

Digging Deep

A monologue by Pete Malicki

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Kieran Johannsen: A young gold-digger. Can be either gender.

Note: character says a lot of things under their breath to themselves. This is indicated in brackets.

Life is unfair. My neighbour Mark Grimshaw inherited a bunch of money from his Great Aunt Edna (I assume it was “Edna”) and he used it to buy a Porsche Boxster. I drive a 1996 Ford Fiesta.

I’m not jealous of Mark Grimshaw and his beautiful Porsche Boxster but I think it’s totally unfair that a guy who stacks shelves in a supermarket (I assume) can own a luxury car and I have to get around in a twenty-year-old clunker. That’s why I’m looking for my own Great Aunt Edna. Not because I’m *jealous* of Mark Grimshaw, but if that guy has a Porsche Boxster then I want one too.

I met my friend Mrs Mavis Dalton at the hospital cafeteria where I work. She’s a sweet old lady suffering from severe rheumatoid arthritis and I reckon she’s only got months to go. Oh, “Hello Mrs Dalton! So great to see you. Look what I have. It’s your favourite chocolate pudding. I made it myself.” (bought it from the deli) “How’s your health?”

I talk to Mavis for twenty minutes and she updates me on her beloved Mr Tabbikins. Even though I’ve never seen Mr Tabbikins I could pick him from a lineup of twenty tabby cats by his odour alone. Mavis Dalton’s only daughter died in a car accident three years ago so she needs a friend.

On Wednesday evening I work as a bingo announcer at the local Club. “Eighty-eight, two fat ladies. Not that anyone here fits that description. Sixty-eight. Ooh, so close. *Legs* eleven, phwoar.”

They all love me there. I make it fun. At the end of each night I chat to whoever’s come alone. I’m particularly close to Max Sutton who has stage something prostate cancer, and Walter Finkleson who’s a different shade of grey every time I see him. He’s gone through half the Dulux colour chart since we met in April.

Max and Walter aren’t around tonight so I go introduce myself to Molly Alderley. “Hello dear. What’s your name?” “I’m Kieran Johannsen. Two Ns and an E.” “And what do you do, Kim?” I frown a little. “I’m the bingo announcer.”

Molly Alderley frowns right back as she pokes around in her meat tray. I say, “You look to be in good health Molly. How old are you? Seventy? Sixty-five?”

“I’m eighty-seven. And yes dear, my health is tip top. Still on my second set of teeth.”

I compliment Molly on her dentures, then she says. “What’s your name?”

Alright, dementia. A dementia sufferer isn’t going to know who I am, let alone put me in her will. I wish Molly a nice evening and head home.

Before you start judging me, all I’m doing is giving these lonely old darlings the one thing they’re missing in their lives: some company. If that’s worth their entire life savings to them, who am I to argue? That kiss on the cheek Mrs Bellevue gives me each week at the wildflower gardens is one of genuine fondness. And I really do care about how Mr Steinbach’s Parkinson’s disease is affecting him. You know the poor guy’s signature looks like an angry spider trying to paint a Jackson Pollock? Half his cheques bounce!

Next week I have lunch with Mrs Tan during my break. “How’s the hip?” I ask. “Which hip? One God give me or metal one Dr Frankenstein put in?” “Both?” “Both are terrible!”

I sip my coffee. Old Mrs Tan is supposed to be dying of something I can't pronounce but she's looking great. "Sorry to hear that Mrs Tan. I was going to take you ballroom dancing on the weekend." "Ooh, you such a charmer. Maybe weekend after."

On Thursday I play lawn bowls with Ernie Simmons, a retired engineer whose hunched back makes me think he was born to play this sport. Ernie barely left the house before I met him at Woolworths and encouraged him to get back into society. On Saturday I see Errol in the morning for tea and those invulnerable biscuits old people like to eat for some reason, then Mary at the nursing home at lunch time to help her cut her steak, then Judith in the afternoon for tea and more invulnerable biscuits. Saturdays are a real jaw workout. Errol, Mary and Judith all have cancer but they're all going strong.

Visiting the oldies keeps me on a pretty tight schedule. I barely have time to google the difference between Mark Grimshaw's 2009 Porsche Boxster and the third generation model I'll be buying.

On Sunday I knock on Judith Peterson's door. She's a different Judith. Judith *Peterson* is my favourite and I drop in on her whenever she's feeling up to it, but she's got Lou Gehrig's Disease and these days that's not too often. I get a long blank stare. "Hello there young lady. What can I do for you?"

Uh oh. "It's me Judith, Kieran. You recognise me right?" "Oh, it's you. You're my son! Come on in Bradley."

I feel strangely upset by this. Judith hadn't shown any signs of Alzheimer's and suddenly she's so far gone she can't even tell my gender. "I'm not your son, Judith. I'm your friend Kieran. We met at Janet's Jam Stand at the church fair."

Judith stares blankly at me, then her lips twitch, then she bursts into cackling laughter. "You really thought I'd lost my marbles, didn't you! You have such a low regard for me you horrible child."

"You hateful old cow!"

Judith takes me inside and serves tea and lamingtons. She's been getting me to show her young people's things and today she insists we play a video game. I tell her she's going to hate it and load up the new Doom game. She's surprisingly into it, especially when she picks up the chainsaw. Demon limbs fly all over the screen and she cackles her head off. I give her a big hug when she runs out of steam and kicks me out. "See you next time Bradley," she says.

Next week I go to bridge club with Ethel Williams. Ethel was given six months to live nine months ago and she's still going strong. We're having a grand old time until Mrs Taubman appears out of nowhere and comes across to our table. "Hello Kieran. Lovely to see you dear. I didn't know you came to bridge club."

Ethel is stunned. "Kieran, who is this?"

Uh oh. "Er, Ethel, meet Mrs Taubman. We met at the knitting workshop run by Franny Jones."

"What are you doing going to classes run by the likes of *Franny Jones*?" Ethel says. "Are you telling me you're playing bridge with other people?"

"No no, Mrs Taubman's just a friend."

Mrs Taubman goes red in the face. "Just a friend? You told me I was quote 'The most special lady for a five hundred mile radius.'" (I said kilometre). "Now I'm *just a friend*."

Before I know it, Mrs Taubman and Ethel Williams are going at each other's throats, walking sticks and Zimmer frames flying every which way. I jump up to leave, ducking a pump pack of sorbolene cream. It's a blur of false teeth, musty old blankets and exploding colostomy bags as I crawl to the exit.

This event finds its way into the local papers. They call it “Bridge-gate”. I get a mention: “The fight broke out after it was revealed that local charlatan Kieran Johannsen had been trying to swindle elderly people of their life savings.” What?!

None of them want a bar of me after this. “Mrs Bellevue? It’s Kieran. Don’t believe what they say in the papers.” She hangs up on me! Mrs Tan comes in for a check-up but leaves without lunch. Ernie, Errol, Mary, Max – they all shuffle away when I approach them. It’s particularly hurtful because it takes them more than three minutes to leave my sight.

Not a single one of them has anything to do with me after Bridge-gate. The only thing I can rely on now is that some of them forget to write a new will.

I actually miss my old friends. I meet new people but it’s just not the same. The way Bill Knowles’s pudding dribbles out the corner of his mouth isn’t as charming as when Mrs Taubman did it. And I care way less about Nancy Jones’s Fluffy than I do about Mr Tabbikins.

One morning I wake up to the revving of a car engine. I assume it’s Mark Grimshaw trying to make me jealous so I ignore it. Ten minutes later I get jack of it and go downstairs.

It’s a Porsche Boxster but it isn’t Mark’s. It’s a way sexier third generation model. As I stand at the end of the footpath the convertible roof starts moving back and... dear Lord, it’s Judith Peterson!

“Hello Kieran,” she says. “I read all about you in the paper.”

I don’t know how to respond. She beats me to it. “I’m dying Kieran. I have a serious degenerative disease and I’ve probably only got weeks to go.” (She’ll last at least a year) “I have no husband, a son who I haven’t seen in twenty-seven years, no grandchildren. What am I going to do with my savings? If a kind soul like yourself wants my money then I’d rather see you enjoy it while I’m alive. Now, come and have a – how to you say it – *spin* in your new car. That horrible neighbour of yours will be here any second.”

I can’t believe it. I stagger blindly to the third generation Porsche Boxster Judith Peterson has given me. I sit down in the driver’s seat. Mark Grimshaw’s going to hate me. He’s going to absolutely *hate* me.

“Did you really get me this car, Judith?” I ask.

“Yes I did.”

“Even though I befriended a bunch of old people for their inheritance?”

“Nobody’s perfect. At least you didn’t poison their tea.”

That would have saved a lot of time. “Are you really sure about this?” I ask.

“Shut up and get on with it.”

I turn the key in the ignition and the engine purrs like a kitten. I look over at Judith’s twisted posture, wondering how she even got the thing here. I say, “I love you Judith,” and kiss her on the cheek.

Judith smiles. I pull out from the kerb, waving happily at Mark Grimshaw as he stares open-mouthed at me from beside his letterbox.

Suck it, Mark Grimshaw.

Suck it.