

AUNT ETHEL'S DEATH NOTICE

WRITTEN BY DARREN BREALEY

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AUNT ETHEL'S DEATH NOTICE

A death notice appears in the newspaper advising the passing of Mrs Ethel Lane, 82 years old who leaves behind a loving and caring family.

Three of her distant relatives, having read the death notice attend her home and ultimately to her belongings as her funeral service takes place at St. Peters Church, where she lay in state.

Once they realise who each other are, they feel at home until their grievances decree their right of ownership to Ethel's personal belongings. As their relationships, integrity and wits disintegrate, their understanding of Ethel's passing seems somewhat contrived when Ethel returns home with an employee of the local Nursing Home where she has finalised arrangements for her stay. The grieving relatives come to realise they have misunderstood the death notice for another Mrs Ethel Lane, 82 years old, who has left behind some other loving and caring family.

BRIAN Nephew of Ethel Lane
JANNICE Niece of Ethel Lane, cousin to Brian
PETER Nephew of Ethel Lane, cousin to Brian and Jannice
DAPHNE Married to Peter

Ethel's personal items have been packed into moving boxes, ready for pick up. The boxes sit in the living room in random sized stacks, in no organised order. The room is bare, apart from the boxes giving off a vague reminiscence of once being a loving and well kept family home.

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BRIAN enters carrying a clipboard and writing paper in one hand and a rolled up newspaper open at the obituaries in the other hand.

BRIAN: Hello. Hello.

Looking over the boxes, he opens the newspaper and reads an obituary.

BRIAN: Mrs Ethel Lane's service to be held at St. Peter's Church at two-PM. Friends and family are welcome to attend. Hmmm. It's two-PM now. I should have at least an hour.

He opens one cardboard box and rummages through the contents. Finding nothing of interest he moves the box to reveal a second box, rummaging through it. He removes a box of tissues.

BRIAN: Jesus. Nothing but crap. Is this what life ends up being, a bunch of crap that no one wants. How many boxes of tissues does someone need? One, two, three...

He throws a box of tissues over his shoulder, onto the floor. He makes a note on his clipboard. He moves to a third box.

BRIAN: Worthless. What's in this box? Hairspray. Not something I really need. An envelope, what's this? Two tickets to a Shostakovich concert at the arts centre. Well, you won't be going now ... nineteen ninety-six. Why hold onto used concert tickets? Hope you enjoyed it, Aunt Ethel.

He drops the envelope and tickets to the ground.

BRIAN: This was supposed to be the woman who held everything together, talked you through an issue; not me. Nothing but a harsh word and a hard hand, too reckless, that was your problem. Where are you now? Don't play with matches, stop bouncing the ball in the house; don't, don't, don't. Try and stop me now.

He throws the box to the other side of the room. Pause.

BRIAN: Where's the good stuff, Ethel? Nothing but crap, Jesus.

The sound of a door opening and closing is heard off stage.

BRIAN: Shit. Who could that be? The service can't be over. Now what do I do? Jesus Brian, get it together, stop talking to yourself. I'm doing it again. Hide you idiot. Good idea. Stop it.

Brian hides behind a tall stack of boxes. JANNICE enters talking on her mobile phone and holding a rolled up newspaper, open at the obituaries.

JANNICE: Yeah, hold on Craig. Hello. Hello. Anyone here? Nope, doesn't seem to be anyone here. Yeah, I'm at the right address, bloody hell. Don't panic, I'll get something for you; most likely the bottom-feeders have already had their fill. I don't know, do I, it looks like she was heading for the Nursing Home. Yeah, she's dead. Hang on.

She opens the newspaper and reads an obituary.

JANNICE: Ethel Lane's service to be held at St. Peter's Church at two-PM. Friends and family are welcome to attend. Don't take that tone with me, you're such a pig. Wait up. Shush – close your hole; I think someone's here. 'Cause I'm standing on their bloody head, what do you think? There's a box of crap on the floor and an envelope... I don't know. Oh alright, keep your hair on.

She picks up the envelope.

JANNICE: Some old tickets. No not tattslotto, concert tickets. How would I know why she kept them? I'll dig her up and ask her. Why you such a dick; you got anyone there to check with? Yeah, you do that.

She disconnects the call. Brian knocks a box over, its contents spilling onto the floor.

JANNINE: Shit. What's going on?

Brian appears.

BRIAN: Hello.

JANNICE: Who are you? What are you doing here?

BRIAN: I was about to ask you the same.

JANNICE: I asked first. Well?

BRIAN: I'm here...

JANNICE: Why you got a clipboard? You from the Nursing Home?

BRIAN: Yes. That's right. I'm the Nursing Home guy. Who are you?

Jannice begins to sob.

JANNICE: Oh, Aunt Ethel; she was my favourite Aunt. I loved her very much.

BRIAN: She was your favourite Aunt?

JANNICE: And I was her favourite. We shared a special bond. I'm going to miss her.

BRIAN: Yeah.

JANNICE: She loved me as if I were her very own daughter.

BRIAN: Her very own?

JANNICE: We were very close.

BRIAN: Really?

JANNICE: I still remember sitting around the long, rectangle breakfast table with a big glass of orange juice, fresh eggs and bacon, toast. And she always whistled through her false teeth when she cooked.

BRIAN: I'm hungry now.

Pause.

JANNICE: You don't look like a Nursing Home guy.

BRIAN: What do you mean?

JANNICE: I don't know, shouldn't you be older?

BRIAN: No, I'm this old.

JANNICE: Looks like she was taking everything with her to the Nursing Home. It's just thrown together, like nobody cares.

Jannice's emotional state intensifies.

BRIAN: We just pack them.

JANNICE: You didn't do a very good job; her personal items are everywhere and this.

Jannice points the envelope and tickets at Brian.

BRIAN: Who'd have thought she'd keep something like old concert tickets?

JANNICE: What are you going to do with her things, now?

BRIAN: I have to make my inventory.

Jannice composes herself.

JANNICE: Well, I'm here now so we don't need the Nursing Home anymore.

BRIAN: She signed everything over to us, so it's our responsibility now.

JANNICE: What about her Will? The right owners are written down in that.

BRIAN: Did she have a Will?

JANNICE: I don't know.

BRIAN: I don't make the rules.

JANNICE: It says here in the newspaper that she's dead.

BRIAN: Yes. It says that in my newspaper, too.

Pause.

JANNICE: Who are you?

BRIAN: I told you.

JANNICE: No. I said you were from the Nursing Home. What's your name?

BRIAN: Brian.

JANNICE: Do you have a last name, Brian?

BRIAN: Yes.

JANNICE: Are you going to share it with me or do I need to apply Chinese water-torture.

BRIAN: Fitzgerald.

JANNICE: Does it?

BRIAN: What?

JANNICE: Never mind. You can leave now; I'll take care of Aunt Ethel.

Pause.

JANNICE: Well?

BRIAN: I can't leave.

JANNICE: Why?

BRIAN: I'm not from the Nursing Home.

JANNICE: What?

BRIAN: I said, I'm...

JANNICE: Like, I heard you the first time.

BRIAN: Oh.

JANNICE: Well?

BRIAN: I'm Brian.

JANNICE: Brian Fitzgerald.

BRIAN: I thought you said we hadn't met. How do you know my name?

JANNICE: I have distant relatives with the surname of Fitzgerald. They live in Sydney.

BRIAN: Moonee Ponds. We moved here twelve years ago.

JANNICE: You have an older brother?

BRIAN: Michael.

JANNICE: Your father is, Terry.

BRIAN: Yep. Are you related?

JANNICE: No, I'm a travelling Gypsy who can read the past. You look like your Dad.

BRIAN: Hope not, it'll be seven years ago this coming July we buried him.

JANNICE: He can't grab my arse no more.

BRIAN: If there is any justice in the world, he's pulling out weeds in the garden of hell with the heating on.

JANNICE: Dead hey? What are you doing here?

BRIAN: Taking stock.

JANNICE: Why aren't you at St. Peter's Church?

BRIAN: Why aren't you at the church?

JANNICE: Come to check the Nursing Home guy hadn't taken Aunt Ethel's stuff.

BRIAN: Well, it's still here.

JANNICE: Yes, looks like it.

BRIAN: Well, good seeing you, again.

JANNICE: Yep.

BRIAN: I guess you should be getting to the church?

JANNICE: You going?

BRIAN: Haven't finished taking stock. Are you going?

JANNICE: Why you taking stock?

BRIAN: I told you. So, the Nursing Home guy doesn't take...

JANNICE: That's why I'm here.

BRIAN: Who sent you?

JANNICE: No one. I came here, to find...

BRIAN: Find what?

JANNICE: Now I remember. You're that dumb dupe, Brian, a.k.a. *The Brain*, who got his head stuck in the fly-wire door and the same one who dropped Aunt Ethel's vase on the... it was in here. There should be a dent, here, look, on the floor, there.

BRIAN: Where?

JANNICE: Right here.

BRIAN: Oh, yeah.

JANNICE: Your other brother still hanging around?

BRIAN: Brad, yeah. You're cousin Jannice.

JANNICE: Very good.

BRIAN: And your brother? What's he doing?

JANNICE: Craig is a mechanic now ... cars.

BRIAN: He still bossing you around?

JANNICE: He thinks.

BRIAN: Wow, it's been years since I've seen you guys. After we moved to Sydney, it just turned into a blur. You know; new school and stuff.

JANNICE: Why did you disappear off the face of the earth?

BRIAN: Don't know. Life just got away from us I guess.

JANNICE: You missed my Birthday's.

BRIAN: And you missed mine.

JANNICE: If I remember correctly, as kids we were inseparable back then.

BRIAN: We're we?

JANNICE: You don't even remember! I didn't even recognise you when I first came in.

BRIAN: The last time I saw you I was a baby, a little kid.

JANNICE: That's what I mean. So was I.

BRIAN: I think you were a little older than me.

JANNICE: I still am.

BRIAN: Yeah, but. I didn't choose to move to Sydney. Mum and Dad did.

JANNICE: No one has still explained to me why you moved so far away.

BRIAN: I think Dad got a new job and they moved him up there.

JANNICE: It had nothing to do with Uncle Terry...?

BRIAN: Yeah, his new job.

JANNICE: I mean his wondering hands being too close to my arse.

BRIAN: What is this fixation with your arse?

JANNICE: You didn't know?

BRIAN: Granted he was a bit different, but he never did anything like that.

JANNICE: You were lucky. I can still recall every Christmas in the backyard around the BBQ and him going, 'little Jannice and her cute little face'. After he abused my cheeks with his pinching fingers on my face, they then moved to my...

BRIAN: How can you remember something from twenty or so years ago?

JANNICE: Traumatic Memory Recall.

BRIAN: T.R.M, too many red wines; fancy name to blame something on someone else.

JANNICE: Nearly five years of therapy. I'm dealing with my emotions now.

BRIAN: You're dealing with them?

JANNICE: Don't you start.

Jannice retrieves a chocolate bar from her pocket and begins to eat it.

BRIAN: OK, settle down. I can see you're dealing with your emotions; or eating them.

JANNICE: What?

BRIAN: Sounds like one of those new fan-dangled syndromes.

JANNICE: So why the move to Sydney?

BRIAN: I told you, Dad's new job. Just drop it, alright. God that was over twenty years ago and you're still carrying on. Our Aunt has passed away and you're carrying on about something that happened a life time ago. If you want to scream at someone, go scream at Dad. Though, it's gonna be a bit hard, seeing that we've already buried him.

JANNICE: It's been traumatic for me.

BRIAN: Just drop it. What is Aunt Deirdre doing now?

JANNICE: Mum's retired. She's using up her time by keeping busy, out of the house and away from Dad. That's what you get for nearly fifty years of being married to the same person and their same annoying habits.

BRIAN: OK. So, I gather their doing fine, then.

JANNICE: Yeah. Suppose.

BRIAN: And are they still living in the same house?

JANNICE: You missed the big building project.

BRIAN: I gather I've missed a lot of things.

JANNICE: We built an extension on the house, a second story. At first it was Mum and Dad's bedroom and lounge room and personal space. You know, with ensuite and the trimmings, but now it's my place. They moved downstairs into my room and Dad uses Craig's room as a study.

BRIAN: What have you been doing with yourself?

JANNICE: Just got divorced and lost the kids to shit-head.

BRIAN: Sorry to hear...

JANNICE: I don't need your sympathy. It would've been good to have some support from my family, but all I got was, 'It's all for the best' and crap like that.

BRIAN: If I had known...

JANNICE: I had no idea you were back in town. You've been living in Moonee Ponds for years and we haven't heard boo from you. *If you had known...*

BRIAN: Well, I'm sorry. OK?

JANNICE: Not that I care, but you've buried Uncle Terry and Mum never had the chance to say goodbye. I don't get people, I really don't get them.

BRIAN: Will you stop blaming me for everything my parents do. I'm sorry he died. I'm sorry no one told you. I'm sorry for everything.

JANNICE: It's been tough for everyone.

BRIAN: You doing all right, now?

JANNICE: I manage.

BRIAN: I know it's a bit late now, but tell me about your kids.

JANNICE: My beautiful children. You would've like them.

BRIAN: Would have...?

JANNICE: Shit-head have them. Family Court thought I have too many emotional problems and need anger management.

BRIAN: What ever gave them that idea?

JANNICE: I won't be a doormat. I'm sick of not speaking my mind.

BRIAN: Yeah.

JANNICE: Yeah. Little Jannice is not going to sit back and watch the world take from her for the rest of her life.

BRIAN: Take what?

JANNICE: In this world there are givers and there are takers. As long as I am giving, they are taking. It's my turn to take.

BRIAN: What are they taking? Do you mean the kids from shit-head?

JANNICE: Not just the kids, everything. My opinion. My love. Myself.

BRIAN: I'm not sure I follow.

JANNICE: You're a man. I wouldn't expect you too.

Pause.

BRIAN: You haven't even asked about me and what I've been doing.

JANNICE: What have you been doing?

BRIAN: I've just got out of the Military.

JANNICE: As what?

BRIAN: Cook.

Pause.

BRIAN: So, what did you come to take?

JANNICE: What?

BRIAN: You know, before the bottom feeders have their fill.

JANNICE: What did you come to take?

BRIAN: I don't know. Nothing here.

JANNICE: Typical. You haven't changed one bit. Just like the time you put that fire-cracker under that grumpy old neighbour's car up the road. When it went off, we all ran, but no, you just stood there watching the pretty lights. You still have no idea.

BRIAN: Gees, what do you want from me? I haven't seen you for twenty years and you still treat me like a useless kid.

JANNICE: Well, great seeing you again.

Jannice opens a box and peers inside.

BRIAN: Last summer, my wife was killed.

JANNICE: Oh. How?

BRIAN: A Military transport plane was flying over the house, before she could finish saying, 'Brian, stop being a...' a ninety litre combo fridge-freezer fell on her.

Pause.

BRIAN: I can't look at fridges the same way anymore.

JANNICE: Have you had a look around?

BRIAN: There are a lot of boxes here and maybe we can help each other find that thing you want.

JANNICE: The thing I want?

BRIAN: Yeah. Let's find that thing you want.

JANNICE: You're about as subtle as a startled Cockatoo.

BRIAN: No point gumming at the teat. Get you nowhere that way.

JANNICE: What happened to you?

BRIAN: Huh?

JANNICE: I've come to get a book she had.

BRIAN: Didn't Aunt Ethel return it?

JANNICE: That's right, I'm a Librarian.

BRIAN: Really? My Dad was a Libran.

JANNICE: What do you want?

BRIAN: You mean from here?

JANNICE: Yes. God!

BRIAN: Well, there was a photo of the family. Great Grandparents, I think.

JANNICE: That's it?

BRIAN: Well, there was the dining table and chairs.

JANNICE: You should have no trouble going unnoticed by shoving them up your jumper on your way out. Anything else?

BRIAN: Brad liked the painting in the hallway.

JANNICE: And?

BRIAN: Gee, I don't know.

JANNICE: Sounds like you got your hands full. That crusty old cow won't miss any of it now.

BRIAN: Mum always said she was supposed to be some kind, old woman, but she always hit me with a branch from the whipping tree.

JANNICE: The whipping tree? Oh yeah, the whipping tree, that willow tree by the back door. I wonder if it's still there?

BRIAN: No. The lemon tree by the shed.

JANNICE: There was never a lemon tree by the shed. Elderberry trees, three of them, surrounded by lavender bushes.

BRIAN: It was a lemon tree

JANNICE: You're a lemon!

BRIAN: And remember that time the fence caught fire when your father sprayed the hose on the BBQ to put out the fat fire.

JANNICE: What? When?

BRIAN: Christmas. The year Aunt Ethel's dog was run over in the driveway.

JANNICE: She never had a dog, she hated them.

BRIAN: The damned thing kept falling asleep under parked cars.

JANNICE: She had a Budgie. Grandpa Mike taught it to swear.

BRIAN: No she didn't.

JANNICE: How often did you come here?

BRIAN: All the time, when I was a kid.

JANNICE: What was written on the small plaque by the front door?

BRIAN: What plaque?

JANNICE: I thought as much. It read, *Love Is Blind, The Neighbours Aren't*. It had a picture of a couple holding hands.

BRIAN: That doesn't sound like the Aunt Ethel I knew.

***** Truncated *****

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