

David Brooks

THE LOST WEDDING

Miss Jennifer Cooley lives amidst tall trees on the edge of town with a dog that hoards things under the house and a cat that stays mainly on the roof, where it stalks sparrows. In her rather sequestered existence in between, Miss Cooley is hardly ever seen but for the one morning a fortnight when she does her shopping, and for one week each year when she seems to do a kind of spring cleaning, during which time she sometimes hangs upon the line out back a rather faded wedding dress in the style of twenty years ago.

They say that every town and village has its crazy person. I wouldn't know, and I'm sure Miss Cooley isn't, but certainly she is different. I think people call her crazy because they need someone like that, and since she keeps to her house so much, and when she does come out has such a lost look about her, she fits most readily into the role, whatever better candidates there are. It's mainly the young, anyway, who call her mad; older people have a sort of respect for her.

You couldn't say her behaviour is all that strange. You don't see enough of it. And her circumstances aren't really all that different from others in town. It's her story that singles her out — so strange and so well known that it's become something of a local myth.

The church she claimed it was all going to happen in is a little convict-built chapel half-way between Albatross and Vincentia. On the day it's supposed to have taken place she had got almost there — close enough to see, from the top of the hill, people milling around the door, just beginning to file in, someone who looked like her uncle standing in the lych-gate, the sounds of the old, windy organ cranking up to play "O Perfect Love" — when she had to turn back, having forgotten something which is now forgotten, or at least uncertain, but which must have been somehow vital at the time, a piece of old jewellery, or the bridal bouquet, or something else that you get superstitious about on occasions like that. And when she got back there was nobody there. She went right to the door, thinking that they would be waiting inside, but the place was locked, and there was nothing, only the dusty road, and the hot sun beating down, the cicadas, the long grass stirring faintly over the graves.

When at last she dared to mention it — she was too embarrassed, of course, at first — nobody knew anything about it. They were rather surprised to hear that she'd been thinking of getting married at all. Indeed, some — even some she'd thought she'd seen at the church — were perturbed that they'd not got an invitation. It was as if the whole thing had

been an illusion, a mirage, a figment of her own imagination. And she distinctly remembered it all — the groom (though he hotly denied it), the proposal (beside the hibiscus outside the Albatross Town Hall, on a hot night near Christmas), the preparations, the congregation around the church door.

It might, people said, have been that she dreamt it. The world of dreams and the waking world are often so similar that, moving from one to the other, we can be quite unaware that we've crossed a border, and everyone has a story about one time or another when they had thought they had done something they'd only dreamed they'd done, or that they knew someone they'd only dreamed they knew. But it's hard to dream something that takes a month or so, proposal to almost-happening, let alone to remember it all in such detail, and for a long while Jennifer Cooley thought instead that she'd been a victim of a conspiracy, a cruel practical joke. At last, however, she conceded that too many were involved for that, and everyone remained so adamant that nothing of the kind had ever happened that she decided, eventually, that she must simply have lost it, in the same, exasperating, incomprehensible way that one can lose other, more tangible things — a gold watch, say, or a pair of spectacles, or the clipping from *The South Coast Record*, that shows one with the biggest silver bream ever caught in Mooney Creek.

A few years ago, my father mentioned one night that, when he was much younger and she more beautiful, he used to dream about Jennifer Cooley. And on the wharf once, shortly before he died, I got Old Man Cooley to propose the astonishing hypothesis that something very like what had happened to his daughter must have happened to his father's sister. Generally, however, when I mention the lost wedding I get the feeling from the older people that it's not a thing to talk about. Nobody, anyway, seems to have much to add, though sometimes they look as if they might. It might be that this business has been around so long that some are not as positive as they used to be, and begin to suspect that somehow, somewhere, they too might have lost it. After all, a wedding must have a congregation, even a lost wedding. It seems to me that there must be a whole lot of lost things around, just under the surface, if only you knew what they were, or where to look for them.

When she talks about her wedding, as she sometimes still does, Jennifer Cooley keeps changing things — one time, say, it'll be a brooch she goes back for, another time a ribbon — as if fitting the wedding into the real history of things were a bit like a jigsaw puzzle, or like one of those shapes that in the children's game you have to get into the right-shaped holes. Maybe she doesn't have the right shape yet. Maybe there's just one little, niggly thing that stops it all from slipping neatly into place: perhaps it was grevillea, not hibiscus, outside the Albatross Town Hall; perhaps it had not been "O Perfect Love", but "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling";

perhaps, if she had spoken up earlier, if she hadn't been so nervous, someone might have remembered, and this silence, this blankness, this awful process of forgetting might not have set in.

George Gott

COME WITH ME TOMORROW

Come with me tomorrow,
have you seen the white daisy,
in the morning sunlight,
in the morning sunlight.

Come with me tomorrow,
have you seen the yellow primrose,
in the morning sunlight,
in the morning sunlight.

Come with me tomorrow,
come with me tomorrow,
when the heavens walk upon the earth.