

# A Retiring Lady

by Michael Olsen

CYNTHIA CARSON — 50s

*In the darkness, we hear CYNTHIA's voiceover:*

I am invisible. All you can see is the iron moving back and forth on the ironing board. The shirts float up then settle down to be ironed. You can hear a voice, but you can't see me. Not yet.

*Lights come up on a kitchen. Stage left, there is a small hall table, with a letter on it, along with a photo of FRANK. Stage right there is an ironing board. CYNTHIA is there ironing a shirt. She wears a one-piece slip. Behind her there is a hanger, with a number of shirts hanging on it. Cynthia appears to be an ordinary middle-aged woman. Hanging on the hanger are a dark skirt and jacket. In the course of the monologue she dresses in these professional-looking clothes. In a couple of large plastic bags are Tupperware containers, lids, ovenware et. al.*

I've been invisible all my life. You could do a survey of people after I've walked through a supermarket, and not find one person who remembered seeing me. Being invisible, I could rob banks, eavesdrop on whispered conversations. But I don't. What's the point? You grow up eventually. Everyone does. It's how you handle it, step by step, that's what counts. In fact, I'm old enough now to retire.

*Pause. Holding up the letter. Cynthia takes the letter out, puts on her glasses. Reading:* "Dear Cynthia Carson. It is with regret that we accept your letter of resignation. You have been a valued member of the Organisation for many years, and we trust your retirement will meet the very highest standards that you yourself have brought to your work day after day. With best wishes, Carter Granger."

*Cynthia folds the letter up and returns it to its envelope.*

That was nice of Granger, I must say. We've rarely had two words to say to each other. We've never needed to, I suppose. He handled orders, passed on the footwork to me. "Valued member!" That was something I never expected.

*Cynthia looks away, overcome.*

It's always the smallest of kindnesses that touch me. It's nice—sometimes—to be noticed.

*Pause. Cynthia achieves some level of composure.*

Today's my last day. You'd think I'd be upset, but I'm not. Retirement is just moving on to the next phase of your life, isn't it? If my job's taught me anything, it's that change is the only constant these days, though Frank's immune. He's in insurance. He's been in insurance since he left school. That must be nearly 30 years now. Catches the 7:32 into town, wearing that hat of his summer or winter, catches the 5:17 home every night, and I'm there to meet him. He's still sprightly, if that's the right word. And every day he walks up to the car and says: "Evening, love," like I'm the best thing he's seen all day. It's never going to get any better than that.

*Cynthia dusts the photo, looks at it.*

I let Frank see me. See the parts I want him to see. And he's happy with that. Happy just to live this simple life, where we eat and sleep and he tends the garden and I clean house, and we watch our favourite shows on TV at night. There's nothing better than Sunday afternoon after he's cut the grass. I take out a glass of lemonade and after he's swigged it down he puts his arm around me and says: "We're doin' OK, love," like we're the King and Queen of Greenwood Avenue.

*Pause*

I put in for retirement a couple of weeks ago. All of a sudden there was this feeling. "Leave while the going is good!" I'd reached my perfect level of invisibility. I've always thought the dancer should finish before the music. When I spoke to Granger he just smiled and nodded, said he'd arrange everything. It was like a load off my mind I can tell you. On the way out I saw Terri, she works in the front office, she was crying, but I told her: "Don't worry, I've made up my mind. This is what I want."

*Pause*

I expect you've noticed: I'm in Tupperware. I've been in it for about as long as Frank's been in his line of work.

*Cynthia pulls a container out of a plastic bag.*

The greatest invention in domestic houseware products ever. Lifetime Guarantee. Versatile. Hard-wearing. You'll never stop needing it. I have dozens of clients. I go to the annual conference in the city, as well as training seminars interstate. I've been very successful. I've made lots of money, and it's helped make me even more invisible than I already was. Now, take this piece. No, it's out-of-date. I think the last time they made it was—yes: 1978.

*Pause*

I've never sold a piece in my life.

*Pause*

I've confused you, haven't I? Maybe that's because I'm not a Tupperware lady at all. I use Tupperware as a cover. A very good cover, I might add. I think they complement each other, actually. And if you bear with me, I'm sure you'll never look at another Tupperware lady in quite the same way.

*Puts back the Tupperware.*

Ever since I was a child I've known what it's like to be invisible. But instead of being oppressed by it, I decided to make the most of it, so I became the big fat lazy girl who couldn't think or feel. I confirmed peoples' prejudices about me—a big fat lazy girl—only they were the lazy ones who couldn't be bothered to find out who I was or what I was really like. (*looking at the audience*) I watched the way people behaved, the way they thought. Not what they did, but what they felt. Not what they wanted, but what they feared. Not what they did to others, but what they did to themselves.

*Pause*

I couldn't wait to leave school. Leave that small world with its bullies and abuse. I could have gone to university, but I needed to disappear into the real world. I managed to obtain the position of secretary in a large manufacturing business. A few years later the business went through a “periodical downturn,” as they so nicely put it, and they had to “let me go”—a phrase I loathe because it implies one was chomping at the bit to leave in the first place. For some reason I just got it into my head I had to go home, so I walked

home. I wrecked my shoes and my feet were covered in blisters, which is hardly surprising since it was 20 kilometres. When I finally got home—late in the afternoon—I just sat at the kitchen table and cried. Invisible people like me know how special jobs are and losing one can still hit those places you thought you'd spent years protecting. For the first time in my life I had absolutely no idea who I was or where I was going. (*Cynthia blows her nose*) When I finally stopped crying I looked down at the newspaper and saw this ad in small print: “Wanted: independent people for dangerous work.” “Dangerous work.” I felt I weighed a thousand tons, but I got up and dialled the number and made an appointment. It was all very simple. There were 9 Rules. That's all. Just 9 Rules that governed everything. I asked them, “Am I the kind of person you're looking for?” and they said “Yes. Absolutely.” They wanted someone invisible. They said my cover would be a Tupperware lady, as I would always look busy, I'd always be travelling, and there would be times I might have to go interstate. It sounded wonderful.

*Pause*

The Organisation is very professional. I went through 6 months' training. Very hard. Very concentrated. Very theoretical at times. The more I learned, the more I learned how little I knew about the world and how it worked. I became a huge sponge. I soaked up every bit of knowledge, every scrap of experience, and more importantly, I applied it. It was so ironic. Here I was learning about the veins and arteries of the human body and the essential nerve points that can leave you dead in 6.7 seconds, and I felt more alive and in touch with myself than I'd ever felt before in my entire life. I trained the hardest. I was top of my class that year. The essential thing to remember isn't strength, or speed, or stamina. It is invisibility. That is the one thing I have plenty of.

*Pause*

Frank was very pleased. He thought Tupperware was a wonderful institution, that I could really make it my thing. Everyone was happy. After graduating I was allocated a minder, someone who would handle my assignments. That's Granger. So there I was after 6 months. Out on my own, ready for new assignments, and all I had to do was live by the 9 Rules. (*Cynthia gets the Rules off the hall table*) Just 9 Rules kept the whole Organisation in check. OK, I thought. 9 Rules. I can do that.

*Cynthia pulls on her gloves and points an imaginary gun at the audience.*

Rule #1: Never miss.

It's what the Organisation guarantees: a hit every time, a hit being a successful kill. That's very important. You would not believe the number of amateurs out there. They set off a bomb that kills 25 people and leaves the target pissed off about some shrapnel in their Bloody Mary. Very sloppy. Now you've got a target even more security conscious and much harder to get to.

*Pause. Smiling.*

I've never missed. Not in 28 years. Never.

*Pause*

I can't remember how many assignments I've had. Hundreds. Thousands probably. But you always remember your first. It was a government job. Some high-tech company had won the contract to supply targeting software to the Navy, but someone was selling the schematics to the Indonesians. *(Cynthia puts on a hat)* So I started as “Bertha the tea lady.” It's taken me a week to be accepted, to get the layout of the place, and everyone's comings and goings. Everyone loves Bertha. I trolley around dispensing “Tea? Coffee? Biscuits?” And gossip. It's amazing how quickly you're accepted if you smile enough. *(looks at watch)* It's late, there's a light on at his workstation. Everyone's gone home. The rest of the office is dark. *(Cynthia wheels the trolley in quietly and knocks the table)* “Ooh! Did I give you a start? Sorry, love, it's only me, Bertha. *(Cynthia turns to her trolley)* “Tea? Coffee? Lead?” *(First shot)* Double tap. *(Second shot, picks head up)* To make sure. Clean, quick and quite exhilarating. No time to waste. No time to crow. I'm out of here.

*Pause*

The thing to remember all the time is you're solving a riddle. There's you, the target, the location—country estate, public baths, whatever—and the piece—a knife, gun, bomb, whatever you think is going to do the trick. You have to bring all these unrelated things together in one moment to achieve your aim—no pun intended. The more you eliminate the extraneous, the more you can focus on the immediate, and there's always the weather, the light, the crowds, whatever's mixed up in the set-up. They say it's a science, but I say it's an art. There's no way you can fail as long as you remember one crucial thing: people usually take other people at face value. I've always been a bit of an actor and I've been

so many characters. A dithery tourist. A cleaning lady. A waitress. Even a Star Trek fan! Can you believe it? Beam me up Scottie! You take the world as it is, and mould it to your will. It's the sign of a true craftsman. I suppose the amateur will always be with us, but while the amateur may still achieve what they're after, there's no finesse. No proper forethought. Nothing to make it clean and quick and unequivocal.

*Pause*

Rule #2: Never kill for pleasure, only profit.

For me, it only happened twice. The first time was 10 years ago. Frank came home one night very agitated, more upset than I've ever seen him before. Turns out a client, a Mr Clarkson, a lawyer, was refusing to pay an invoice Frank had sent him and it got to the point where he was threatening to take Frank to court. Anyway, the whole business got totally out of hand, costing the company money and making my Frank look bad. When he tried to talk things out, the fellow just laughed in his face. Frank was livid, I mean he was shaking. He even went so far as to call Clarkson a prick, which is very strong language for my Frank I can tell you. The following week when he walked up to the car he said: "Evening, love," as usual, and then he said: "Guess what? Mr Clarkson committed suicide. He jumped out of the window of his multi-storey office block." *(aside)* Oh dear, he must have been a very unhappy chap! Frank confessed he was totally surprised, but I reminded him the world must be a better place for having one less lawyer. He smiled. "No time for second thoughts once you've launched yourself from the window ledge," he said. Of course I didn't tell him that Mr Clarkson was persuaded by a Ruger P89T Two-Tone.

*Cynthia opens the window. We hear the distant sound of traffic, and she looks out.*

"Mr Clarkson?" "Mr Clarkson step onto the desk please, now the window ledge."

"Goodbye Mr Clarkson."

*She pushes him off then looks down out of the window*

You should let other factors assist you. In Mr Clarkson's case, gravity.

*Pause*

The only other time was when Brian Davis showed up. He's the small sickly kid from next door. He rocks up bold as brass onto my doorstep and tells me he knows what I do for a living, and could I bump off Jeff Johnson in 4E for \$22? \$22? \$22,000 maybe, not

22, but then he tells me Jeff Johnson used to smash up his bike, and then bash him at lunchtime if he didn't give him any money. "Alright, I'll look into it. What does he look like and where does he live?" Next week I was between paid jobs, so I followed Jeff Johnson. Of course he never saw me. What's he doing in this industrial site? (*We hear a dog yelping*) It's coming from this disused warehouse. He's got it on a lead. He's bashed it. It's legs are broken. He's dragging it along the ground. I shoot Jeff Johnson—twice. It's the hardest thing I've ever had to do, (*pause*) putting that poor little dog out of its misery. I like to think the last thing he felt was the touch of a kind hand. I told Brian what had happened. I wasn't worried that he knew about me. No-one would believe him. After all, he was invisible too.