**100 TRUE STORIES**

Studio Minuit presents :

# 100 TRUE STORIES

from

# UNUSUAL DEATHS

*Can you die impaled by a straw, killed by a slug, crushed by a cow that fell from the sky, poisoned by a carrot, or choke on a laugh? NO? Well yes, it is possible... Unfortunately. You will discover the 100 most absurd and tragic, sometimes funny, ways to die, which will make you feel cold and smile at the same time. Each one is a reminder of the unbearable fragility of existence and the need to avoid risky behaviour.*

*Unusual deaths - True stories* is also a Studio Minuit podcast.

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- 4 A Home-made smoothie
- 5 The Dish of the day
- 6 A dangerous recipe
- 7 The cow that fell from the sky
- 8 The birthday, the beach and the flying parasol
- 9 The brilliant writer and the little bottle cap
- 10 The hunter gatherer versus the python
- 11 The factory, the flying plate and the pensioner
- 12 The dancer and her scarf
- 13 The health enthusiast and a vitamin overdose
- 14 The comedy fan and his favorite show
- 15 Water: are you thirsty or overhydrated?
- 16 The worker and the robot
- 17 Golfer's karma
- 18 The falling poodle, and the three passers-by
- 19 The lawyer, the fantasy, and the 24th floor
- 20 Teenagers, hygiene and deodorant
- 21 The cook's banquet
- 22 The king, gluttony and indigestion
- 23 The king killing pig
- 24 The deadly statuette
- 25 The revenge of the cactus
- 26 Autopsied alive
- 27 An easy job?
- 28 Fatal Blowjob
- 29 The writer and his toothpick
- 30 Life is great!
- 31 The laws of architecture are the same for everyone
- 32 A genius, somewhere between science and madness
- 33 The man who wanted to be eaten
- 34 For once, the rabbit kills the hunter
- 35 The astrologer was right
- 36 Fatal kiss
- 37 Beware of viruses!
- 38 Buried alive
- 39 The bezoar, or death
- 40 Radithor or nothing
- 41 The man who wanted to prove that the Earth is flat
- 42 Not just anyone can be William Tell
- 43 A giant bat on the Eiffel Tower
- 44 The horseman of the apocalypse
- 45 Soccer strike, or lightning strike?
- 46 The last screening
- 47 Bad timing, bad tempo
- 48 Bring me wine!
- 49 Climbing to heaven
- 50 Six feet under
- 51 One last drink, please
- 52 The surprising jealousy of hippos
- 53 Winner winner, liver dinner
- 54 Just wait a minute
- 55 The Iron Throne
- 56 Requiem for a bicycle
- 57 A deadly plea
- 58 Dying on stage
- 59 Is there a pirate on the plane?
- 60 On his deathbed
- 61 And the, all hell baroque loose
- 62 Fifteen seconds too long
- 63 Deadly dares
- 64 Hunting the lone snake
- 65 Locked in
- 66 One punch too many
- 67 Video games don't kill
- 68 Dying for a cheeseburger
- 69 Kingslaying water
- 70 A hippopotamus can very deceiving
- 71 A question of balance
- 72 Santa Fe fire
- 73 A fitting punishment?
- 74 How much can a selfie cost?
- 75 Experimenting with his life
- 76 The killer slug
- 77 Dying for your country
- 78 Mithridatism
- 79 Lethal gasses
- 80 Sugar's a drug too
- 81 Gluttony is a bad habit
- 82 Life or lava
- 83 At the height of her fame
- 84 A strong-willed logician
- 85 1 tree, 1 chain, 2 personalities
- 86 A choice that weighs heavily
- 87 A girl to die for
- 88 When an inventor goes off the rails
- 89 The Crocodile Hunter, not killed by a crocodile
- 90 The rebel and his helmet fart
- 91 A sound mind, in a sound body
- 92 What is a carrot?
- 93 The student, the bottle and the dumpster
- 94 From the chuggin' to the coffin
- 95 Singing, or screaming, at the top of your lungs
- 96 A stewardess in the clouds
- 97 When travel plans fall through
- 98 The descent into hell
- 99 Coup de théâtre!
- 100 And yet, it is spinning!
- 101 Searching for new sounds, only to be silenced
- 102 Hot hot hot in Lorraine
- 103 The living dead

# A Home-made smoothie

Elena Struthers-Gardner was a 60-year-old retired woman living in Broadstone, England. Elena had an unusual job, especially for a woman: she was a jockey.

For years, she risked her life on thoroughbreds galloping at over 35 mph. It's a high-risk job... Some jockeys die in training or during races, victims of fatal falls, during a jump or unintentional trappings by an adversary's horse.

Elena Struthers-Gardner, Lena to her friends, had survived decades of risk and is now enjoying a well-deserved retirement.

At the moment she was sitting quietly at home, making herself a cold drink. Being environmentally conscious, she had chosen a reusable metal straw rather than a disposable plastic one. But once she had her drink in her hand, Lena slipped, lost her balance, and fell face-first onto the floor, right into the straw that impaled her eye. The straw entered her left eye socket and pierced her brain.

Mandy, her wife of four years, said she did not hear the fall. She found Lena lying on her stomach, making "*unusual gurgling noises*".

Her death led the coroner warning against using metal straws with a lid that held them in place.

# The Dish of the day

Is it possible to be killed by an animal that has been dead for at least 20 minutes? In theory, no, there's no way that could happen. A snake that has been decapitated for a good 20 minutes can theoretically do no more harm. However, it happened to Peng Fan, the chef of a small, well-known Asian restaurant.

Peng Fan was preparing a dish of the day based on the Indochinese spitting cobra, a delicacy that is very popular in Asia. The snake is found in Southeast Asian countries, including Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam. Adults can be up to 63 inches long. They are found in plains, hills, forests and jungle. They feed mainly on rodents, toads and other snakes. Mainly nocturnal, the spitting cobra is more likely to flee when disturbed during the day.

Why is it called the spitting cobra? Well, it has the unpleasant habit of spitting its venom into the eyes of its victim. The victim may be temporarily or permanently blinded. Its bite is fatal, causing paralysis of the muscles of the respiratory system and death by asphyxiation.

Peng Fan, our cook, cut off the head of the snake and set it aside on his worktop. He spent about twenty minutes preparing his soup and cutting up the body of the snake. The snake was now simmering in a large pot filled with herbs and small vegetables. A delicious soup.

But, when Peng decided to throw away what was left of the cobra, the severed head bit him, injecting him with its fast-acting venom.

The restaurant's customers heard screams coming from the kitchen, and unfortunately, help arrived too late to save the cook.

A reptile can retain reflex functions for up to an hour after being decapitated. Good to know, just in case!

# A dangerous recipe

Rebecca Burger was a 33-year-old French model and fitness fan with almost 200,000 followers on her Instagram account.

It sounds so absurd, so out of place. Whipped cream is a delicious, common dessert and quite harmless, if not abused. Well, that's what killed Rebecca Burger!

On Saturday 18 June 2017, Rebecca decided to make herself a whipped cream dessert. But the gas cap in her whipped cream siphon exploded and hit her in the chest. The freak accident and the resulting injuries caused her to go into cardiac arrest.

When the firemen arrived on the scene, they attempted a heart massage and managed to revive her. Taken to hospital, she remained unconscious and died the next day.

News of the tragic incident spread when the model's family posted an image of the whipped cream canister on her Instagram account, with the caption, "*This is the whipped cream siphon that exploded and caused Rebecca's death.*"

These accidents can occur because of the pressurization of the containers. This whipped cream dispenser contains nitrous oxide chargers to pressurize the container that allow it to spray whipped cream. Under pressure, the gas can explode and cause serious injuries: broken teeth, loss of an eye, coma, fractured face and chest... The cardiac arrest, which led to Rebecca Burger's death, is often mistaken for a heart attack. *"Heart attacks are caused by a blockage that prevents the flow of blood to the heart. Heart muscle tissue dies from a lack of blood supply. In contrast, in cardiac arrest, the heart suddenly stops working. This can happen as a result of a severe blow to the chest. It is usually associated with the sudden impact of an object on the chest wall that happens to coincide with a specific part of the electrical cycle of the heart, which produces cardiac arrhythmias. When this happens, the heart stops pumping blood and its electrical activity eventually stops too."*

A word of advice: beware of common kitchen objects, they can be among the most dangerous. And never forget that every year, preventable injury-related deaths at home are the cause of around 156,300 deaths in the US.

# The cow that fell from the sky

A man falls asleep in the evening next to his wife. And he will never wake up, because of a cow falling on him!

Just how much does the average cow weigh: about 3300 pounds. Multiply this by the speed of the falling object to get the force of impact. Deadly.

It happened to 45-year-old Joao Maria de Souza. He was in bed with his wife, Leni, when the animal fell through the ceiling of their home in Caratinga, in south-east Brazil. The cow had escaped during the night from a nearby farm and climbed onto the roof of the house, which was set against a small hill. The corrugated iron roof immediately gave way and the one-and-a-half ton cow fell 7.5 feet onto Mr de Souza's side of the bed, leaving him no chance. He died of internal bleeding.

The latest news suggests that both his wife and the cow escaped unharmed from the incident. Mr de Souza's brother-in-law, Carlos Correa, told a Brazilian newspaper: "*Being crushed in bed by a cow is the last way you would expect to leave this earth. But if it's God's will... I think it wasn't the cow that killed our Joao, it was the unacceptable time he spent in the emergency room waiting to be taken care of.*" His mother, Maria de Souza, told Brazilian TV channel SuperCanal: "*I didn't raise my son for him to be killed by a cow falling from the sky!*"

The police in Caratinga, Minas Gerais, launched an investigation into the strange death. The prosecutor is considering whether to prosecute the owner of the cow for manslaughter if he is found guilty of negligence in the supervision of his cow.

A word of advice: beware of certain seemingly harmless animals, they can be surprisingly dangerous. And don't forget to take a look up at the sky from time to time, you never know.



# The birthday, the beach and the flying parasol

Is a woman in danger when she is sitting quietly on the sand of a large, peaceful beach by the Atlantic Ocean? In theory, no, nothing untoward should happen.

What could be the risk of being on a nearly deserted beach in June, surrounded by your best friends? Well, something very bad happened to 55-year-old Lottie Michelle Belk. Lottie had decided to celebrate her birthday on the beach with a small group of friends on a quiet Saturday in June. But bad luck, the wind was blowing quite hard that day, around 19mph. The wind lifted an umbrella and it blew over Lottie, impaling her in the heart.

Police in Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA, responded at the beach at 33rd Street shortly after 5pm after receiving calls about a woman in cardiac arrest. It was Lottie. Medics arrived and transported her to a local hospital, but she died from her injury. The investigation revealed that a parasol stuck in the sand on the beach was lifted by a strong gust and then slid across the sand. Police said the umbrella stabbed Ms Belk in the chest. The chief medical examiner, Donna Price, said Belk's cause of death was blunt force trauma to the chest. He also said the death was accidental. The Virginia Beach Police Department's homicide unit has nevertheless launched a routine investigation into the incident. According to Tom Gill, captain of the Virginia Beach Rescue Department, this is the first time he has heard of someone being killed by a beach umbrella in the beach town. Gill said he had heard of people being injured by a detached umbrella, but considers Belk's death a freak accident. Gill says it is important to readjust and check the anchoring of your parasol in strong gusts. If the winds seem too strong, Gill suggests simply taking the parasol down. According to Rob Lindaur, owner of a beachwear shop, the parasol should always be placed facing the wind. Whether you're just taking a walk in the water or on the beach, Lindaur advises that you never take your eyes off your parasol!

A word of advice: when you're on the beach, don't just think about the shark that might come and bite your leg off while you're swimming. Don't forget to look around, you never know where danger may lie...



# The brilliant writer and the little bottle cap

What could possibly go wrong for a man who has just put two drops of saline solution in his eyes before going to bed? Quietly lying down in a luxury suite of a major Manhattan hotel. In theory, everything should be fine. But, as you know, things don't always go according to plan. Sometimes it seems so absurd, so out of place. This was a famous writer, a successful playwright, Tennessee Williams, the author of *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Pulitzer Prize winner for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Well, the worst thing happened to Tennessee, aged 71, on the evening of 22 February 1983, in a beautiful suite at the Hotel Elysee on 54th Street in Manhattan, in the heart of New York.

Not knowing where to put the cap of his eye-drop bottle, he put it between his teeth, just long enough to put the drops in his eyes. He leaned his head back, mouth open, cap between his teeth, hands busy with the dropper. A false move? A hiccup? A sneeze? Tennessee Williams swallowed the bottle cap, and choked to death. His body was found the next morning by his secretary, John Uecker, who shared the two room suite with the playwright. Mr Uecker said he heard a noise in Mr Williams' room at about 11pm on Thursday night, but did not investigate. At about 10.45am the next morning, Mr Uecker entered the room and found Mr Williams lying dead beside his bed. Dr Gross, the chief medical examiner for New York City, who performed the autopsy, confirmed that Mr Williams had died late on Thursday evening, suffocated by a plastic cap of the type used on nasal spray or eye solution bottles. Doctors said normal nerve reflexes in the back of the throat would normally force a choking person to eject any object caught in the opening of the larynx, called the glottis. Dr Gross said that a number of reasons may have weakened the ejection response, for example when a person is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Dr Gross said that there was no suspicion of foul play and that deaths of this type are usually classified as accidental. At his best, Williams was a master of dramatic moments and created lost and tortured characters, struggling for dignity and hope in a world that often denied both. Obsessed with illness, failure and death, he constantly thought his heart would stop beating. He had suffered from many ailments, including cataracts, arthritis and heart disease. "*I have had every disorder known to man,*" he once said.

A word of advice: even when you're doing rather harmless things in your daily life, be careful. For example, don't forget to put down the cap of your pen or the lid of a beer bottle, on a table, you never know what might happen.

# The hunter gatherer versus the python

What could possibly go wrong for Akbar, a 25-year-old Indonesian man, who went into the forest with a machete and a basket to harvest the fruit of the palm oil tree in his part of Indonesia? A green forest, quiet and almost no one on the horizon. In theory, nothing. But as you know, nothing ever goes quite according to plan.

When his uncle came to visit him the next day on Sulawesi Island, he found the house empty and locked. His wife had left for her parents' home in another province, and none of his friends and neighbours had seen Akbar since the previous day. Akbar's uncle gathered some villagers to go looking for him.

A few hours later, the search team found scattered palm oil fruits, a picking tool and a boot. Then, a few steps further, they spotted a 13 feet long reticulated python, engorged, bloated and unable to move after an obviously pantagruelic meal. In the wild, pythons are known to eat monkeys, pigs and other mammals. Reticulated pythons cling to their prey with dozens of sharp, curved teeth, then squeeze it to death before swallowing it whole. They are widespread in Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia. This constrictor snake, one of the largest snakes in the world, averages between 15 and 30 feet in length and weighs between 200 and 300 lbs. In exceptional cases, it can reach 32 feet, as in the case of a female killed by natives in Sulawesi, Indonesia, in 1912 and measured by an engineer. In addition, a 29 feet long female, which died in 1963 at the Highland Park Zoo in Pennsylvania, had reached a maximum weight of 320 lbs. It is a massive species like all pythons, but despite its weight, it remains more slender than other constrictors, notably the great anaconda.

Akbar, as you might expect, had just been swallowed whole by this huge python, which was in the process of digesting him. "*When his stomach was cut, we first saw his boot and feet near the snake's neck, his uncle told the local newspaper.*" It looks like he was attacked from behind, as we found a wound on his back." A six-minute video on the website of the publication *Tribun Timur* shows villagers cutting up the python's carcass to reveal the legs and torso of the dead victim, Akbar. This was the world's first fully confirmed case of a snake swallowing an adult human whole, and it was Akbar Salubiro. A sad end.

Friendly advice: when you go for a walk in the forest, be careful. For example, don't forget to look behind you from time to time, you never know what may lie there...