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From the moment you slip your engagement ring on your finger to the moment you and your husband drive away from the reception, you're enacting wedding rituals that are hundreds, or even thousands, of years old. Knowing the origins of these traditions can make following the steps slightly less baffling.

1. The white dress: Prior to 1840, a bride wore her very best dress to her wedding, no matter the color. All this changed with the wedding of Queen Victoria. She arrived at her wedding in a truly stunning pale gown with orange accents, and suddenly every bride simply had to wear white. This is one tradition that's falling out of favor, as brides choose a variety of different colors to express their own style and creativity.
2. The veil: When it was common to arrange marriages, a bride and groom might see one another for the first time on the wedding day. A veil helped an unattractive bride hide her face until after the wedding, when the deal was struck. A veil also allowed the bride to ward off evil spirits who may be jealous of her good fortune.
3. Bridesmaids: These maids also helped a bride ward off evil spirits. They typically attended in dresses that matched the bride's dress. This was thought to confuse the spirits and deflect any hexes.
4. Groomsmen: The groom's pals were originally in attendance to keep the bride from running away before the ceremony was complete. Groomsmen also stood guard in front of the couple's door, so the marriage could be consummated. This is one tradition that has (thankfully) evolved into a more ceremonial role.
5. The wedding cake: In ancient Rome, wheat and barley were considered symbols of fertility, so cakes made of those substances were commonly provided after weddings. The cakes were rarely eaten, however. Instead, the cakes were broken over the head of the bride and the bride and groom both took small bites of the cake as it spilled. Now, wedding receptions commonly dictate that both the bride and groom share a bite of cake, but no crumbing is required.
6. Garter belt and bouquet toss: In the 14th century, it was considered good luck to obtain a piece of the bride's dress after the wedding. Brides were often mauled and pinched by their guests in their eagerness to obtain a scrap of cloth. Over time, this evolved into a tame (by comparison) toss of the bride's garter belt and bouquet as a symbol of luck and fertility.
7. Throwing rice: It's long been a tradition to hurl objects at the married couple as they leave the venue. Ancient tradition calls for throwing shoes (showing a transfer of responsibility), nuts (as a gift) or rice (as a symbol of fertility). Now, many venues restrict this behavior and suggest couples leave in a shower of blowing bubbles instead.

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