

# Circle of Angels

by Michael Olsen

GEORGE COOPER — late 60s

*In the darkness we hear a big band waltz, wild and free.*

*Lights come up on a dusty, disused dance hall. Sheets cover a couple of round tables ranged at the edge of the dance floor.*

*GEORGE COOPER, late 60s, enters, holding a large plastic bag in one hand and a can of petrol in the other.*

Quickly, quickly.

*From the bag he pulls out small white wooden and cotton angels, and arranges them all in a large circle around the dance floor.*

Wait!

*He stops. The music stops.*

May I have this dance?

*He holds out his arms as if he were taking a partner. The music starts again. George gracefully and fluidly dances around inside the circle of angels.*

Beautiful my dear. Beautiful.

*Suddenly, the music stops. George stops dancing. He is breathing heavily. He sits down at one of the tables.*

You always did take my breath away.

*Pause*

Remember that night we first met? There were balloons all around the rafters, and the band was over there, and the crowd! The same every Saturday night.

*Pause*

You wouldn't know the place now, Nance.

*George reaches out across the table for Nancy, then realises she's not there.*

They're pulling it down. Some freeway extension. We don't have much time.

*He leans down and picks up one of the angels, setting it on the table.*

Bloody Keith Badgery: “We've signed with Castleton's, George. That's who we're going with. I'm sorry to say your stall is not commercially viable.” (*shaking his head*)  
 “Commercially viable!” What does that mean in a hospital?

*Pause*

There's nowhere to go. Not the Eastern—too far away. That other one in Peel Street closed down. Can't have too many hospitals! The Great Southern isn't even on a bus line. Wherever I go it'll be so far away from—from where we should be.

*Pause*

“The contract with Castletons is an exclusive one, George—no other shops or vendors on the floor.” All I asked for was one card table, one pissy little card table, this big. A hospital's gotta have a heart working at the centre of it, don't you reckon? This is a different time, my friends. After the Cold War comes the Cold Age.

*Pause. George picks up the angel, inspects it.*

It wouldn't be so bad if you were from Japan made of plastic and came down a long process line with little robots stamping you into shape. But I've hand made every one. (*holding up the angel*). On average I'd sell one or two a week, and when I do I know there's hope again, my message gets through.

*Pause*

Such small hopes riding on a handful of wood, cotton, paint and glue.

*Pause*

A pale little girl came by once from the children's wing. She had one of the angels. “My brother James broke it,” she panted. I told her I'd fix him up as good as new, but she never came back, just walked away with that silent little smile of hers.

*Pause*

Would have liked a daughter. Already knew about boys—I was one. Something fascinating about how unknowable a girl was, even when she grows up—especially when she grows up. Turned out we couldn't have any. The plumbing blocked up. Nothing we could do. This was before all that IVF stuff. Neither of us really liked the idea of adoption, so that was it—just the two of us. It was never mentioned again. When they say you don't miss what you don't have—that's rubbish. Families started up around us, the kids playing in the street and the empty blocks, the bikes tearing around the place. I

wanted to call out “Daphne!” (that was the name I liked) “Daphne!” And then she’d come racing around the corner covered in dirt and twigs. “Dad!” she’d yell and she’d throw herself into me.

*George stands and realises he holds nothing but air.*

As a piano teacher Nance had children in her life all the time. I’d usually come home from work and hear some poor kid killing Beethoven or Bach (*we hear a child learning Beethoven or Bach*). I’d slip in the backdoor and sit in the kitchen with a home made scone and a pot of tea. After the last kid had gone Nance would jump on the piano and play something—usually Chopin (*we hear a flawless Chopin piano piece*)—and the sound would roll out through the house like a wave, cleansing the air of all mistakes and discord, and the steam from the tea would dance in time with the music.

*Pause*

We had a good life, didn’t we Nance? I know it was just the two of us, but it was—it was good. I mean, you have to make a stand in life, don’t you? Sometime. Somewhere. With someone. We made our stand at 17 Greenwood Avenue. The first day we were there the block looked like a bombsite. “It’s just waiting for your green fingers, dear,” is what Nance said. The only scrap of green was a young pittosporum already twice as high as the fence, but I knew what I had to do, and I did it.

*Pause*

Know how long it takes to make a garden? A lifetime. Father taught me a bit. “If you plant it and it dies it’s not your fault. If you plant it and it survives you’re a bloody good gardener,” he used to say. Planning and planting, digging and fertilising, working my way out from the pittosporum, until eventually—the way I worked was I’d get Nance to stand somewhere in the garden, like so, (*George puts the angel down and moves back*), and I’d take a photo, and I’d say, “There’s going to be an archway over your head” or “I’ll plant some waist-high shrubs around you there,” and Nance’d laugh: “I think you want to plant me in the garden!” and then over the next few months I’d make all that happen, I’d build that archway, plant those shrubs, and then Nance’d walk out and it would be like magic, the garden that I pictured would come alive, would be complete with her standing in it.

*Pause*

Just like the garden took root, so did we. Even when they put in those high voltage power lines through the reserve at the back we didn't move. So there we were. Established. Comfortable. "Doing nicely," as Nance used to say. I worked for the local accountant, at first as a clerk, then working my way up to be senior manager only three years before I retired. Nance had her students.

*Pause*

Sometimes of an evening we'd be sitting in the living room and Nance'd have some piece of sewing on the go and I'd finally turn off the T.V. and just watch her. Without looking up she'd say, "What are you looking at, Mr Cooper?" and I'd say, "You know who I'm looking at, Mrs Cooper," and that was all that needed to be said.

*Pause*

Life would have been pretty quiet, except for Harry Hutchins and his family next door. Harry and Yvonne were a few years younger than us, and they had three kids: Dennis, Maureen and little Ben. Hardly a quiet weekend with that lot charging around their jungle of a backyard, Yvonne calling out: "Now Dennis, don't do that. Put it down! Dennis!" and there'd be this crash, and then Harry would come in: "Dennis!" and there'd be a whack, then crying, and that's when I'd usually go back inside. They were friendly, though, and sometimes Nance babysat. Yvonne had as foul a mouth on her as Harry: "I don't care what the f\*\*\* you said, we're going to my mother's tonight!" Harry would come out later and water his prize pumpkins and I'd be out there, too, looking after my azaleas, and he'd chat away as if nothing had happened. I never liked to ask. None of my business. As Nance used to say, "At least they're talking!"

*Pause*

The highlight of my week was always the Saturday night dance. Some of the chaps from the office went with their wives, too, so it was really social and fun. For me the best bit was when we first got up to dance, (*George stands*) that feel of Nance under my hands, and then taking her hand in mine, (*George raises his hands again as if holding Nancy*) and moving around the dance floor like we owned it. (*George glides around the dance floor.*) Everyone in the office commented on what a great couple we looked, and I was always a little sad the next morning to wake up and think a whole week would have to go by before I could do that again.

*Pause*

Like all terrible things in the world it started so quietly. “Ooh,” Nance said, “what's that?” There was a twinge in her hip and I chuckled—like a fool—“You're getting older, dear,” I said, “just like me.”

*Pause*

It was a bright sunny March day when Nance came in the back door and told me about the cancer. I was making a cup of tea. “You'll be right, darl! You'll beat it” I said, and I think more for my sake than hers Nance said: “Of course! This'll be done by Christmas, George.”. Nance went to freshen up and I just sat there, and for some reason I noticed the little shelf I'd made above the doorway, and on it were the set of six angels from the Franklin Mint. I used to call them the Six Horsemen of the Apocalypse, but Nance laughed. “There are only four Horsemen, silly, and besides, none of them are as beautiful as my angels.” Nance thought they were watching over us.

*Pause*

Ever practical, Nance solved the question of how to tell people by inviting Veronica Staples around for afternoon tea. Veronica was a fellow member of the U3A. I had strict instructions to stay outside, but I didn't need to see it to imagine how Nance played it. First Nance swore Veronica to secrecy. “Oh no, of course not,” Veronica would have said, reaching for a biscuit. “On my life.” And then Nance would have told her, and Veronica would have been patting her hand, and Nance would have offered her another biscuit. Of course, after that Veronica would have found the best excuse to leave. (Apparently the prized geraniums needed a watering.) Within a week, everyone knew. We couldn't have been more efficient if we'd written it in the sky with orange lipstick (*looking up and waving his hand across*).

*Pause.*

Of course we had to make changes and Nance wanted to make them before she had no choice at all. The first thing to go was the dancing. I insisted we go one last time, but Nance got so tired so quickly that's when it really struck me that something was wrong.

*Pause*

Was definitely wrong.