

Square Peg podcast

Part 1: Typo

<https://www.squarepegpodcast.com/part1>

Transcript

*NOTE: Square Peg is intended to be heard, not read. If possible, please listen to the audio, which relays feeling and tone not captured by the transcripts.*

AMERICAN MAN: Let me know when I can get in.

BRITISH WOMAN: Yeah, we've got Karen, who is our chapel attendant today, so she's going to go through the button system.

KAREN: So all you'll need to do is just press that red button there, and then that'll slowly fade out.

AMERICAN MAN: Perfect.

KAREN: It won't stop immediately. Your next piece of music... [FADES DOWN]

MUSIC and VOICES [FADES DOWN]

AMERICAN MAN: Good afternoon. Thank you for being here today. We are gathered to remember the life of Frank Carver. My name is Rob Collins, and Frank was my friend. For those who don't know me, [FADES DOWN] I'll be saying more about who I am and how I got to know Frank during the eulogy in a little while.

ROB COLLINS (narration): April 11, 2019. I'm in a town called Scunthorpe, in Northern England, officiating a funeral for the first time in my life, for a man I'd only met in person a handful of times. And I'm the only one speaking. It's surreal, looking out at the smattering of people gathered in the funeral home: Frank's companion, Kiki, a few neighbors, some drinking buddies. No family.

I had only known Frank for two years. He had emailed me. By accident. Because of a typo.

Frank was attempting to contact a British blogger named *Rod* Collins. But instead he reached me, *Rob* Collins, a video producer from Richmond, Virginia. Rod's and my email addresses are off by just one fateful letter, B versus D. And Frank made the typo, I soon learned, because his vision was severely limited. And he said *that* was caused by his brother.

FRANK CARVER: And he actually used it like a dagger, and he lunged it at me. Frank told me that his older brother assaulted him when they were both soldiers in the British Army, over 50 years ago. It left him nearly blind and permanently disfigured. But he said his brother was never punished.

FRANK: I just don't know. I'm hoping something is going to be done about it. He's got away with it, so far.

Frank had been trying to get his 72-year-old brother thrown in jail.

FRANK: I said, "Question: could I bring charges against my brother, my elder brother, for knocking this out?" I showed him. 'Bloody hell,' he says. I said, 'Yeah, could I do him for that today? I found some new evidence.'

And on top of that, Frank had also tried to sue the British military over this, and the case had reached the country's High Court of Justice. That was the story that fell in my lap two years ago.

But I had no idea that it would become so personal. Or so *bizarre*.

[music cue]

FRANK: You've met me, an ogre. Grrrr.

Over the past two years, I've dealt with the British legal system.

ROMANIAN WOMAN: His file was either moved or is no longer held at the National Archives. We don't know why.

BRITISH MAN: I almost fall off my seat when you tell me that.

I've gone deep with a German psychiatrist.

GERMAN MAN: You're missing something, you know that?

FRANK: Oh I know that. I'm aware of it.

GERMAN MAN: So why are you punishing yourself?

I've been drawn into violent histories kept secret.

BRITISH MAN: What they wanted to do was really hurt him. They wanted to give him a good beating.

BRITISH WOMAN: She seemed shocked to know there was fighting in this family that seems to be such a well-known and much-loved family of the community. Very, very strange.

I've been in some difficult situations.

AMERICAN WOMAN: He's somewhere from being a little manipulative to, I would say, moderately manipulative. And are you okay with that?

FRANK: I probably won't and don't because I cannot tolerate the word 'no.'

GERMAN MAN: OK.

But I've had a lot of help.

FRENCH WOMAN: Like, we need to make things happen. We can't just keep running in circles— There's so many mysteries, there's so many people to meet, there's so many things we have to do.

I've been forced to face some big questions.

AMERICAN WOMAN: Just in case you don't know what your purpose for life is.

And resolve some contradictions.

BRITISH WOMAN: There's no such word as 'can't'. When there's a will, there's a way. Yes, you can fit a square peg into a round hole.

ROB (at funeral): ... who I am and how I got to know Frank during the eulogy in a little while. [FADES DOWN]

And now I somehow find myself at the Scunthorpe Crematorium. But this wasn't all Frank's doing. I'm just as responsible for this twisted, strange journey as he was, although I prefer not to admit that. So here I am, Rob Collins of Richmond, Virginia, about to nervously give a eulogy in working class England, in front of a group of strangers, for this man—this infuriating, stubborn, hilarious, horrible, endearing, rude, crazy, dogged, strange man who changed my life, Frank Carver.

How the hell did I get here?

This is Square Peg. Part 1: Typo.

[music]

I wasn't looking for a story. I never thought I'd be producing a podcast, although I am in a semi-related field, video production. But I make my living in the corporate world. Exciting videos about restaurant equipment, promos for a local bank, stuff like that. I do OK. Wife and kids, house in the suburbs. Great life.

Then I received that random email from Frank Carver. Initially it was just a curiosity. That first typo email wasn't his life story or anything, though it was interesting enough. The phrase "skunk farm" was thrown around. But when Frank learned that I made videos, he pretty quickly started to pull me in. He thought it was fate that he accidentally typed B instead of D. I wasn't so sure.

Frank had written a book about his life, and he sent me a copy. It was a troubling, but fascinating, read. I remember thinking that if even half the stories were true, this man had led quite a life:

CROSS FADED MONTAGE OF FRANK: They called it Carver's cavalry, he had four or five elephants... I did make a prototype of the weapon that I, well weapon... I got tangled up in a bloody Zulu dance on the main road, on the high street. And I thought, whoops a daisy... They were killing them like hell, like bloody flies, and it was a real nasty situation... And you could hear the bullets, you could hear grenades going off...

But beyond the intriguing anecdotes, I think I was kind of flattered that this unusual and worldly man thought I could help him. I mean, this has been going on for 50 years, and now, because of a typo, I of all people could make a difference?

For reasons I couldn't quite put my finger on, I started to record some Skype calls with Frank in early 2017. He was eager to tell me his story.

And so now, I want you to hear that story, as I first did. I knew I was just hearing one side, but I pretty quickly became intrigued by this dark, decades-long, ongoing saga of conflict between Frank and his older brother, John.

It starts in 1952, when Frank is just 5 years old. His parents owned a fish and chips shop. And they worked long hours, leaving the kids unsupervised. Frank remembered that his older brother, then 7 years old, coaxed him out onto the roof of the shop.

FRANK: Yeah, he got me on top of that roof, and then he disappeared. I looked around and I thought I was on top of the world, it was such a high place, and I was so damn scared. And he was down there, and he said, "look, just think you're a bird, put your arms out and flap your arms, you'll come down to me." And I did, I jumped off, I landed on the concrete footpath, I busted me thigh, fractured me skull, and I was in hospital for quite a few weeks before I got put right. And that is where it all started.

So based on this and a few other stories, it sounded like Frank's brother—and I hate to sound judgmental here—was just categorically terrible. But Frank somehow gets through childhood and adolescence, and both brothers go into the Army. They wanted to be like their father, who was a decorated World War II hero.

FRANK: Well, Dad had always been the dreaded Company Sergeant Major. He had a crown and laurels on his jacket sleeve.

That insignia showed the highest rank a soldier could earn without being an officer. So when Frank is just 15 years old, he goes to his father for permission to join the Army as an apprentice.

FRANK: I said, "Dad, well if I can be honest with you, I've got a reason." "Well, go on then." So I told him, I said, "Look, you've been frightening the hell out of me all my life. I'm scared of your shadow. You've got a crown and laurels on your jacket sleeve, a Company Sergeant Major." I said, "I want a crown. But I don't want it on my arm, I want it on my shoulder."

A crown on the shoulder was for officers.

FRANK: "And I want you to stand in front of me and salute me." And he just bust out laughing. He said, "Son, if you've got the balls to do that, give us that bit of paper." And he signed it, and that was it.

So succeeding in the military was hugely important to Frank. It was his dream.

He joined the Army at age 15, but it got off to a rough start—thanks to John. Frank's older brother had enlisted two years before, and apparently was a bully and made lots of enemies at the Army training camp. Two years later, Frank goes to that same camp, and the guys who were abused by John wanted to get their revenge by abusing Frank. So it was tough going, but Frank got through his first two years, and was doing well in the Army. He got promoted, and seemed like he was on his way to receiving that salute from his father.

But then, two terrible things happened. First, there's the incident on New Year's Eve, 1964. Frank and his brother John were home on leave from the military. And they got into an argument while John was holding a glass of liqueur in his hand.

FRANK: And the glass—straight into the face. And he actually used it like a dagger, and he lunged it at me.

I'd later examine this moment in some detail, but for now just know that the liqueur glass broke on Frank's cheek bone. And one of the jagged pieces sliced his left eye in two.

FRANK: And I just collapsed. I just bled profusely. Just collapsed on the spot. And the next thing I knew, I was in the hospital. And that was the beginning of the end.

Frank meant that was the beginning of the end... of his life. At 17 years old.

What remained of his left eye had to be surgically removed. To make matters worse, Frank's vision was severely compromised in his remaining eye. He got the measles when he was a kid, which damaged his right eye.

FRANK: So when I lost the left eye, which was my best eye, I was left with one eye with a damaged retina which had double vision.

He'd later strengthen his right eye so that he could function OK, but initially Frank was nearly blind. That detail would become really important to me much later.

But when Frank was in the hospital, John did come to visit him. But Frank says his brother didn't even apologize.

FRANK: I think he was forced by Dad to come up. And he stood at the foot of the bed, just looking at me. Never said a word. Nothing.

That was the first terrible thing, losing his eye and most of his vision. But believe it or not, the second thing was actually worse for Frank. He gets medically discharged from the Army because of his poor vision.

FRANK: And I was shocked out of my head, I couldn't believe it. They gave me until nine o'clock the next morning to be off the camp, off government property, and on a one-way ticket on a train, back to Scunthorpe.

Frank never got over that, to his dying day. His military dream, his dream for his life, ended.

Frank called it the beginning of the end, but really it was just the beginning. It was the beginning of his lifelong quest to get revenge on his brother, like Ahab with the white whale. It was also the beginning of his eventual lawsuit against the British government. Frank contended that he shouldn't have been kicked out of the Army for losing an eye to begin with.

FRANK: So basically you've got military law challenging civil law, because they're telling me that I was on leave, and I wasn't in the Army. So you know, I've got contradiction, and I've never had the chance to show this and to speak about it in a court of law. That's the step that I want and I haven't gotten there yet.

ROB: So are you seeking compensation from John, or from the Army, or from both?

FRANK: Well, from both. Both the Army for canceling my career when I was told that it wouldn't affect it. B., yeah for just slinging me out of the Army onto the scrap heap, and C., I want some compensation from somebody for taking one of my eyes away.

ASHLEY: That sounds weird to me.

This is Ashley Hall, a screenwriter and longtime friend of mine. She's now the co-producer of this podcast. But early on, she needed some convincing.

ASHLEY: To A number 1, be doggedly pursuing it for 50 years is one thing.

ROB: Well, and just to be clear, he's only been really pursuing it for like 25 years because those first 25 years he kept trying to get John to be nice to him.

ASHLEY: So that's sad number one, and number two is 25 years is still a long time, like I was a small child.... [fades out]

So as I was then saying to Ashley, for a long time after this alleged assault, Frank *didn't* try to get revenge. The incident wasn't reported to the local police. Frank's father wanted to keep it quiet, and told Frank that John would make it up to him.

Yet when Frank tried to borrow some tools from John for a job he'd gotten:

FRANK: He said no. No, you can't. And that word went through my heart like a knife. No--after what you've done to me, you're not going to lend me a couple of miserable spanners? I just couldn't believe what I'd heard.

AMY: Well, it's pretty typical for someone who's been abused to turn to the abuser for help. And that seems to be what Frank has done.

That's Amy Rose, a friend of mine who's a therapist and social worker. Back then, I shared some of these Skype recordings with her to try to understand this pattern that Frank alleged.

ROB: So, what, is that kind of like when a partner or a spouse is abused, but keeps going back to that person?

AMY: Well, sort of. Someone who's been abused by the very people who are supposed to care for and protect him will grow up and actually recreate those

dynamics and patterns of interaction, and turn to abusive people for help, which is what Frank seems to have done. And it seems like at some level, he wants to connect with his brother and get his approval so badly, which is probably what made him be willing to jump off the roof. So it makes me wonder if the driving force behind his efforts to sue John and get revenge, is Frank's desire to connect with his brother. It's kind of heartbreaking, really.

Frank did make a life, though. He got married, had a son, lived in Africa for about 12 years. But the marriage broke up, and Frank ended up back in Scunthorpe in the late 1980s, unemployed. His vision problems made it challenging to find work.

By this time, John had done well for himself. He had a family, and started a business that became successful. So Frank went to John for a job, in part so they could finally form a good relationship.

FRANK: Well, that was at the back of my mind, that we could create the brotherhood that we—that I lost out on. Well, we both lost out on.

But Frank said that John refused to help him, again and again, even though Frank was in a bad way. He was on and off government assistance, and occasionally homeless. He became depressed and unbalanced.

It was a dark time for Frank, but one good thing did happen. Frank met a woman named Freda, who became his girlfriend. Freda was escaping a bad marriage, but made a good match for Frank. She was like him in some ways, stubborn and maybe not super well-adjusted herself. But she stuck up for Frank at a time when no one else would. Most importantly, though, Frank said that Freda may have saved his life when things finally came to a head with John.

FRANK: I didn't know what to do anymore, to get, not even with him--well yeah, even with him because he ripped one of me eyes out, of course. But not just that, but why did he put me in this predicament? Why has he wrecked my life? Why didn't he apologize? Why hasn't he done something to help me?

Frank went to John's house to ask him this, why? Freda tried to stop him. She asked him how he could possibly think that yet another encounter with John would solve all the years of problems. But Frank was determined to try.

FRANK: Anyway, I wandered up there, and I got this hammer down my trousers, because what I was gonna do, was put it through the windscreen of his car if he didn't come out and talk to me. That is how determined I was to have it out with him.

Frank knocked on John's door.



FRANK: He opened it, and as soon as he saw my face he tried to shut it. And I stuck my foot, my shoe, in between the door and the step, and he's forcing it too now, trapping my foot so I couldn't get out.

So, yeah. Frank was basically breaking into John's house. But he said that what happened next was that a relative of John's came up behind him and attacked him, leading to a big brawl. Frank feared he'd lose his other eye, or worse.

But what he didn't know was that Freda had followed him to John's house.

FRANK: I was unaware that Freda would've jumped in her car and come up there to make sure I was OK.

I imagined her trying to break up the fight, bring some sense to things.

FRANK: Of course when she got there and parked up, and saw what was going on, she just dived out of the car and ran up the drive and did like a flying head butt. And this is where it went. It was like a scuffle in the drive, until it finished. Until the neighbors came out, and everybody's shouting at everybody. And I eventually got off the property, into the car, to go fetch the police, to go to the police station and report what he'd done to me.

John also called the police, and, of course, Frank and Freda got locked up for most of the night. But then finally, after so many years, Frank says that he let go. He finally accepted that John wouldn't change.

FRANK: Yeah, that was when I gave up the idea of trying to do anything with it. It was just a complete zero.

Frank was still angry, but he channeled his energy into writing that book about his life. It was tough with his poor vision, and it took a couple of years, but Freda helped him type up the manuscript. The title of Frank's book is *An Eye for an Eye and His Blood for My Tears*.

FRANK: When she typed the end, we got on a plane and we went to Spain on holiday to celebrate.

That was in 1991. Frank and Freda went to Spain to celebrate finishing the book. But here we have a tragic, random accident. Freda was hit by a car while they were in Spain, and died a few weeks later. She was 44.

FRANK: She was brain dead for what, four days, on a life-support machine. And they ended up switching it off.

ROB: That's rough. You talk about fate, and all the times you survived.

FRANK: Yep, yep, absolutely. It's just--it's just been a rough old road. You know, it's a tragedy, and hell, it knocked me back, and it busted me up, big time. It's just been one hell of a 28 years.

Freda died in 1991, and not long after Frank began his lawsuit against the British military. It would reach the High Court of Justice in 2004 and then be appealed, but Frank said the case was somehow *still* ongoing.

But in 2011, things changed. Frank saw a TV program about the police investigating a crime that had happened many years ago.

FRANK: And I didn't think that was possible. I didn't think you could bring something to light again after 30 or 40 years. Apparently, you can. I was walking to town one day, and I walked around the corner of the police station, and a copper came around the corner--I more or less bumped into him. I said, "Question: could I sue my brother, or could I bring charges against my brother for knocking this out?" I showed him. "Bloody hell," he says. I said, "Yeah, he knocked that out 40 years ago. Could I do him for that today?"

This somehow seems to get the cop's attention, and Frank is invited to go to the station to give a statement to a detective.

FRANK: And the case was opened against him. A case was opened against John Carver for what he'd done to me, grievous bodily harm and for ripping me eye out.

From everything I've learned, this seems to be what actually happened in 2011. The police opened a case for the alleged assault that took place 46 years earlier.

FRANK: Apparently, they went to his house to take him to the police station so he would have to make out a report.

Frank says "apparently" because he doesn't know exactly what happened. What he does know comes from an encounter he had a couple of weeks later. Frank was coming out of a store, and a woman he didn't recognize came up to him.

FRANK: And she approached me coming out of the shop. She says, "Is it true that you're trying to kill my father?" I said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Frank then realized that this woman was his niece, John's daughter. Frank hadn't seen her since she was a kid.

FRANK: And I told her the story, I said “look, if I’d wanted to kill your dad, I’d have killed him a long time ago.” And there was a brief story about the police had been to visit him and la la, and that’s when, that connection, that I realized that Mandy—

Mandy was the name of the police detective Frank had been talking to.

FRANK: Mandy had been around to his house to get a statement from him.

So Frank learned from John’s daughter that the police were indeed questioning John. That’s what she meant when asking if Frank was trying to kill her father—I guess the stress of being investigated was taking a toll on John. This pleased Frank greatly. He felt he was finally on the verge of receiving some justice for what had been done to him.

FRANK: Then later, weeks later, I got a letter from the police saying the case has been squashed because your sister, she helped John by saying to the police that she was there when it happened and that I fell, I was drunk, and I fell over onto the glass. Which is totally untrue, because the glass was shoved in my face.

I haven’t yet mentioned Frank’s younger sister, but he didn’t get along with her either. She allegedly lied to the police about what happened. As a result, the case against John Carver was dismissed.

So Frank was stuck. He lived just three miles from John in this relatively small town, but the brothers hadn’t spoken for over 28 years.

FRANK: No, I don’t go looking, I stay out of the area. I don’t go anywhere near where I think he might be.

Frank had tried over the years to get his book published, but was not successful.

FRANK: The whole idea was to get back at him via the book. That was my dream, my ambition, in general in life, was to get it out, so that people could see what sort of a son of a bitch he really was. And I’m wondering now and this day and age, is it gonna do me any good? I don’t know, I don’t know.

I also learned that Frank might be sick. He’d been battling cancer, and he’d recently had some serious surgery and was in the hospital for 8 months.

FRANK: Don’t forget, it was a year ago this month I was in hospital having my rib cage ripped apart, and they patched me up with pig skin [makes pig noise]. Five months ago, it was gone, it was clear. But they don’t know whether it’s come back.

Here's this man potentially facing death, he's spent most of his life trying to get justice for some terrible things that happened to him, and he accidentally emails someone who could maybe, finally, help him.

ASHLEY: I'm a little bit hesitant, because I don't trust Frank.

[music cue]

That's Ashley again, now my co-producer but then undecided.

ASHLEY: Since this started, I think maybe in his head, maybe I'm putting thoughts in his head, but he's like, "Oh man, I'm gonna get this guy to do this, and he's gonna tell my story, and gonna get my book out, and he's gonna get John thrown in jail, and he's gonna do all of these things for me."

ROB: And maybe I will!

ASHLEY: Maybe you will. [laughs] But we need to think about... [fades out]

Part of Ashley's hesitation had to do with something we learned online. Early on, we of course Googled Frank, but the only thing we found was one article from the BBC in 2004 about his lawsuit. It said that Frank had won at the High Court of Justice, but that the Ministry of Defence had launched an appeal.

The article went on to say that Frank, quote, "suffers from bipolar disorder, mental illness, and depression." Now Frank didn't hide this—he later sent me the same article. And I've had personal experience with mental health challenges. I know they can be treated, and managed. And of course that this shouldn't discredit Frank's allegations. But it did feel like a tiny red flag, to Ashley at least.

ASHLEY: I do think it's an interesting story, I already think it's an interesting story, I just want you to walk into it with a healthy level of skepticism.

ROB: I think I am, you don't think?

ASHLEY: No, I do not think that at all.

ROB: All right, yes, I get that it's unconventional, but that's why I think it's interesting, this—

ASHLEY: Unconventional is not the word that I would use, but that's fine. [laughs]

ROB: I mean, yes I get it but what—

ASHLEY [mocking]: Unconventional.

ROB: What if it's all true and because of this weird thing, what if I'm the one who could actually make a difference?

ASHLEY [after a pause]: Ah... I mean, that seems like a lot. [laughs, fades out]

But if I'm honest, it wasn't all about helping Frank. I also started to imagine a potential adventure for this suburban dad of three kids.

ROB: Am I this weirdo who's done this crazy thing?

CHARLIE: Yes. You are a weirdo because you took a random email and turned it into like a 9 episode podcast.

That's Charlie, age 14.

ALEX: You're a typical dad, but like a cool dad.

That's Alex, also 14, they're twins.

MAYA: I mean, you're a unique person, but—

And that's Maya, age 16.

MAYA: I mean, you went on this whole thing, like that's a unique interest for someone to have I guess.

MARY KAY: Why do I think you have done this?

This is my wife, Mary Kay.

MARY KAY: Something struck you, which I thought was insanity. You needed something a little bit more exciting than what you were doing, you were making a lot of bank training videos [laughs] and being a parent of three children, and this was something that seemed to have some excitement, some possibility.

ROB: Which what does it say about me that my excitement is an old guy in England? [laughter]

So maybe there's a mid-life crisis element here. I started to imagine myself like an investigative journalist, sleuthing around England with a microphone. My life that was

previously so satisfying started to seem a little... I don't know, boring? I had this opportunity dropped in my lap to, yes, help someone, but maybe to do something cool?

I even got Ashley on board.

ASHLEY: Whoever Frank is or is not, what happened to him was truly, truly gross, and terrible. I think that there is something funky going on here that we haven't truly put our finger on yet, that you'll only be able to figure out if you go to England.

Ashley was right, more so than either of us could have known. It took several transatlantic flights, an international team of producers, a psychiatric examination in Berlin, and hundreds of hours of investigation, frustration, and revelation. But I eventually uncovered the truth about Frank Carver.

In the end, though, this isn't just a story about Frank. Over the course of the past couple years, I've come to realize that it's also a story about me. It's about how I learned to define what's true—and whether that matters. It's about loving people who don't deserve it. It's about how we can become hostage to the stories we tell ourselves about who we are.

Most of all, it's about why trying to fit a square peg into a round hole can lead you to some weird places. Like for me, a funeral home in Scunthorpe, eulogizing someone I'd truly grown to care about—even though he was unconventional, to put it very mildly.

ROB (at funeral): We are gathered to remember the life of Frank Carver.

[music]

Square Peg is a LUSID48 production. It was written and produced by Ashley Hall and me. Visit our website, [squarepegpodcast.com](http://squarepegpodcast.com), to learn more.