

+ ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARTIN CENDREDA

# PINOY SCIENCE

+ BY TEENA APELES



**Rubbing your face with the underwear you wore during your very first period will reduce acne and give you smoother skin.**

**To** say Filipinos are superstitious is an understatement. From cutting your toenails at night to leaving the dinner table, every action is assigned a consequence or folk belief. There are so many Filipino *pamahiin* (superstitions) that if you believed all of them you'd never leave home. For your convenience, here is a compilation of the most widespread, creepy, and absurd beliefs. If you're already afraid of breaking mirrors or having black cats cross your path, read no further—you'll never get through another day.

#### HYGIENE

**If you go to sleep with wet hair, you will gray prematurely, go blind, or go crazy.** Especially if you are genetically predisposed.

**If you intentionally photograph your hair for the sake of recording its length, then you will experience hair loss and thinning.** Or at least you will notice it.

**If your second toe is longer than your big toe, your mother will die before your father.** Statistically women live longer than men do, but have you ever noticed how long Filipinos' toes are in the first place?

**If you cut your toenails at night, one of your parents will die soon.** My father feels that in the old days, when there was no electricity (or nail-clippers for that matter), cutting one's nails in the evening by candlelight or moonlight probably resulted in some painful accidents. This is a perfect example of how parents scare kids into doing things.

#### MENSTRUATION

**If you jump up and down three times after your very first menstrual cycle, your period will last only three days.** Shaking may shed the uterine lining more quickly, but does that guarantee a shorter menstrual cycle?

**Rubbing your face with the underwear you wore during your very first period will reduce acne and give you smoother skin.** "I don't think so," says my friend Luccio, a physician's assistant.

**Taking a bath during your period will make you crazy.** Whoever came up with this ridiculous restraint on female behavior is crazy.

**A boy should not lie down on the lap of girl who is menstruating or he will lose his hair easily.** No comment.

#### FINDING A SPOUSE

**If you keep a pet turtle, you'll have a spinster in the family.** My cousins had a pet turtle and Betsy, one of the sisters, gave the turtle away. The three sisters ended up marrying and avoided spinsterhood, but it is possible that Betsy made up this superstition because she didn't like the turtle.

**Do not wear purple if you are a single woman or else you will become an old maid.** You mean those girls in the Prince videos never settled down?

**If an unwed woman is eating and all the plates are removed from the dining table, she will stay single all her life.** She will also be alone at the table.

**If a woman takes the first serving of fish, she will end up a spinster.** This means more fish for the men, who probably caught it in the old days.

**If a man marries a woman with bags under her eyes, she will soon be a widow.** There are several ways to look at this: (1) A woman who has dark circles under her eyes already has the appearance of a mourning widow; (2) society frowns on a woman who does not meet the ideals of beauty; and (3) having tired eyes means a woman parties or is unhealthy. The real implication is that either she will kill you or you will die before her. I better get rid of the bags under my eyes.

**If you marry a person who has a mole beside his or her nose, you will die before he or she does.** So that's why Cindy Crawford was never a hit in the Philippines.



#### WEDDINGS

**Giving knives or other sharp objects as wedding gifts will lead to a broken marriage.** Hel-lo, couples can use them as weapons when they get into a fight.

**Couples should avoid long drives or traveling before their wedding day since altar-bound couples are accident-prone.** Such trips are also conducive to arguments, and shouldn't they be busy tending to wedding details anyway?

**Rain on a wedding day means either prosperity and happiness for the newlyweds or the couple will have many crybabies.** One interpretation for the first option is that Saint Peter cries when a couple is a good match. It rains a lot in the Philippines, so it's likely that this one was made to help couples feel better about gloomy weddings. As for the second, babies cry no matter what.

**If a bride wants her husband to agree to her every whim, she should step on his foot on the way to the altar.** This reminds a husband who's the boss from the get-go. Also, it's difficult to walk in heels, especially when wearing a heavy dress with a long train!

**A bride shouldn't wear pearls at her wedding or she will experience heartache and tears during her married life.** Pearls resemble tears. To avoid them, don't wear them.

**If during a wedding ceremony the ring, veil, or arrhae (coins) are dropped, it will be an unhappy marriage.** People sometimes measure a marriage's success by how perfect the wedding was. Don't choose clumsy friends or relatives to be in your wedding.

**Breaking something during a wedding reception brings good luck to the newlyweds.** Tell this to the owners of the reception site when your guests get drunk and start breaking things.

**It is bad luck for two siblings to marry in the same year.** It is also very expensive.

**If an unmarried woman literally follows the footsteps of the newlyweds, she will marry soon.** This must look really funny at a wedding. Some women do the craziest things to get hitched.

## MARRIED LIFE

When a husband leaves the house after an argument, the wife should get his shirt, hang it over the stove, and whip it several times to make sure the husband comes back. He has to come back for his shirt.

A married woman who wears a pearl ring will cause her husband to commit adultery. Why is it always the woman's fault?

## PREGNANCY

A pregnant woman who eats light-colored foods will have a light-skinned baby; one who eats dark-colored foods will have a dark-skinned baby. Pigmentation is predetermined regardless of diet.

If you take food from a pregnant woman, you will be constantly sleepy. According to one source, "sleepy pregnant women are contagious." Expectant mothers must have food to keep nourishing their unborn babies. People who take food from pregnant women are punished by becoming sleepy.

If a pregnant woman eats a piece of fruit from a tree, the remaining fruits will stay sour. Isn't carrying a baby hard enough?

If you scratch your tummy when you are pregnant, you will end up with stretch marks. Some people are predisposed to stretch marks, but cocoa butter or lotions can minimize the appearance.

If a pregnant woman crochets, her baby will be strangled by the umbilical cord. The medical opinion is that this is not so.



**If a pregnant woman crochets, her baby will be strangled by the umbilical cord.**

If a pregnant woman is sick and steps over her husband while he is sleeping, all of her symptoms will be transferred to him. What is he doing sleeping anyway?

Visitors who hang out at the door of, but do not enter, the home of a pregnant woman will give her a difficult delivery. Just say no to door-to-door salespeople, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Girl Scouts.

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## BELIEVE IT OR DON'T!



I'm a "Polipino," half-Polish, half-Filipino. My mother and all of my aunts are extremely superstitious. About 15 years ago, my mother became ill with severe, flu-like symptoms. My aunts were convinced that a woman consumed by jealousy over my mom's beauty cast a spell on her during a work party. The next seven days of her recovery consisted of things like fish bones in oil rubbed over her abdomen (source of the spell) several times per day, prayer, and chanting. My Caucasian father went nuts trying to convince her that she needed to be admitted to the hospital. She (and the aunts) refused. Thank God whatever she had left her body after 14 days.

Suzanne Szostak-Pierce

You asked for it:

1. Don't sing while over the stove, it means you will marry an old man.
2. Don't take a shower at night. You'll become anemic.
3. Ears ringing means someone is talking about you.
4. Nose itching means someone is thinking about you.
5. If a bird craps on you or your car, that's good luck.
6. Moles with hair growing out of them are good luck.
7. Stepping over graves will make the spirits follow you.

That's all I can recall now. There are also many regional superstitions that involve imps, fairies, tree dwellers, ghosts, and witches that I remember from visiting there. Do you want to hear about those as well? Or should I even incriminate my relatives for believing all this mumbo jumbo? (I'll probably get 10 years of bad luck for saying that.)

Nic



One superstition in particular that always stood out to me involved the "little people." If you are ever outside doing yardwork and you come across little hills or mounds, you have to say "excuse me" to inform the little people to get out of the way. The same goes if you trim a hedge or bush with clippers. If you don't say "excuse me," you run the risk of accidentally killing one of them, which will make them angry. One punishment is that you will no longer be able to see the shape of your head when the sun makes shadows on you and/or be unable to feel your head. Because you chopped up one of them, it's only fair that you feel the same way.

There's also a ton of ghost stories that involve "white ladies" and "asuangs," vampire/ghosts who are missing the lower half of their bodies.

Ryan Decaney Castro



Filipinos believe in a pagan sort of religion, where dwarves and spirits live in the ground, trees, etc. One year during typhoon season our houseboy told my dad that he noticed huge, long footprints leading from the bushes in the backyard, across the grass and going into the pool. They had a witch doctor come and he said that there was a big spirit in the bushes, living in one particularly large plant—a leader or king of some sort. So he proceeded to do a kind of exorcism using my dad's driver as the medium. He had him hold two one-piso coins, one in each fist, while pouring melted wax onto a plate. Our driver went into a trance, with toes curled, and they communicated with the spirit in this way. The melted wax took on the image of a dwarf, complete with pointed hat and curled up shoes, and that was that. This all happened, of course, very early in the morning when my brother and I were asleep and we missed the entire thing.

Alexis J. Ching

1. If your fork falls on the floor while you're eating, a male visitor will come. If it's a spoon, it will be a female visitor.
2. If your palms are itchy, money will come.
3. When walking in a forest say, "Tabi po." It means, "Excuse me, please," so that you won't step on the forest spirits.
4. Turn your plate around if somebody at the dinner table is leaving before you finish your meal, so the person will have a safe journey.
5. Don't sweep the floor at night. Old folks say you're sweeping the good luck out.
6. Don't sleep with your hair wet, because you're going to be blind when you wake up.
7. First thing you do when you move into a new place is scatter rice for good luck.
8. If it's raining while the sun is shining, a tikbalang (half-horse/half-man from Filipino mythology) is getting married.

Ogie Gonzales

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## Kissing a baby's feet will result in the baby talking back to his or her parents when he or she grows up.

### BABIES

If you kiss a sleeping baby, especially on the hands, he or she will grow into an overly sensitive adult who is easily offended. It's better to let sleeping babies lie.

When a baby lies on his or her stomach for the first time, placing a pencil, paper, and a book underneath will make him or her intelligent. It might also stab him or her.

Stepping over a child while he or she is asleep will slow his or her growth. Maybe you better not step over anyone at all.

Kissing a baby's feet will result in the baby talking back to his or her parents when he or she grows up. Duh.

### TABLE ETIQUETTE

If you eat too many onions, you will become a playboy or playgirl. The layers of mystery surrounding the onion are seemingly unending.

If you leave some rice in the cooker, there will always be something to eat in the house. Variations include "Always keep a coin or bills inside your bag or suitcase. If you don't spend it, it means you will have money for the whole year" and "If you find a coin on the road, put it in your purse or pocket. If you never use it, you will never be short of money."



I know when someone passes away, my family does things that may not be acceptable to a lot of people. My Uncle Ricki passed away when I was a teenager. My mother grabbed a rosary and broke it in two pieces, then placed it around his hands. My mother told me it would stop the chain of death in the family. They did not do it for my other uncle, Ted, who had passed away three months before because his wife didn't believe in breaking the rosary. Since it is a religious symbol, she thought, the rosary should not be broken. It made me think if we did break the rosary of my Uncle Ted, Uncle Ricki would still be alive. After Uncle Ricki passed away, there wasn't another death in the family until seven years later, when my grandfather passed away. We also carry small kids and babies over the casket of the dead, so the deceased won't come to hunt the children of the family.

Vera V. Wijangco



1. When there is a newborn baby in the household, the family covers the house with garlic because some sort of witch will try to take him or her at midnight. The vigil lasts a few days, and everybody stays up all night.
2. Never tap the oven top. It wakes up ghosts.
3. My friend's mom won't take pictures with only three people in it. The number three is bad luck.

Cherry Thomas

My mom used to tell me:

1. If you drop a spoon someone's coming.
2. If you sleep on your back your spirit will be taken away.
3. If you sleep with any body parts hanging over the side of your bed, a ghost will come from underneath your bed and try to grab you.
4. Mumus are the monsters in the closets. (Say this in a Filipino accent: "Don't leed de closet open when you are sleeping. De mumu will come out and get you!")

Parents are so mean sometimes. I guess it's all about the Filipino child-raising process. They gotta mess with you and tease you so you can develop a sense of humor and strength.  
Jillian Pobocan



Filipino superstitions seem silly from an outsider's point of view. For example, before a housewarming party, the host throws coins into various corners of each room to ensure good luck while living there. Filipinos also believe that vampires suck blood through your feet, so they make sure to keep them covered while sleeping. On New Year's Eve, they hang grapes from the windowsill or hallways to insure good luck and prosperity for the rest of the year. Another New Year's Eve superstition is to open all doors and cabinets to insure that good luck will flow through the house for the rest of the year.

Earl

I don't know if they are Filipino or just coming from my family...

1. If you sleep with your hair wet, you'll go blind. We never took showers or baths before we slept.
2. My family used to always make the sign of the cross (a Catholic thing) whenever we were about to drive a car, fly on a plane, go on a boat, etc.
3. If you cut your nails on Tuesday or Thursday, you'll get hangnails.

Jay Bautista



My mom once told me that if you ever see a big fly buzzing around your house, that means a relative would die soon. For a while that freaked me out, and I was always on the lookout for giant flies. Then one day there was one. My mom said, nonchalantly, "Oh, I bet Uncle So-and-so is going to die." We all knew he was in poor health but it was still a surprise when we found out he died the next day.

My mom's a nut. She has a bunch of superstitions. Like if I slept with my arms behind my head, fingers interlaced, that would mean I was wishing ill will towards her. She'd be like, "Ana ba? You want me to die, ha?" Crazy.

If I slept with my hair wet, she'd say that I'd wake up with a headache. I would do it all the time and it didn't happen. But one day I was like, "Ma, you got any Tylenol? I got a headache!" and she'd be like, "What, did you sleep with your hair wet again? See, I told you!"

**If you disrespect an elf by cutting down his tree, trashing his living area, or peeing on his tree trunk, he will come after you.**

**If you eat tutong (hard rice) at the bottom of the rice cooker, you will always be the last in everything and never at the top.** This pertains especially to marriage.

**If you change seats at the dinner table, you are jinxing yourself into numerous unhappy relationships and will never find your true love.** Why not just ask someone to pass the adobo instead?

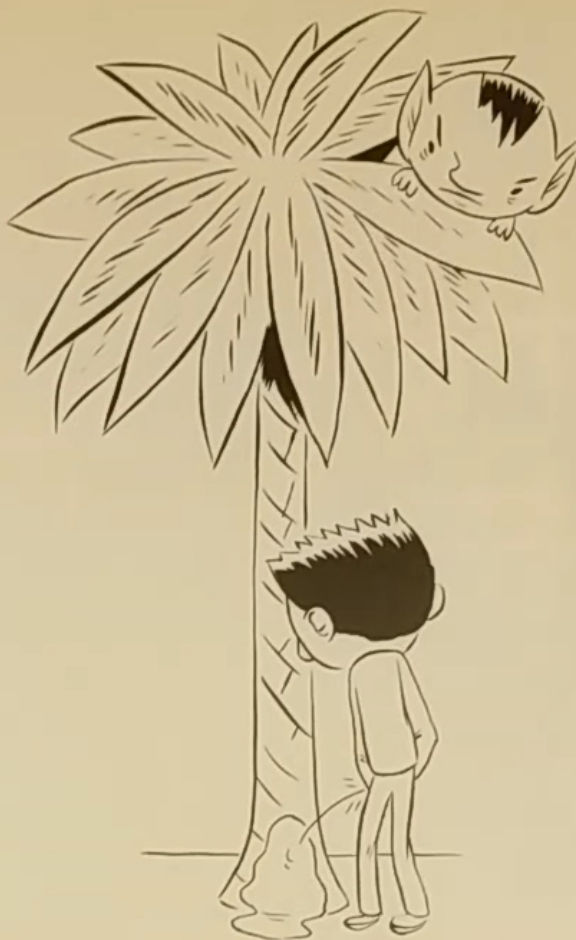
**When dining in the home of strangers, always eat food from the center of the plate.** Can you avoid the temptation of scraping food off your plate directly into your mouth?

**Stacking dirty dishes one on top of the other will lead to adultery.** This might have something to do with mixing spit.

## ELVES

**If you have a huge mound of dirt next to a tree, an elf owns and lives in it.** Only children need playmates.

**If you disrespect an elf by cutting down his tree, trashing his living area, or peeing on his tree trunk, he will come after you.** My friend Angel told me how his friends' lolos (grandfathers) became very ill. After seeing some witch doctors, they realized that an elf was pissed off. Apparently, they had peed on the tree trunks or near the mounds of dirt, but my dad says these are just ant or termite hills.



My mom, sister, and I went to some photo studio to get our pictures taken and she was kind of hesitant about it. She was like, "But there's three of us! That's bad luck!" The pictures turned out kinda meh and she blames it on the three-person pic rule.

**Malinda Gacula**

1. You can get killed by the dead skin that falls off you when you sleep! You must brush off your bed every day because your dead skin turns poisonous.
2. Never cut your fingernails or toenails at night!
3. You must not eat with the spoon that you use to scoop out your samal (hot sauce). Somehow, you will contaminate yourself with evil!

**Lauren**



If you see suspicious lights moving around at night, don't follow them! They are supernatural creatures that are trying to get you lost. Inside the light there's a mummy-type figure made of palm leaves with a dead body wrapped inside. The spirit will block your way, and to get by one must slash it open to release the spirit. This one's really weird, and my dad's not sure if he's messing it up somehow.

Another creature is 10–15 feet tall with the head of an animal (typically a wolf), the body of a man, and hair all over its body. Called a capri or tikbalang, it smokes cigars and hides in mango trees.

Aswangs have the face of a bat, the body of a woman, and a tongue with a pointy end like a hook. They fly around looking for sleeping pregnant women to suck blood from.

**Martin Cendreda**

My lola used to warn me and my brothers about an evil leprechaun that lurked in the park outside our house. I used to think that was her way of keeping us indoors and out of trouble, but I think she really believed in this creepy little man. It is believed that if you disturb a leprechaun's home in the trees, he will come to haunt you and give you pains that no physician can treat. The only remedies are the potions of a Filipino witch doctor.

**Angel Lopez**



1. My aunt said that one can grow tall if he or she eats a lot of Star margarine.
2. My grandfather once told me that if you accidentally bite your tongue, that means someone is thinking of you.
3. If a teenager gets pimples on his or her face, that means he or she is falling in love.

**Jon Camaisa**

1. The aswang is a floating half of a witch with dangling entrails that steals babies from pregnant women with her tongue.
2. The White Lady is pretty much the same as the Mexican legend of a woman dressed in white who kidnaps children because she lost her own.
3. Never take a professional family photo. Something terrible is sure to happen.
4. If you dream of losing your teeth someone close to you will die.
5. Some Filipinos believe in fairies, dwarves, and magical trees. My family doesn't, but I've heard it from other families.

**Rhianne**

My whole family went highly superstitious whenever it was New Year's Eve. My parents would have us open every window and door to the house at midnight and leave coins at every windowsill. Influenced by foreign sources, noisemakers were also necessary (taken from Chinese tradition) and the wearing of clothes with circle patterns to represent money and prosperity (a Spanish belief) was encouraged.

**Johanns Fernandez**



I have a friend who mentioned that she was told never to bathe after a hard day's work or during the afternoon or daytime. It is believed that it would shorten your life.

**Conchita**