DANIELLE WOOD

VISION IN WHITE

Clocks in international airports do not tell the time. Or not, at least, in the usual way. Gathered together within their auspices are refugees from all quarters of the day: some dazed by the earliness of the morning and others faintly excited to be staying up so late at night. These clocks point their hands at numbers not to signify a particular time of day, but rather to reassure you that the seconds are still being measured, somewhere out there, by the great universal tick-tock. The hour is quite arbitrary, and yet I managed to arrive at precisely the wrong time.

It was a huge, gleaming chrome kind of airport, somewhere in Asia. I forget where exactly. The floor was a lake of marble with reflected lights shining just beneath its surface. There were kilometres of duty-free shops and cafés and bars — all closed, because I was in transit during those few hours of local time when the airport shut itself down and went to sleep. I was not alone, of course. There were enough travellers to fill three or four jumbos and we straggled the length of a concourse in a listless and fragmented queue. Those first to arrive had grabbed one of the padded, backless benches that were spaced at intervals down the corridor, while the rest of us sat on the floor or stood leaning against a colossal frosted-glass wall. There was nothing to do. The hours we had to kill would die slow, painful deaths. Surely, I thought, the expression ‘terminal boredom’ was used for the first time in an airport closed down for the night.

For quite some time, I waited. I did all the things that I imagined would be done by a young woman travelling alone on a holiday she had paid for all by herself, with savings from her first proper job. I creaked open my travel diary to the first, virgin page. And then shut it again. I stared for a while at the type on the pages of the too-literary book that I had been sure would be perfect for the plane.

And then, just for something to do, I went to the Ladies. I sat on the toilet conducting a good close reading of the sanitary napkin advertisement on the back of the door, but remained unconvinced by its wafting, fresh-breeze promises. Still, the advertisement did inspire me to treat myself to the pair of clean knickers in my carry-on bag and to squirt some deodorant around various of my body’s moving parts. I had done all that I could think of to do, and so I prepared myself to return to the concourse and resume my boredom. But when I emerged from the cubicle, I saw something I did not expect to see. Standing at one of the marbled basins was a woman in a wedding dress.

‘Bugger,’ she said, in the way only English women can.

It was not a simple dress. There was sufficient white satin in the skirts and train for Christo to wrap the best part of a one-storey building. There was a mosquito net's worth of tulle tucked into the warp and weft of her hairdo.

'Bugger, bugger, bugger, shit,' said the woman, ferreting in her make-up bag.

'Forgotten something?' I asked.

'Must have left it in the bathroom on the plane. My lipstick. I mean I've got others, but they're all too dark or too bright. It was a really nice peachy colour. Fuck!'

'I've got some pale pink,' I said, holding out a sparkling tube of something called Baby Doll. It had come in one of those gift packs that enable cosmetic firms to offload their most atrocious shades. 'You can have it if you want.'

'Oh, I couldn't.'

'It's all right. I mean I have used it, but I don't have cold sores or anything.'

'That's not what I meant. God. Sorry.'

'Here.'

'Oh, look, could I? This is the closest thing I've got and it's just far too red to wear with white. I'd look like a bloody geisha. I'll only borrow, though.'

'Honestly. Have it. I hardly ever wear lipstick and I suspect your need is greater than mine.'

'It is my wedding day,' she said. Then, looking at her watch, 'At least I think it still is.'

She applied the lipstick thickly, and smiled her approval at herself in the mirror.

'Angela,' she said, turning to me and pressing a hand to her heart.

'Rosie.'

And so it was that I met Angela Cuthbert (nee Wootton) and began the conversation — reflected in the mirror of the Ladies' loo — in which I discovered that the reason she had come to be waiting around in her wedding dress in a closed-for-the-night international airport somewhere in Asia was because she had had a vision.

Angela Wootton had seen herself emerging from the silver chrysalis of an aeroplane like a magnificent white butterfly, stepping out onto the staircase and appearing to

unfurl as her skirts and veil billowed suddenly in the mild breeze. Against the backdrop of aeroplane and clear sky, she would be a bedizenment of blinding whiteness, the satin of her gown catching the brilliance of the sun. Her new and as-yet-unmet in-laws would watch from the terminal building as she paused at the top of the staircase to wave. And instantly, instantly, they would love her.

It was a vision that came to Angela only gradually, as if from a great distance, moving slowly into the centre of her mind. Once it had settled there, though, she moved it just slightly to one side where she could look upon it whenever she wasn't busy. In quiet moments at work (she was a dental nurse at an inner-city London practice, but wouldn't have to be for too much longer) she would work on the details, deepening the famous blue of the Australian sky and chiselling the handsome features of the flight attendant whose face was just visible over her right shoulder as she turned to wave. For a time, she enjoyed her vision purely as mental celluloid. But on the day that she went to buy her bridal underwear it turned from a vision into a plan.

After a couple of hours and four boutiques, Angela had narrowed the choice to two sets. Each of them had boned corsets in white lace that lashed in her waist and pushed her breasts right up. The difference between them was that while one had suspenders attached and went with high-cut lace knickers, the other finished in a scalloped edge at her hip bones and went with low-cut knickers that made her bum look great, but which would have to be worn with stay-up stockings (not always fabulous for the profile of one's thighs). Now was not the time for a rash decision, Angela counselled herself, remembering hew New Year's resolution to take shopping more seriously.

'Look, I'm just too close to the issue to be objective,' she told the shop girl, and went to have a coffee and list the pros and cons of each set on a napkin.

Inside the warm stone walls of the underground café, she toyed with the chocolatey froth of her cappuccino and wished, not for the first time, that Jeremy's mother could see her in all her wedding finery. She had been leaning towards doing the first meeting with Jeremy's parents in lime green three-quarter pants, strappy heels and a white sleeveless polo-neck top. But there in the café, with the turbulent sounds of the coffee machine in the background, a more dramatic idea began to take shape. She nibbled at an almond wafer and wondered if it really were such a silly idea. They were going straight from the reception to the airport anyway. It would be quite dramatic. One of those things you would never forget. She could do it, you know. She would do it. She would wear her gown all the way to Australia. She would step out of the plane, bouquet in hand, as if she had just that minute walked back down the aisle, ready to be sprinkled with confetti and kisses. She would glide across the tarmac to embrace her mother-in-law, who would say, 'You look lovely, dear'. And Angela would smile, and blush just a little.

A Word from Rosie Little on: Brides

It is not, of course, only women already predisposed to silliness who can be adversely affected by the distant, promising chimes of wedding bells. If ever a sensible woman is likely to become silly, then it will be in her bride period, which begins, naturally enough, with her engagement and concludes shortly after the wedding, when she emerges from a fog of tulle into the terrible clarity of a world where no-one makes comforting noises for an hour while you sob over the thoughtlessness of a grandmother who refuses to buy any of the gifts specified in the bridal registry; a world in which it suddenly seems conceivable that you might forgive the bridesmaid (bitch!) who got drunk at your hen's night and stole your limelight by bursting messily into tears and declaring that no-one would ever love her enough to marry her; where the problem of seating Uncle Travis's new young wife (younger than his youngest daughter, you know…) is no longer a valid cause for Camp David-scale diplomacy; a world, in short, suddenly and horribly devoid of the incantation 'whatever you want, darling, it's your day'.

I do not think that it is any accident that the croquembouche is a cake traditionally found at nuptial celebrations. I think it the most perfect of metaphors: all those profiteroles piled high on a plate like so many flaky little brides' heads, and within each of them (in place of brains) a quantity of custard: thick and sweet.

'Where do your in-laws live?' I asked her as we left the Ladies and returned to the concourse.

'Western Australia. About an hour's flight out of Perth. Loads of Poms there, apparently. And you?'

'Other side. Eastern states, as they say in the West.'

'Oh, really?'

'Why couldn't they make it to the wedding?'

'You won't believe it.'

'I might.'

'Spider.'

'Spider?'

'Jeremy's father was getting his old lawnmower out of the shed. Going to donate it to some trash and treasure thing in the neighbourhood, yeah? Got bitten by a white-tailed spider and had to have his finger amputated. The finger you, you know,

give someone the finger with.’

‘He couldn’t come to your wedding without this particular finger?’

‘Well, he was supposed to have knee surgery, you see. And the finger amputation put his knee surgery back and they couldn’t afford Business Class and, well, you know what it’s like on long flights, even without a dicky knee. So, we said we’d do a little re-enactment when we got there.’

We reached the place on the concourse where Angela and Jeremy had commandeered a pair of facing chaises. On one of them Jeremy was sleeping, wearing a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. On the other were Angela’s bags, which we moved, and an only slightly less than fresh bouquet of orchids and roses, which she placed tenderly in her lap.

‘What did Jeremy think?’ I asked quietly. ‘About you wearing the dress?’

‘Oh, he said I was mad.’

‘You’re mad,’ he said.

‘But don’t you think it would be nice for your mother to actually see me in the gown?’

‘Whatever you want, darling, it’s your day.’

And, indeed, it was her day. It was a tour de force. The pews at the church were decorated with tea roses, the caskets of old violins, and plum-coloured ribbons. The bridesmaids in their voluptuous skirts of raw silk posed like Royal Doulton figurines for the photographer — who had once done a shoot for Vogue. At the reception there was the string quartet, and the Viennese waltz was executed faultlessly by the bride and groom, thanks to eight months of dance lessons. And there was the banquet that concluded triumphantly with a towering croquembouche.

The newlyweds took a limo to the airport, and about two hours into the first leg of the journey, Angela cuddled up to her husband across the wide armrests of Business Class and cooed, ‘See, it’s not so bad, is it?’ She had been delightedly fielding the inevitable questions from airline staff and other passengers — ‘Yes, we’ve only been married seven hours’, ‘Australia’, ‘No, no, I haven’t met them yet’.

She had brought nothing to read on the plane, and didn’t want to watch any of the movies since it would involve putting a headset over the top of her hair, thus ruining her do. She had already read the safety instruction card in the seat pocket twice, and thought about the tragedy of being forced to discard her wedding shoes in the event they had to evacuate the aircraft via inflatable slide. The shoes were silk. Like the manicured nail of her ring finger, they were monogrammed with her (new) initials.

And they had cost more than she earned in two weeks. After the first meal had been served, a thoughtful flight attendant called Kyle brought her a stack of glossy magazines. She assessed his blond-tipped hair and immaculately filed fingernails. Probably gay, she thought. Shame.

Angela knew that she should not even glance at the brand new edition of Bride To Be. Looking at a bridal magazine hours after you'd tied the knot was just torturing yourself. But look at the magazine she did, and punished she was. Because there in its pages was a wedding ring much nicer than the one that had just a few hours ago been slipped onto the ring finger of her left hand. The magazine ring was beautiful. Stunning. And very original. Rather than the traditional engagement ring and matching wedding ring set — for which Angela had opted — the bride in the magazine had cleverly chosen a single broad band in an opulent arrangement of diamonds and gold. Why hadn't she thought of that?

She had thought that she was really getting somewhere with her impulse buying problem, but here in Bride To Be was the proof that she had muffed it on something as important as her wedding jewellery. When, oh when, would she learn that it was always worth just popping into the boutique around the corner before you made up your mind?

Still, she reasoned, all was not lost. All she really had to do was put up with her empress-cut diamond engagement ring and plain gold band for a year or two, and then she'd get a new set. She was sure Jeremy wouldn't mind. A fashionable woman couldn't be expected to wear the same jewellery forever.

'Are you comfortable in all that?' I asked her.

'Oh, Christ no. My arms are all itchy under the lace and the bones in my corset are jabbing me in the tits.'

She stood up and stretched, rotating her head on her long neck and causing another strand of dark blonde hair to fall from its place in an elaborate construction of loops and love knots. Her interest was caught, for just a moment, by a young man asleep on the marble floor, his girlfriend's dark curls fanning out over his stomach, which she was using for a pillow.

'You can tell he's Australian, can't you?' Angela said, sitting down again. 'Look at his legs, they're like trees.'

Jeremy, who had woken by now with ruffled hair, was sitting up reading a finance magazine. His legs, poking out of his navy blue shorts, were thin and darkly haired. He yawned and fiddled just inside one nostril with his finger. I watched a wave of mild disgust pass over Angela's face before she turned to me.

‘Promise me something, Rosie,’ she said, in the passionate and sisterly manner that women sometimes affect towards another woman they have chosen as a temporary ally. ‘Promise me?’

‘What?’

‘Promise first.’

‘Okay, I promise.’

‘Promise me that no matter what you’re trying to find, you will always look in the boutique just around the corner before you make up your mind.’

It was not long after I accepted this pearl of wisdom from the bride that her flight was called. As she walked towards the departure gate, trailing a quarter-acre block of white satin, she half-turned back towards me, waving one last goodbye. And I knew, conclusively, that I would never see her again.

And yet her unfinished drama nibbled at the corners of my imagination. Days later, as I strolled by a river in a city full of strange sounds and strange smells, I was still wondering how it had turned out for her. I doubted that she had foreseen she would have to give up her bouquet at customs. I could see her, batting her eyelids at the chaps in uniform, asking what on earth the signs about rotting fruit and sticky little fruit flies had to do with her lovely flowers? The customs guys would have been unmoved, I imagined, but would, out of kindness, have waited until Angela had crossed through the big, swinging doors before they tossed the white roses and pink orchids into a grubby airport bin.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ she would ask Jeremy.

‘Never mind, baby, we’ll get you a fresh bunch.’

‘But it won’t be the same.’

‘It doesn’t matter, babe.’

‘It matters to me! But clearly, you don’t care about that!’

Yes, she would snap like that, and then immediately wish that she hadn’t. She would know that brides did not snap. Brides were poised, calm, happy.

Pull yourself together, Angela! she would tell herself. This is your honeymoon.

It was a word that had tasted so sweet in the Piccadilly travel agency. Hon-ey-moon. She had felt its syllables melt in her mouth as she dished it out to the mousy girl behind the counter, who no doubt wished that she were going to Australia on her honeymoon. Yes, thought Angela, she was in an enviable position, orchids or no orchids. And so she edited the bouquet from her vision and accentuated instead the princess-style wave.

As the Cuthberts settled into their domestic airline seats for the final leg of the journey, Angela took her husband's hand. She smiled like a film star as she saw a touch of light spark off the gold band on her finger. Only an hour more. One single hour, a little circle of time the same size as the face of her Raymond Weil watch (which, of course, perfectly matched Jeremy's). Once the seatbelt sign was switched off, a stewardess in a taut navy suit presented the newlyweds with a small bottle of champagne and two plastic goblets.

'We would like to help you celebrate your special day,' she said in broad Australian, smiling.

It was a windy, bushfire kind of a day and the flight was bumpy. Unbalanced by a pocket of turbulence, the stewardess pitched into Angela's white satin lap the full glass of red wine that was destined for the gentleman in the next row. Very, very deep down, Angela knew that it wasn't the girl's fault. But the knowledge was too deep to prevent her from shrieking, 'You stupid cow! Look at my dress! Do you have any idea, any faint conception, how much this dress cost? No! Of course you don't! And you've just wrecked it, you stupid, careless …slut!'

The stewardess began fervently to apologise and mop at the spilled wine.

'Don't touch! Don't touch it! Just don't make it any worse than it already is, you ridiculous, brainless trolley dolly.'

'Look, I'm sorry, she doesn't mean it. It's been a really long day,' Jeremy intervened.

'How dare you? How dare you take her side?'

'Well, you are being a bit irrational.'

And Angela saw, twiddling with the corners of her husband's mouth, a tiny little smile.

'Are you laughing at me?'

'Well, you do …I'm sorry, love. You do look a bit funny.'

And Angela flounced out of her seat and down the aisle to the tiny toilet cubicle, which

she almost entirely filled with her froth of wine-stained skirts, and began to cry. When her tears subsided, she looked at herself in the mirror. Under the harsh cast of the fluorescent lights she was all blotchy and creased. Somewhere in their travels, they must have crossed some kind of dateline. Which meant it was all over. It was no longer her day.

She was not so easily defeated, though. She wiped the mascara from beneath her eyes and breathed in deeply, a sense of determination filling her lungs. She returned to her seat and sat beside Jeremy in a restrained silence (not, you understand, a sulk) until the plane landed and taxied to a standstill.

‘Congratulations on your marriage. And I’m really sorry,’ said the clumsy stewardess, passing down Angela’s bags from the overhead locker.

‘I’m sure you didn’t mean it,’ Angela said. There was no sense holding a grudge on one’s wedding day. Brides were supposed to be happy. And gracious. And since no-one else, clearly, was going to make an effort to make her happy, then she would just have to be bigger than all of them and do it herself.

At the door of the plane, she prepared herself. She would step out, smile, and wave. Step out. Smile. Wave. But when she stepped out, it was into the ferocious cross-current of a dusty wind that tore the tulle from her hair and carried it away over the tarmac into the neighbouring pine plantation.

It was an extraordinary mime that Mr and Mrs Cuthbert Senior witnessed from behind the glass of Arrivals. In the blustery conditions, Angela’s wine-dappled skirts were a handicap, billowing out to one side as she struggled down the first few steps.

It’s unlikely that silk wedding pumps, even those that cost more than two weeks’ salary, are ever designed with grip in mind. Which is why Angela, about halfway down the stairs, slipped and fell on her bottom, upon which she slid the rest of the way to the ground.

‘Ouch! Poor lass!’ Jeremy’s mother said, muffling a giggle with her handkerchief.

As in a good silent movie, captions were largely superfluous to the interpretation of the scene that followed. The Cuthberts could see that although Jeremy rushed to rescue his damsel, he was having trouble stopping himself from laughing. They could see, too, that from Angela’s point of view, her mishap was entirely Jeremy’s fault. Her lips were forming all kinds of words that the seasoned watcher of test cricket telecasts could easily decipher. Jeremy submitted to the tirade for a time, then threw his arms in the air and turned to march towards the terminal building.

‘Not bad for a first domestic,’ said Mr Cuthbert Senior as Angela hurled one

monogrammed silk pump, then the other, at Jeremy's head.

Jeremy threw one of the shoes back over his shoulder, in the general direction of Angela, but his high lob pass was intercepted by the ruck rover from the Sharks, the local Aussie Rules footie team on its way back from an end-of-season drinking marathon. It was a good mark, and his team-mates cheered and called for the handball. Angela chased after one of them, which only had the effect of egging the lads on in a game of keepings-off. A rogue gust blew her skirts up around her face, giving the footballers a good view of a set of high-cut knickers and suspenders.

That's where I left her: whirling in perpetuity, piggy white-frock in the middle, chasing after a monogrammed shoe. I admit that I am a coward and that I left her there because I could not bear to watch the next scene. I could bring her within metres of her in-laws, but no closer. I had reached a point in the story equivalent to the moment in a radio station prank call when I would always switch channels, or the moment in the movie when the joke-butt hero embarrassed himself one time too many, causing me to squirm right out of my seat and leave the cinema in the dark. And yet it is odd, isn't it? That I should get squeamish, when I was the one who pushed her down the stairs in the first place.

Slightly guilty, faintly remorseful, I returned to the point in the story where Angela stood at the top of the staircase, and stood there with her for a time, right there at the locus of her spectacular vision. And I thought that perhaps I should not have caused her to slip. Perhaps I should have had more compassion. Perhaps her silliness did not deserve quite so humiliating a punishment. But the longer I paused there, the clearer it became to me that her tumble down the staircase was, in fact, beyond my control. I realised that it was inevitable — written in the proverbs, even — that Angela Cuthbert (nee Wootton) would end up on her arse. For I doubted that anyone had ever more perfectly embodied the quintessence of bride before a fall.