

Dog Day Trio

by Michael Olsen

A Retiring Lady
Circle of Angels
Room Service

- Synopsis:** On the hottest day of the year...three people take the plunge...
to find the truth...to change their lives forever.
A black comedy with grey roots.
- Characters:** Cynthia Carson, 50s (f)
George Cooper, 60s, (m)
Betty Butterworth, mid 40s, (f)
- Genre:** Drama/Black Comedy
- Time:** 60 mins.

A Retiring Lady

(2)

CYNTHIA CARSON— 50s

Lights come up on a kitchen. There is a small hall table, with a letter on it, along with a photo of FRANK, and a Tupperware container, and a case, along with 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 skirt and jacket. In the course of the monologue she dresses in these professional-looking clothes.

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. But of course, they know me at work.

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. 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, but I'm not upset. 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. Catches the 7:32 into town, catches the 5:17 home every night, 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. 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 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'm in Tupperware.

Cynthia picks up the Tupperware container.

The greatest invention in domestic houseware products ever. Lifetime Guarantee. Versatile. Hard-wearing.

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.

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. (*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 managed to obtain the position of secretary in a large manufacturing business. A few years later the business went through a "periodical downturn," and they had to "let me go." 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. (*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 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 or even overseas. It sounded wonderful.

Circle of Angels**(2)**

Character: 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. A sheet covers a chair. There is a circle of angels arranged around the floor.

GEORGE COOPER, late 60s, enters, holding a can of petrol.

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 on the chair.

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 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.

Bloody Keith Badgery: "We've signed with Castleton's, George. I'm sorry to say there can be no other shops or vendors—or stalls—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?

George inspects the angel.

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.

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. Turned out we couldn't have any kids. The plumbing blocked up. 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. 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*). 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 cleansing the air of all mistakes and discord.

Pause

We had a good life, didn't we Nance? 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. The only scrap of green was a young pittosporum. "It's just waiting for your green fingers, dear," is what Nance said.

Pause

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. I'd get Nance to stand somewhere, like so, (*George puts the angel down and moves back*), 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 then over the next few months I'd make all that happen, 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 and made it to 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 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 fuck 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 the 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. The best bit, of course, was that feel of Nance in my arms 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."

Room Service**(2)**

Character: BETTY BUTTERWORTH — mid 40s

Lights come up on a room with a trolley in it and a portable TV. BETTY sits on a chair with a bag on her lap. She is a woman in her mid to late 40s. She wears a maid's outfit. She speaks with a Cockney accent. Betty looks at the room around her.

It's all here. A life, such as it is. I never thought about it before this morning, but now that I have, I wonder if I need this at all. After all, you're you. You're not just your memories, are you? That's why we've got eyes in the front of our heads: we're supposed to look forward, not backwards.

Betty opens the bag.

Everything here is about all my yesterdays. Everything except this. Room 1521.

Betty removes a bottle, unscrews the lid and pulls a white handkerchief out. She sniffs the handkerchief. She makes a great effort to calm herself down—but instead, she starts to cry.

I'm not sad. Really I'm not. It's just—Well, after 27 years I never expected this. I have to keep reminding myself of the fundamentals: there are 19 floors above me, and 418 rooms, 448 toilets, 1672 coat hangers hanging in guests' rooms, along with 3244 towels all up. That's quite a responsibility. And not just anyone can do it.

Pause. Suddenly listening.

Can you hear it? Room 2031 flushing the loo. That's the third time in 20 minutes. Maybe something's wrong. Maybe they're ill. She certainly doesn't look well. Ah, now it's Room 1517. There's a fault in the pipes—a leak. That's why we have water seeping into the shower in Room 1417. It's not bad, but they'll have to replace it—soon. And there goes the air conditioning in Room 1746. I don't need it down here. Down here—seven by seven, so regular—it's always a very pleasant 21.4°. The whole world is here. I don't even need the tele to keep me amused.

Betty rummages in the bag, pulls out another bottle, unscrews it, sniffs. She wrinkles up her nose.

Mother. The bitterness of lemons preserved in gin.

Pause

Mother cleaned every room in this hotel thousands of times before she died. I'm sure I've already beaten that record. To Mother the job was just a job. But there were people who lived in those rooms. People who'd come from far away. People with exotic names like Clement and Cynthia and Regis. It wasn't our job—it was our calling—to make sure the moment they stepped into their room they felt as though they were the first person who'd ever been there. Every trace of the past was to be eliminated. The bed had to feel as if it had come straight from the showroom. The towels, straight from the shelves of the local Marks and Sparks, factory fresh. Mother never understood that. Even the last footprint on the carpet inside the door—I'd get rid of that before I left.

Betty frowns at the photo.

Why did you always frown, Mother? Always frowning, like every person you were going to meet was going to tell you bad news. The only way I thought I could please you was to be better than you at everything, but you couldn't stand that. The way you grew more and more silent as I grew up. “What about the towels?” you'd say. “Already done, Mum.” “What about the sheets on the bed? Did you replace them?” “Yes, Mum, and fitted hospital-style with 3 creases per corner.” She checked once, but that was it—never again. Doreen, lovely Doreen, who worked the opposite rooms to us, used to say, “You're gonna make a great little maid of this girlie one day, Gladys” and Mother could only nod and say, “If that's all she wants, then that's what she'll get,” like a curse.

Pause

I was never asked what I wanted. Life with Mother was a bit like dinner. She'd serve it up from a can and say: “Eat it and shut up.” Not that I'm ungrateful. It's just that in the whole mix of life there has to be some love, doesn't there? and the greatest tragedy in life is not to have lost it, but to have never known it in the first place.

Pause

Mother must have loved once. I know she made love at least once.

Betty picks up the photo frame.

Can you see the fellow in uniform? That was Father. He was stationed in Belfast and killed with seven others in a massive car bomb. Not even enough of him left to fill the smallest bottle.

Betty looks through the bag and pulls out a very small bottle.

There's nothing of him except his hand patting the back of my head. Of all the senses

touch is the one that fades the fastest.

Pause

We both knew Mother would go on the job. She was cleaning Room 1214, on her knees scrubbing the bathroom floor, when she had what they call an aneurysm: a blood vessel burst in her brain—boom!—and she was dead. Nothing. And I do believe it's nothing. Mother of course believed in God. She had a crucifix above her bed and used to mumble something to herself each night before she went to sleep. I always wondered what God thought of Mother. That's why I never took up with God. I used to ask Him the question all the time and I never got an answer.

Pause

From the television I caught glimpses of what it was like, other people's lives. There was hardship and hunger and disease and here we were in the grandest hotel in East London, on Greenwood Avenue, no less, warm and well fed, with the world walking in through the front doors every day. There was no way I was going to buy into how Mother saw the world. I'd come to see things differently, and I did something about it when I was 17. I don't know if it was just curiosity or stupidity, but at 17, who can tell the difference? I wanted the outside world to come to me. I couldn't go to it, so it must come to me in my hotel.

Betty fishes through the bag and finds another bottle, opens it, sniffs.

Hamburgers: 100% American beef. October 17, 1986, Room 1610. His name was Chuck Bramble and he was from Stockton, Utah. I found out later that Stockton is famous for its cheeses—or was it a cow, or a horse? Every town in America has to be famous for something. At the time, though, Stockton, Utah, sounded like the Wild West. Chuck was a businessman, in town for a conference on Fluid Dynamics in Non-Core Rotating Engines, I think it was, and he handed out tips like they were going out of fashion. He'd called room service, and he wanted a sandwich so we made it and I took it up to him. “Room service!” He called me in and the moment I closed the door I felt like the room had detached itself from the rest of the hotel and was somehow, somewhere, floating free of the rest of the world. He smiled at me nice and easy like Americans tend to do. When he saw the sandwich he wasn't too happy—it wasn't mayo on rye like he asked for—but he said it would do. He offered me some, and I took a bite, and he said, “Don't that taste good?” and I nodded, and he kept talking about how life was back home, and I just kept

looking at him, and pretty soon he noticed me looking at him, and he sat on the bed and patted the bed beside him, and so I sat down beside him, and he asked me my name and I told him and he said, “Betty sure is a pretty name.” And he leans over and kisses me full on the mouth. His lips are soft and warm, and there's something thrilling and comforting about it all at the same time. And then he's guiding me back onto the bed, and he's above me all blonde teeth and cowboy hair, and I let him do all the work, moving my skirt up, pushing down my knickers, unhooking my bra, and all the time these things are happening I'm lying there and I can see our reflection in the large mirrors on the front of the wardrobe, but for some reason I notice an ugly smear of a handprint on the mirror and I think to myself: I'll have to come back here tomorrow morning and clean that. And then there's a sharp pain inside me—for an instant—and I come back to this hairy chest lying above me, and then I see the girl in the mirror and it's not me, it's not, it's—it's someone else. And then it's over, just like that, and he's getting up and he holds out his hand to help me up, and I'm pulling my clothes on and then he's gently moving me out the door like there's nothing else to be said, and there I am standing in the hallway and the door closes behind me, but there's something in my hand and when I look down there's a whole tenner that he's given me—for services rendered. When I went back down Mother asked if he liked his sandwich? “Yes Mum,” and she just nodded at and kept watching tele, like it was just another day. Of course it wasn't just another day, and it wasn't a normal 9 months either. Always practical, Mother wanted me to get rid of it, but for the first time in my life I stared into her eyes for longer than 5 seconds and said, very quietly: “If you touch me I'll scream, and I'll tell them you sent me up to him.” At the 7-month mark I was sent “up the country.”

Betty finds another bottle, opens it, and breathes in deeply.

Summer. High grass, lush rivers, trees swollen green and the sky burning blue. They were very nice at the farm. They knew people who wanted a baby and wouldn't ask questions. You weren't supposed to, but I had a couple of names picked out. Anna if it was a girl, Billy if it was a boy. I was in the kitchen when I had the first contraction. Anna arrived three hours later. Couldn't wait to get into the world. She arrived with one little cry and that was it. I saw her once. I never touched her. But I breathed her in.