

# Superstitions...

## Demystifying The Mystical

By

*ANDY VAN SCOYOC*

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# INTRODUCTION

A fun, but serious look at what drives normally ordinary people to perform bizarre and oftentimes ridiculous rituals.

## Dedication:

To all the thinkers, rationalists, skeptics and those who embrace all of the aforementioned, yet still dare to allow their imaginations to fly...

With age, I have become one of you...but I still dream.

May we never fully let go...

## ~Foreword:~

Who doesn't like a good superstition?

They're fun, oftentimes funny and they can even be spooky portents of dire consequences if disobeyed.

I grew up in a family of "Country Folk/Country Witches" (Wise Women), "Hill people", "Hillbillies" whatever you want to call them, that's my mother's people.

Growing up, superstitions were as much a part of my daily life as eating. To this day, off the top of my head, I can rattle off a superstition for just about *any* situation.

This little ability of mine always fascinated people, so, many years ago I put all of my mother's expansive encyclopedia of superstitions into a book and it was a hot seller.

At conventions, people would pick up the coffee table sized book (with my black cat, Buddha featured prominently on the front cover) rifle through it, I'd hear, "Hey, I've heard of this one!" or, they'd call friends over, one of them reading aloud from the book...they'd all burst into laughter and I'd get a, "I *have* to have this!"

Whether fun and laugh inducing, or ghost stories, holidays, home and hearth, cooking or even sewing...you can find superstitions as part of all these scenarios.

Whether or not you put any stock in these age old wives tales, they've endured the passing of time and every scrap of modernism and technology man has invented.

Not many things in existence can boast such a claim. For all we humans have evolved, threats of ill tidings for a misstepped action, still make even some of the most grounded and rational people do the strangest things.

It's my hope to help unravel, shed some light on and maybe demystify where these quirky rituals came from, using simple, common sense.

After all...none of us were there when the superstitions were made up, so we can never really know.

There's absolutely nothing concrete...at least not that I've found in all my years of research...to lend any sort of remote idea to where *any* of these odd little practicalities of what was once, everyday life wisdom, came from.

But...maybe...just maybe...we can get an idea...and I have a feeling that's going to be just as much fun for some of you, as enjoying the superstitions themselves.

It's my hope that this collection of, "what ifs" and "could be's," brings you many hours of enjoyment.

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# Chapter One

## The Obvious

Now, bear in mind, as you read this chapter - this book actually - that I have absolutely **no** proof or evidence to back up any of what you'll read here and of course, not every superstition in existence is included in this experiment.

I've included well-known to extremely rare superstitions and all kinds in between, in hopes of an in-depth a study as possible.

What I *do* have and what you *will* find in this book, is some ideas...some food for thought and I'm hoping to, at the very least, start a debate amongst those with similar interests as to how these little outdated pearls of wisdom got their start.

In this chapter I'll cover what seems to be the common sense ones, the ones that you can read and think, *well...duh, that makes sense.*

Doesn't make my deduction true or accurate, but that's not the point of this little study of mine. The goal of this project, is to point out - possibly - how these golden life lessons *could* have originated.

So...let's get started!

**~Never turn a chair on one leg.**

Okay, I'm guessing you've already figured out why this one is in this section. Unless your balance is really good, you'll end up on the floor, on your butt, or if you're a super klutz like I am, you won't be that lucky. I'd end up on my face.

## **~Never walk under a ladder**

This is probably one of the oldest superstitions in existence and from personal experience, I always run under them for fear they'll fall on me. This probably happened to someone, and...the dire legend was born.

## **~Never drive a nail after sunset**

Now...this particular superstition could fit in this chapter or chapter two under the "maybes" but I'm including it here because I'm thinking that possibly, before there was adequate lighting to work by at night, someone drove a nail and hit their thumb.

I could be wrong, but I know that would keep me from ever driving a nail after dark, again!

**~Never hold a stick in your mouth while sewing**

This is another superstition that could go in either chapter, but I'm including it here because I sew. I also constantly jam myself with the needle.

I can only imagine what would happen if I had a stick in my mouth when I did that!

Again, I could be completely wrong, but as someone who sews - BY HAND - and is a klutz...I'll say "no" to holding a stick in my mouth while sewing...as I'd probably swallow it with one, good jab!

### **~Don't walk around in one shoe**

Wow...where do I start with what a bad idea this is, and why I figure this is pretty much a "duh" superstition.

Let's see...what could happen if you walk around in one shoe. You could trip, you could get any number of things in your foot.

This one definitely belongs in this chapter.

### **~Never serve 13 at a table**

This is an obvious reference to either/both, Loki being the uninvited guest at the table in Norse Mythology (thanks, Lili!) or Judas being the 13th person at The Last Supper.

## **~Avoid drinking coffee at 5 o'clock**

If you drink coffee, it seems that you fall into two categories...those that can have only a cup or two in the morning and better not touch it the rest of the day, and those of us who can drink pots and pots all day.

I fall into the latter category. But...I know a bunch of people who, if they drink coffee after 12 noon, they are wired for the entire day.

Whoever came up with this superstition must have been in that category.

### **~Avoid combing your hair after dark**

This probably falls into the same category as the nail. Maybe someone combed their hair in poor light, had a huge knot they couldn't see or work through and yanked out a clump of hair.

Pure speculation, but...it seems reasonable.

### **~Never shave at night**

Same as nails and combs...back in the olden days, it was best to do anything where you might injure yourself, during the day, to cut down on that risk.



**~When a person dies in a house, you must cover  
all mirrors, open all windows and doors and stop  
all clocks**

Now...this superstition isn't really so much of an obvious one as, people used to be very fearful of the dead and attributed much more power to them than they actually had.

This goes back to people thinking the dead person's spirit had to be able to leave the house, that mirrors lead to an alternate universe and they'll take you in their place if they have a way to get at you.

## **~Children should not pretend to have funerals**

Again, complete speculation, but back before we humans became so medically advanced, people died of things that can be cured today, with a simple round of antibiotics.

Children were often very susceptible to sickness and death, so my guess is, parents had a justified fear of their children dying as it was...pretending to have a funeral would simply invite death.

As a side note...my friends and I used to pretend to die and have funerals all the time. Oops!

## **~Never leave a grave open overnight**

This superstition is two-fold I believe.

Back before humans lost so much respect for...well...everything, cemeteries had no fences, no gates and weren't locked. If they did have fences, they also had cattle grates to keep horses and cows from walking around in them.

Though people used to fear doing so, if it meant shaving some time off a trip at night, cemeteries were fair game as a shortcut.

My guess is, someone once took one of those shortcuts, fell into an open grave and that cured them of any repeat trips through a graveyard at night.

The second guess I have is that before advanced medicine and embalming, the dead were often

buried while still alive. Imagine being ignorant of the fact that doctors were ill equipped to adequately do their jobs back in the olden days and then see someone "dead" get up out of a grave.

Yikes!

In addition to all that, you shouldn't stand on a freshly dug grave either and that too, is obvious...you'll sink right down into it.

Double yikes!

**~Try not to sit with your back to a fire**

Back before there was such a thing as fire safety,  
I imagine someone either got burned or caught  
themselves on fire, in an attempt to keep warm.

**~When your name is called, don't answer the  
first time...it might be the Devil calling you**

People used to be very religious and the Devil was  
under every rock, behind every tree and in  
everything around them. The Devil's trickery was  
everywhere...or so they thought.

Though another..."not really obvious" superstition,  
this is probably as good a guess as any why people  
felt this way.

**~Don't ever step on a mound of ants**

Forget that doing so is considered bad luck. This is a definite "duh". I don't think this one needs any explanation or guesswork at all.

**~Don't store your shoes above your head**

Let's see, they fall and hit you in the head.

That's reason enough for me. I'm sure the reasoning behind this one isn't as obvious as I think, but it's obvious enough for me.

**~If a bird flies into your house, especially a  
Robin, it's a portent of death**

I've heard this my entire life and I'm not sure why it's so staunchly believed, but I've heard more than one person say this has actually happened in their family and swear this is fact.

**~Carrying a cat across a stream is bad luck**

This is an old French superstition and this one is pretty obvious, I believe. Most cats don't like water and will freak out.

I predict a pretty awful slashing for anyone who tries.

**~Seeing a spectral black dog (called a  
"Barguest") is a portent of death**

This is an age old superstition and I personally know someone from North Carolina (the South is a serious hotspot for superstitions. Being a Southern gal, myself, I speak from experience!) whose father saw one one night, with a group of his friends before they all left for Vietnam.

One of them didn't make it back. If you went to Vietnam, you had a pretty good chance of not making it back, so...this is up for debate on every level.

But...these stories are all over America and seem to span every generation. While I have no personal experience in this matter, there seems to be many people who do and this superstition, despite time and education, endures and probably always will.



**~Don't chase someone with a broom, it's bad  
luck**

This superstition fits into the same category as why you shouldn't run with scissors. Trip and fall and things could be very bad for you...or the person you're chasing. Impalement, clubbing the person you're chasing in the head. There's so many reasons this shouldn't be done.

**~Never allow a candle to fall over**

This one is pretty obvious too. How many poor people have burned their houses down because they left a burning candle unattended? Candle companies even put the warnings on candles as a reminder.

This one is definitely obvious.

**~Don't ever mend or sew clothing while you're  
wearing them**

Yet another obvious superstition. Needle jabs are no fun and despite this simple warning, I've done both...sewn and mended clothes while wearing them... and jabbed myself.

Yet, out of convenience, I *still* do it!

This has nothing to do with luck and more to do with...unless you like pain, sew stuff while it's **not** on your body.

**~Never pick up a comb that you've dropped**

There's a couple of reasons this is a superstition. If you stand up too fast and get dizzy, you could pass out, if you aren't paying attention, you could stand up and hit your head.

These are just guesses of course, but as someone with vertigo, I know I've had my fair share of getting light headed after kneeling down and then standing back up too quickly.

## **~Never allow milk to burn over**

There was a time when milk was very expensive and so I think this superstition stems more from the expense of such a waste than being actual bad luck.

But...I'd *really* love to know where this superstition came from and what **actually** happened when the milk burned over!

House fire...maybe?

## **~Throw spilled salt over your left shoulder**

This is another religion based superstition and more to do with beating the Devil than bad luck.

Supposedly the Devil hung out over a person's left shoulder, so if you spilled salt (which I'm guessing was his fault in some way) you'd throw it over your left shoulder so it would go into his face.



### **~Never rock an empty rocking chair**

Another religion based superstition. People used to believe that if you rocked an empty rocking chair or allowed it to keep rocking after you got up, it would invite evil spirits to sit down.

As a child, I always wondered why my family would stop a chair from rocking, when they got up.

My great-grandmother (who lived to be 103) did this until she went into the nursing home. There was never a time I didn't see her get up from her

rocker, that she didn't reach back and stop it  
from rocking.

I'm guessing the fact that a rocking chair can rock  
for a short amount of time by itself, people  
thought this meant a spirit was sitting in it and  
doing the rocking.

Or...in my case, every time I've ever gotten up  
from a rocker, if I didn't stop it from rocking, I  
always got bumped by it, either the edge of the  
seat or the rockers hit the back of my ankles.

**~Don't wear your shoes on the wrong feet**

Kids seem to be the only ones who can do this and get away with it. If I wore my shoes on the wrong feet, I'd trip.

Someone else probably did too and this lapse became superstition; without taking into account that as humans became more evolved and shoes more streamlined, they were made to be worn on the correct feet and if you don't, you can't walk the way you're supposed to.

## **~Don't trip going up stairs**

This superstition is another obvious common sense occurrence. If you trip going up *or* down stairs, imagine all the terrible things that could happen.

My son tripped going upstairs, when he was little and got a nasty goose egg on his knee, with a colorful bruise to go with it!

So...again...common sense...nothing to do with luck.

## **~Need a place to sleep? Don't sleep on a table**

Here's another that really needs no real scrutiny. Let's see...table could collapse from your weight, you could roll off. This one is quite obvious.



**~All the chairs gone and you have to sit on a table? Make sure at least one of the feet touches the ground**

I didn't make this up, I swear. I don't even think I need to go into why having at least one foot touch the ground if you're going to sit on a table, is a good idea!

**~Never throw nail or hair clippings away**

Another religion/Witchcraft based superstition. People used to (and in many cases I've found, still do) believe that if you can get a person's hair or nail clippings, you can curse them, or have a witch do so.

The only way to avoid this was to burn them.

**~Always cover your mouth and say, "God Bless You" when you sneeze**

In the more educated and advanced times as we live in now, we know that covering your mouth when you sneeze is just common courtesy so you don't sneeze on someone, spread germs, etc.

But...back when this practice became a superstition, it was believed that your soul could escape if you didn't cover your mouth when you sneezed

Saying, "God Bless You," ensured the Devil couldn't enter you.

In today's world, while saying, "God Bless You" still endures, it's just common courtesy and has nothing to do with keeping the Devil at bay.

Same with yawning. If you covered your mouth when you yawned, your soul couldn't escape nor could the Devil enter you.

**~If you bite your tongue, you've been lying**

While I'm not really sure about this one, before people knew about crossbites and other dental problems, the uneducated masses had no other way to explain why someone would constantly bite their tongue, except to attribute the action to something morally based.

**~Always pick up change you find on the ground**

This superstition is definitely common sense.  
Money is money!

**~Don't sing before 7 AM**

Not sure when people used to get up, back in olden days, but I would think this superstition has more to do with making people mad if you interrupt their sleep than any sort of luck.

This is another superstition whose origins I'd love to know!

**~Make sure that neither your pockets or cupboards are empty on New Year's Day**

This one seems to be more of people having what they need, than superstition. People didn't used to have a lot, materially, so if your cupboards or pockets were empty, it was probably just a reminder of how poor you were.

If you could make sure you had even a small something in both your cupboards or pockets, you'd probably feel better about your situation, you could at least eat for one more day.

In today's world, we woefully take for granted, food and our ready access to it.

There was a time when having more than enough to eat, and full cupboards was a luxury, rather than a staple.

**~Don't walk backwards**

Um...duh. Really, that's just common sense. I do good most of the time, to walk forward without tripping.

**~Avoid stepping over a person lying down**

This one seems quite obvious. What if the person on the floor suddenly gets up? What if you trip and land on them?

Like I said...pretty obvious.

## Chapter Two

Maybe *this* is what they were thinking?

Just like with Chapter One, I make no statements as to the accuracy of my assumptions of what people from over a hundred (or more) years ago were thinking when they came up with these little jewels.

My goal, again, is to give everyone food for thought, but I don't mind telling you, some of these I had to stretch my imagination to make *any* type of guess, work!

## **~Never place a broom on a bed**

I've found an explanation for this one...though it will leave you a little tongue in cheek. Supposedly, people used to believe that evil spirits lived in trees/wood, so if you put a broom on a bed, the evil spirits would leave the broom and go onto the bed or person sleeping there.

No...I'm not kidding.



**~Sweeping under a sick person's bed will kill them**

This one seems like it *could* make sense, if you stretch your imagination a little. Sweeping under a sick person's bed could stir up dust and germs, making them sicker. Just think if your allergies are bothering you and you get around dust. Makes them worse, doesn't it?

This is really the only explanation I can even remotely attach to this superstition.

**~Never add on to the back of your house**

I'd **love** to know the rationale behind this one. Maybe they thought that doing so would somehow weaken the back wall of the house and make the area between the original part of the house and the addition, weak?

## **~Don't move into an unfinished house**

This is another one that makes me scratch my head. Possible danger of falling, unfinished materials? Maybe if a ceiling isn't quite finished and comes down or a wall isn't stable it could fall and kill someone?

This is another one that I'd love to know where the rationale came from.

**~If a picture falls from the wall don't pick it up**

This one I can sort of make sense of. If old time photos (and I think they did) have glass in the frame, there's a danger of cutting yourself on the broken glass when the picture hit the floor.

I'm sure there's more to this than simple common sense, though. I'm almost positive it's some sort of bad omen.

I'll take a guess that it's something along the lines of, the person in the photo is going to die (maybe) and if you pick up the photo you will too? Believe me...if you'd grown up in **my** family, this would not seem far-fetched.

But I still wonder what would make someone think so?

**~If you move out of a house, don't move back  
into it for a year**

Maybe they thought that whatever caused you to  
move out, to begin with, would still be there and  
you'd move again? Maybe they thought that after a  
year, whatever caused you to move would be gone?

This is as close to any sort of sense I can make out  
of this one.

**~Keep cut flowers out of a bedroom overnight**

I have a feeling this goes back to the allergy thing.

If someone got sick from allergies, there wasn't a lot that could be done for them.

I'm sure some people died, so it would stand to reason.

**~Never wear another's new clothes before they have worn them**

This sounds like some entitled people I know. But seriously...maybe there was a fear of sickness, or getting them dirty/stretching them out and getting blamed...who knows but this one seems a bit selfish, so I'm not really sure.

**~Never set three lamps on one table at the same time**

Fire hazard? Really, that sounds like a good idea, actually, depending on the size of the table. Having an attack of klutziness or some other mishap could easily cause a fire, so this seems like as good a reason as any to make this one a superstition.

**~Never set the table backwards**

I'm fairly certain this one has to do with "widdershins" (working backward) being of the Devil or in some other way, evil.

**~Never return borrowed salt**

I'm guessing this one also pertains to evil and salt's ability to fight off witchcraft. Possibly if the salt is tainted when it's returned, it will no longer work against witchcraft.

**~Let a baby's hair and fingernails grow until their first birthday**

I've heard some variations of this one...other versions saying to shave a child's head and eyebrows off to make them grow back thicker.

If I'm not mistaken in the research I've done, this one pertains to cultivating healthy hair and nails.

**~Never, ever share a razor used by a dead man**

Descending from such superstitious people as I hail from, I'm guessing that this particular weirdness comes from thinking that whatever killed the dead man will kill you too, if you use his razor.



## **~Don't ever try on a mourning veil**

This one could possibly go in the obvious superstitions in Chapter One. Some people might believe that to "invite" such bad luck will make it happen...that if you try on a mourning veil, someone will die.

My mother used to say that using the excuse (lying) that someone in your family died (to get out of something you didn't want to do or someplace you didn't want to go) would cause that person to die.

I'm fairly certain this falls along the same lines of thought.

**~Never ride in a hearse unless you're the driver**

I get this one too, as I'm surprised I never heard  
my mother say it.

This is another one of those ideas of *, if you invite  
that kind of thing, it will happen.*

Riding in a hearse as a passenger might be seen as  
tempting death to come claim you.

I can't make this stuff up...

**~Never count the cars in a funeral procession**

I kind of get this one, too, in a way. In the South, people are funny about death. There's just some things you don't do when it comes to people dying and funerals, so I'm sure this is some kind of decency thing.

I can't speak for elsewhere, but I've heard my mother say this.

**~Never measure a person who is lying down**

I kind of understand this one. In bygone days, I think people were measured for coffins because they were handmade, not mass produced.

Measuring someone while lying down, I'm pretty sure was some sort of bad juju about bringing on the death of that person.

## ~Never wear red to a funeral

This was one my mother harped on, every time someone died...you never, ever wear red to a funeral.

I once asked her why and she said that the color red signifies blood and death and upsets the deceased's family.

To this day if I see someone wear red to a funeral, I cringe, my mother's words screaming in my ears,

"You NEVER wear red to a funeral!"

## **~Try not to step across a grave**

This one I'm not sure about, as you're not supposed to step *on* a grave, so maybe this one is a warning in case the dead person reaches up and grabs you?

Or, maybe you could misstep and fall in? That would be my luck.

And people wonder where ideas for horror movies come from...

## **~Don't give a person a peony**

There's a lot of superstitions surrounding flowers and the peony is obviously no exception.

I'm fairly certain this has to do with some sort of death omen or ill luck associated with someone dying, so you never give one to someone.

**~If you watch a person leave until they're out of sight, you'll never see them again**

A lot of people have a difficult time telling someone, "Goodbye."

This goes back as far as I can remember...hearing people always say, "Why does this have to be goodbye? How about we say, 'Until we see each other again?'"

I have a feeling this superstition just drives home that fear people have of their friends and loved ones leaving and never coming back.

There's also a superstition about bidding farewell to a person on a bridge...that if you do so, you'll never see them again.

My husband and I used to ride motorcycles and the woman who sold us the bikes at the dealership,

turned her head when my husband took his for a  
test drive.

I asked her why she didn't watch (as the rest of  
us were doing) and she said that one time, she'd  
watched a man ride a bike on a test drive and he  
wrecked, so she could never do so, again, for fear  
that it would happen.

**~Close umbrellas before bringing them into a  
house**

This one, I'm fairly certain is because if an  
umbrella is wet and you close it once you get into a  
house, you'll get water all over everything.

It's best to close an umbrella outside and shake it  
off to get all the water off of it before bringing it  
in.

# Chapter Three

## *What Were They Thinking?*

In this chapter, I'll be covering the absolutely hilarious craziness that makes up these particular superstitions.

I mean, some of these are an absolute riot, which really does beg the question...*what were these people thinking?*

Some of these, no matter how you dissect, ponder and rationalize, I don't think *anyone* could figure out where or how these particular "rules" were supposed to work.

With that said, I won't be analyzing this group of superstitions; just relaying them here so you can laugh until you cry, scratch your head in question



and ponder on your own, what the people who invented these sayings, were thinking.

Go to the bathroom **before** reading, put on a bib (if you're like me and spew drink all over, when something catches you off guard) and most of all...enjoy.

Oh...and if you happen to know the origin of, or why a particular superstition in this section exists, please email me at my email on the Author page.

I'd love to know the history of it.



~Don't take ashes out of the fireplace or wood burning stove between Christmas and New Years day.

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~Never wash clothes on New Year's day.

**Editor's Note:** I said I wouldn't be explaining the superstitions in this chapter and most of them, I can't, but this particular one has been a staple in my family for as far back as my mother's family lineage goes.

My mother and grandmother, both, swore by this superstition... ***"Never wash on New Year's day, or you'll wash a member of your family away."***

Do I believe this? No. But what do I **not** do...for as far back as I can remember? Never wash on New Year's day.

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~Never wash a flag.

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~Keep cats off piano keys.

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~Don't hang a dishcloth on a doorknob.

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~Don't cut a new window in an old house. If you must do so, the only way to avoid the deadly consequences of doing so is to throw your apron through the new window and then jump through the window after it.

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~Don't carry **any** type of sharp object into or through a house. If you do, you must take it out through the same door you carried it in through.

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~Don't hang your sweetheart's picture upside down.

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~If you start any sewing project, no matter how large or small, on a Friday, you **must** finish it that same day, or you'll have terrible luck.

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~Always sew cross-stitching on your underwear.

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~Don't make new clothes between Christmas and  
New Year's day.

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~If you see a Will-O-Wisp while out walking at  
night, turn your coat inside out.

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~A woman who makes her own wedding dress will  
never live to wear it.

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~Never write on the back of a dish.

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~Don't cut your hair in March.

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~Make sure to take a dead body out of a house,  
feet first.

~~

~Never buy new clothing and especially don't buy new shoes for a funeral.

**Editor's Note:** This is another superstition I have personal experience with. When my father died, I had nothing suitable to wear to his funeral, so I had to buy new clothes.

It was the most horrible thing, ever. My mother and I had a fight, my sister-in-law and I had a screaming match at each other while my poor brother was driving us all back to Florida...

Thank God I didn't have to buy shoes.

I can't even imagine how much worse it could have been had I bought shoes too!

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~Drink May rainwater.

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~Pull the shades in the room where a funeral is being held. If the sun shines on someone's face, they will be the next one to die.

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~If you're walking in a funeral procession, don't look backward.

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~Never measure your own height.

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~Don't imagine it's Saturday when it isn't.

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~Never count train passenger cars.

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~Don't whistle in a coal mine.

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~Never sell a dog.

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~Don't kill a crow, but if you do, be sure to bury it  
while wearing black.

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~Don't ever hang a hoe on a tree branch.

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~Don't skip a row when planting beans or corn.

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~Don't shake hands through a window or over a  
fence.

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~If you walk around with your hands locked behind  
your head, doing so will kill your mother.

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~Never mock an owl.

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~Never kill a lizard.

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~Never kill a locust.

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~If a hen crows, you have to kill it.

~~

and finally...

~Whatever you do...never, ever let a lizard count  
your teeth.

## ~Epilogue~

While at times this book was informative, silly and maybe even preposterous, I hope, above all, it has been enjoyable.

## ~Author Bio~

Andy Van Scoyoc is a retired, best-selling Horror author who left the world of depraved and sick Horror behind to, reclaim and live her roots...which are firmly entrenched in the world of Country Folk Witchery and things that can not be explained....

You can contact her at [murgaine@gmail.com](mailto:murgaine@gmail.com)