OLD WIVES’ TALES. TRUE? FALSE? Either way, one thing is certain: “You would never coin such a term today,” says Joe Schwarcz, a chemistry professor and the director of the Office for Science and Society with McGill University. It’s a term with roots in early medicine—it goes back to a time when women were usually the ones concocting home remedies to treat ailments. “Most of the time, they didn’t work,” says Schwarcz. “But some had legitimacy.” The idea of using foxglove extract to treat heart conditions, for example, originally came from “a supposed ‘old wife,’” says Schwarcz. An old wife who, in fact, was correct: digitalis compounds from foxglove have since been used in heart medications for hundreds of years. Other tales—medicine-related or not—persist because “there’s a kind of truth to them,” says Schwarcz. While nobody really believes that if you swallow an apple seed a tree will grow in your stomach, there is a reason to avoid eating them: the seeds release cyanide when they’re crushed (see “Food Facts and Fictions,” p. 76). And when you hear the same stories often enough, even the strange ones, you begin to believe them, says Schwarcz. “A lot of these things become ‘true’ simply because of repetition.” And a lot of these things are repeated more often at the cottage than anywhere else, we’ve discovered. Time to get to the bottom of some of these tall—or not-so-tall—tales.
TO FIND THE FACTS behind common weather-related sayings, we went to Mr. Weather Lore himself: David Phillips, a senior climatologist with Environment and Climate Change Canada. Even though we no longer need rhyming weather sayings to plan our days (Look, it’s a red sky in the morning! Better take warning), “there’s still a place for weather lore,” says Phillips. “Not only does it connect us to our ancestors, it makes us more observant of our surroundings.”

HERE COMES THE RAINS

A LOT OF Lore is based on observations that precede a change in the weather in the next 24 to 48 hours, says Phillips. These include changes in humidity, barometric pressure, air temperature, wind direction and speed, and cloud cover (see “Learn Your Clouds”). Sure, some sayings simply persist because they rhyme and they’re easy to remember. But others persist because they “have stood the test of time,” says Phillips. “Which usually means that there’s at least some truth to them.”

“Don’t bet the family farm on it.”—D.P.

“When clouds appear like rocks and towers, the earth’s refreshed with frequent showers.”

**Why** Those scary-looking formations—anvil-shaped at the top—are cumulonimbus, a.k.a. storm clouds. They appear stacked on top of each other and are associated with severe weather: lightning, thunder, tornadoes, and hail. Take cover.

“Don’t bet the family farm on it.”—D.P.

“When there’s enough blue sky to make a pair of Dutchman’s trousers it means fair weather is on the way”

**Why** A broken sky will have more patches of blue (obviously), which could suggest the clouds are dissipating or moving out of the area. Except...how big is this Dutchman? Normal-sized man pants could fit in a pretty small patch of blue sky—and that wouldn’t tell you much about the coming weather. (“I’m not very familiar with this one,” David Phillips admits.)

LEARN YOUR CLOUDS

**“This is probably one that truly works.”**—D.P.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When dew is on the grass, rain won’t come to pass</th>
<th>When leaves turn on their back, ‘tis a sign it’s going to rain</th>
<th>When the chairs squeak, it’s of rain they speak</th>
<th>When boat horns sound hollow, rain will sure follow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dew forms when there’s no cloud cover; no clouds = no rain.</td>
<td>Winds changing from westerly to easterly—which can bring rain—flip leaves over.</td>
<td>High humidity causes wood to swell, and furniture gets noisy.</td>
<td>The increased moisture in the air makes it denser, allowing sound to travel farther.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**If cows are lying down, it’s going to rain**

Animals seem to sense weather changes that we can’t, but cows lie down for many reasons.

**Aching pain, coming rain**

A change in barometric pressure can make joints ache, but stress or strain can also cause people to feel body pains.

**Thunder curdles cream, lightning sours milk**

Anecdotally, this used to happen, but now we have refrigeration, which negates changes in humidity or air temperature.

**A ring around the sun or moon means rain (or snow) is coming soon**

Cirrus clouds, which can come about 48 hours before a rain, pass in front of the sun or moon, bend its light, and create the illusion of a halo.

Cont’d on p. 75
“WHEN YOU’RE YOUNG and you hear stories, you have no frame of reference for them,” says the Office of Science and Society’s Joe Schwarcz. Therefore, you take them as truth. Especially if the stories come from your parents, who are supposed to know everything.

Don’t leave that tissue box at the back of the car! It could fly forward and kill one of us in a crash!

A tissue box? C’mom. But another “unsecured object” could, says Angelo DiCicco, the general manager for the Ontario Safety League. Or, at least, it could injure someone in the car. (DiCicco knows of a driver who needed stitches near the eye because of a flying garage door opener.) The tissue-box story “is meant to be a warning. The idea behind it is true.” Even if you brake suddenly on the highway, going quickly from 100 km/h to 30 km/h, “the loose objects in the car—a cell phone, a child’s toy—are still moving at 100 km/h,” he says. Imagine getting smoked in the face by a handful of Lego travelling at 100 klicks. Yeah. Ow.

You’ll get sick if you go out in the cold with wet hair!

No. You’ll get sick if you catch a virus. Your hair, even when it’s frozen and crunchy, won’t make this more likely.

It’s not safe to swim after eating! You need to wait at least 30 minutes!

You don’t need to wait any amount of time before swimming after eating. At least, there’s no medical evidence to back up the theory that digestion will sap the blood from your limbs, cause muscle cramps, and then increase your risk of drowning. But any vigorous exercise after eating a huge meal—and, be honest, you probably over-indulge at the cottage—could cause you to vomit. And choke. And in the lake, drown.

Eat your carrots—it will improve your eyesight!

Carrots contain beta-carotene, which is converted into vitamin A inside our bodies. And vitamin A is necessary for eyesight. But you probably weren’t deficient in vitamin A as a child—lots of foods contain it. And even if you were, increasing vitamin A levels to a normal range by diet alone would be a very slow process, says Robert Burke, an optometrist at the Calgary Vision Centre. Your parents really should have encouraged you to eat foods high in lutein, such as kale and spinach. Lutein helps ward off macular degeneration, says Burke.
Porcupines shoot their quills
A hundred times (false. Of course, porkies do swing their tails in defense, and, as anyone with a dog knows, their detachable quills can become lodged in the snout of whichever predator is after them. And the idea of an animal with a sharp, shootable projectile isn't completely bonkers. The venomous cone snail, for example, deploys a harpoon-like spear from its body to snag then paralyze its prey. (Don’t worry: unless your dog is diving deep in the waters where cone snails live—nowhere in Canada—they’re not going to get stuck by one.)

You can tell a ladybug’s age from its spots
“No. An adult ladybug is an adult ladybug,” says Bob Anderson, an entomologist at the Canadian Museum of Nature. “A ladybug doesn’t change once it reaches the adult stage.” Ladybugs are beetles; they hatch from an egg as weird, spiny larvae. That’s okay, baby bugs! You’re pretty on the inside. So why the myth? There are hundreds of species of ladybugs in North America, and “they vary in their number of spots,” says Anderson.

An earthworm cut in half becomes two worms
A worm has a head and a tail. If it loses its tail, it is possible for the worm to regenerate a new one (just as some salamanders can regrow their tail if a predator rips it off). But the tail-end of a worm can’t regrow a head or vital organs. This myth could be somewhat connected to the sometimes-truth that earthworms can reproduce solo (parthogenesis). This is correct for certain worms, but they’re usually only species that live in places where it’s hard to find mates. Or, species that aren’t familiar with dating apps, we assume.

The thickness of a woolly bear caterpillar’s black and brown bands can predict the severity of the coming winter
Unlike the weather lore that gets the David Phillips stamp of approval (see p. 73), this one has no merit. “Long-term weather predictions aren’t usually reliable,” he says. But more importantly, this one is stupid. The width of a caterpillar’s bands depends on how long it’s been feeding, its age, and its species.

“The higher the clouds, the better the weather”
Why When you see thin, wispy clouds, you’re likely in store for clear weather for the next 48 hours. Alternatively, “lower clouds are often associated with precipitation,” says Phillips; you could get rain in the next few hours. Quick, to the games cupboard!

“Cold is the night when the stars shine bright”
Why Look up: if the stars are twinkling, it means the sky is clear. “When stars appear dull or dim, that means there’s mist or thin clouds between you and the stars,” says Phillips. And clouds trap warmth escaping from the surface of the earth, then reflect it back. Therefore, the night feels warmer. With no cloud cover, this heat can escape into space. Brrr.

“Mackerel sky, mackerel sky, never long wet, never long dry”
Why A sky full of rows of rippling clouds that look like fish scales suggests that “there’s going to be a change in the weather,” says Phillips. Thanks, clouds. That’s helpful. For this saying to be of any use, you need to look at where the clouds are sitting in the sky. “Altocumulus (mid-level) clouds usually mean the weather is improving,” says Phillips. “Cirrocumulus (high-level) clouds mean the weather is okay now, but inclement weather could be on the way.”
FOOD FACTS AND FICTIONS

WE’VE ALL GROWN UP hearing tales about certain foods. Some of them have merit. Others are less than accurate. And some are flat-out wrong.

1. Don’t put hot food in the fridge; it’ll grow bacteria

Answer: That’s not true. There’s a greater risk if you put something on the counter to cool; you might forget about it, says Sarah Lynch, a registered dietitian at Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare. Two hours later, bacteria will start to grow. Package the food in a wide, shallow storage container and put that into the fridge. The greater surface area allows the contents to cool more quickly. The only danger of putting something too hot in the fridge is that it could lower the temperature inside, and that could affect the rest of the food. “That’s the theory in this myth,” says Lynch. “It’s not about bacteria growing on the hot food.”

2. Unrefrigerated mayo will make you sick

Answer: So many salads and sandwiches are made better with this egg-based spread, but is it ok to eat the hoagie you left out of the cooler? Most store-bought mayo has additives and preservatives. “It can actually be left on the counter for up to eight hours,” says Lynch. “It’s usually the meat. If left at room temperature, after two hours the sandwich ingredients may develop Staphylococcus, which can cause foodborne illness.”

3. Mouldy food is still safe to eat if you cut off the mouldy bits

Answer: It depends. Spores will grow quickly on soft foods with high moisture content. “If you see mould on your bread, you’re better to throw out the entire loaf,” says Lynch. Soft cheeses, fruits and vegetables: mind the mould. When you see those little medallions of grey fuzz, that means the spores are also growing inward. It’s time to toss. Hard and semi-hard cheese, however, is safe if you cut the mould off an inch away, says Lynch.

4. If you eat a watermelon seed, a watermelon will grow in your stomach

Answer: “The reality is that the stomach acid would kill the seed and it would never have the chance to germinate, or, if it did pass to the gastrointestinal tract, the conditions inside would inhibit germination,” says Keith Warriner, a food microbiologist with the University of Guelph’s Department of Food Science. Either way, no watermelon. “I think this myth came about for the simple reason that some seeds do have poison in them.” Apricot, cherry, and apple seeds contain cyanide precursors.

SEE IF YOU CAN SPOT ALL OF THESE FACTS AND FICTIONS AT OUR PICNIC HANGOUT
**Answer** Do you want to play Russian roulette with your intestines? A study published in *Applied and Environmental Microbiology* delved scientifically into this one, using watermelon, bread and butter, and gummy candy. Co-author Donald W. Shaffner notes there was no amount of time (including a fraction of a second) that he and his colleagues didn’t see at least some bacteria transfer. “That said, the devil is in the details.” If you drop something on a completely sterile floor, you’re in the clear; there’s nothing to contaminate your food. Wet food is at higher risk than dry food because the moisture makes it easy for the bacteria to transfer. “I’m convinced that people eat food off the floor all the time,” says Shaffner. “I do every so often, and as far as I know I’ve never gotten sick from the practice.”

Still, do not eat food that’s fallen on the floor where someone has recently vomited, he says. We concur. And have just lost our appetites.

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The five-second rule rules

**Answer** There’s unfortunately no proof that chasing your hangover with a spicy Caesar is a cure-all. The theory behind this myth is that the hangover symptoms are your body breaking down the alcohol, so drinking more would—temporarily—reverse your throbbing head and nausea. However, Finnish researchers may have found a worthwhile remedy. In a study published in *Alcohol and Alcoholism* they found that a vitamin supplement of L-cysteine, an amino acid, prevented or alleviated symptoms such as nausea, headache, stress, and anxiety. Cheers to that! If you can stomach something on hangover day, eat foods that contain L-cysteine: meat, dairy products, eggs, nuts, seeds, and legumes.

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**Answer** When cooking or grilling food, chemicals form: heterocyclic amines (HCAs) and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). And a National Cancer Institute study noted that these chemicals were found to cause changes in DNA that “may increase the risk of cancer.” Keith Warriner has a workaround: before grilling, marinate the meat in Guinness (or stout). “It reduces the accumulation of these harmful byproducts. The stout is full of antioxidants and they sequester the byproducts.”

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**Answer** Mmm, skeletal bits and tissue. If the label says “pork” or “beef,” the hot dogs have got to contain that very thing. (In Canada, labelling is governed by Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.) But “it could be parts that you wouldn’t necessarily eat if you knew about them,” says Lynch. In 2007, the National Library of Medicine evaluated the ingredients in eight common hot dog brands. The report found that the wiener contained a variety of tissues: skeletal muscle including bone, collagen, blood vessels, peripheral nerves, body fat, cartilage, and skin. In general, more expensive hot dogs had more meat, but all hot dogs contained other tissue types (bone and cartilage) “not related to skeletal muscle.” Brain tissue, meanwhile, “was not present.” Well, at least we can say we’re not zombies.

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**Answer** You might feel warm after taking a few shots—this could just be due to the burning sensation you get as it goes down. And you might sweat while drinking. (Even after a big meal, you start sweating because you’re burning calories, says Warriner.) But drinking alcohol actually lowers your body temperature. When you drink, the alcohol causes your blood vessels to widen and relax, increasing the blood flow to your skin. This is really what gives you the impression of feeling warm.

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**Answer** Turkey does contain tryptophan, which is an amino acid that the body uses (indirectly) to make serotonin, and serotonin helps regulate sleep. But all meat contains tryptophan in similar levels (it’s also found in milk and cheese). What’s more, roasted soybeans and pumpkin seeds are higher in tryptophan than turkey. So, it’s more likely the carb-heavy side dishes along with tryptophan-containing holiday foods—not to mention overeating, alcohol, a cottage full of guests, and a hot oven that’s been cooking the bird all day—that’s making you drowsy.

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