

Square Peg podcast

Part 8: Goodbye

<https://www.squarepegpodcast.com/part8>

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.*

MARIE: I thought I would see him again, to be honest. I thought I would see him again.

ROB COLLINS (narration): Marie and I are in Scunthorpe for Frank's funeral. Marie had seen Kiki earlier in the day and was a little surprised by how she seemed.

MARIE: I felt like today when I saw her, I was expecting her to be a bit more emotional, I don't know why. I didn't ask, I was just thinking, OK I'll ask Rob.  
[laughter]

ROB: That's interesting and she did tell you, you said, some of what happened yesterday, about how she was upset with me.

MARIE: Yeah.

ROB: Frank never told me this, but after he had died, and when I was talking with Kiki and Sharon about the service, I asked, "Well is there gonna be—" Because I was wondering all along, who's going to come to this service? Thinking specifically about his family.

[music]

This is Square Peg. I'm Rob Collins. Part 8: Goodbye.

ROB: And I asked them, is there going to be a notice in the newspaper? And they were like, NO, NO, Frank was very clear with us that he didn't want anybody, specifically his family, specifically his siblings--he didn't want anybody to know that he was dead, and especially not to know about the service, because he didn't want them to be there. And he gave them instructions that if by some chance they *did* come to the service, they were to be asked to leave.

MARIE: Yeah, that's very specific. [laughs]

Frank wanted his death kept a secret from his family, but I ended up telling them, in part because of something else Frank had kept from me. I learned from Kiki that Frank had tried to meet his grandchildren.

A month or so before he died, Frank reached out to his ex-wife, Gloria, for the first time in many years.

GLORIA: It was a Facebook message through Kiki, asking me to contact him.

That's Gloria Carver, Frank's ex-wife. She's originally from Scotland, and now lives in Carlisle, about three hours from Scunthorpe. I had been in touch with her by email before, but she didn't want Frank to know that.

I wasn't sure if Gloria knew that Frank had died, though I suspected not. Which meant that their son, Clint, wouldn't know that his father had died. That didn't seem right to me. I would honor Frank's wishes when it came to his siblings, but I felt like I should tell Gloria and Clint.

And then on top of that, I learn from Kiki what Frank had done. Of course I wanted to know about that too. So I told Gloria that Frank died. And her reaction surprised me. She said it was a shock, and that she never stopped loving Frank.

But because Gloria keeps up with others in the family, word spread, so everyone found out. Sorry, Frank. And I really felt bad about Kiki. She had worked hard to honor Frank's wishes. She even instructed the funeral home to keep it confidential, so she was understandably upset about what I'd done. I was pretty sure that no one else from the family would try to attend the service, but Kiki was still very anxious about it.

Anyway, I ask Gloria what happened with Frank and the grandchildren.

GLORIA: He said he wanted to-- out of all this mess we have in our life, he wanted to see his grandchildren. But he didn't want the father to know.

ROB: He didn't want his son, the father of the grandchildren, to know that.

GLORIA: Yes. And I said, well, that's impossible. I can't bring them down. I couldn't bring them down without Clint's say-so. So he wanted to see the grandchildren because he had so many clothes that were good clothes, and shoes—this just gets me, I don't understand this—that he wanted to pass on to them. I thought, "What clothes would he have that my grandchildren would want?"

ROB: Did he say anything else, besides "I'd like to see them and I have some clothes and shoes"?

GLORIA: No. No.

ROB: What did he tell you at that point specifically about his health?

GLORIA: He just said he was ill. I didn't realize that he was so near to passing.

So, of course, Frank being Frank, he made this request in a dysfunctional and unfair way that couldn't possibly work. But still, I was touched to know that he tried, and that he wanted to give something to his grandchildren. Frank didn't have any money or valuables to speak of. But he did have some nice clothes, for an older man. I couldn't help but think of what Dr. Linden had told Frank:

LINDEN: I understand, you can react like that, but then you can't buy presents for your grandchildren. It's for the grandfather to give the grandchildren good reason to come. You're missing something, you know that? Why are you punishing yourself?

Gloria told me that she might try to come to the funeral. Which would be great, I'd love to meet her. It also makes me a little nervous. I don't know how Kiki would react.

But I've got other things to worry about, namely officiating Frank's funeral. As we were planning it, Kiki and their friend Sharon told me that they scheduled a celebrant to officiate. This was just someone through the funeral home, who didn't know Frank. So I offered to be the celebrant, and Kiki and Sharon were happy to have me do that. As it turned out, I would be the only one to speak at the service. I spoke on behalf of Kiki and Sharon, as they didn't feel comfortable doing so.

I sat down with them both to help craft these remarks. Here's Sharon.

ROB: You were telling a story about how you met Frank?

SHARON: Yeah, it was about 15 years ago, I'd moved into the house next door to his. He came out and introduced himself, and being a single mom, he always helped with things in the house. We became good friends, he'd often have Christmas dinner with us.

Just a word here about Sharon. She's lovely, first of all, and generous. She invited us to stay in her home while we were here for the funeral. Sharon works in childcare and is a single mother of Amy, who's now a student at the University of York. And as I learn more about Sharon and Amy's relationship with Frank over the years, I'm kind of surprised that Frank didn't tell me more about them.

I mean, I did meet Sharon once briefly on a previous trip, but this relationship seems to have been one of the best and longest and healthiest in Frank's later life. I wish I could

have talked to Frank more about them, but I'm glad to get to know Sharon and Amy a bit more.

The next day, we convene for the funeral. It's April 11th, 2019, a beautiful, cool, sunny day. The hearse with Frank's casket arrives at Kiki's house so that we can drive with it to the funeral home. Where we're going is actually called the Scunthorpe Crematorium, but that's one of those U.S. / U.K. differences. It's very similar to what we Americans call a funeral home.

ROB (car noise): Kiki, you know that Frank was eager for me to continue my work with this project, right?

KIKI: Yes.

ROB: I also, as far as recording, want to be respectful, and I don't want people to feel—

KIKI: Uneasy.

ROB: Uneasy. I guess what I'm saying is, please if you see me holding a microphone and you feel like it's not appropriate, please tell me.

KIKI: I don't mind.

GREG: If you wake up and your eye's a little bit sore, you'll know. [laughter]

That's Greg, Kiki's son, who's driving us. He's a big, sweet guy in his 40s. Greg didn't much care for Frank, though, which put a strain on things for Kiki. But he came over from Manchester to support his mother, along with Kiki's brother and sister-in-law, Bob and Rosemary.

ROB: We're behind the hearse with Frank's casket and heading to the crematorium. In the car with Kiki and Greg and Marie, and Bob and Rosemary. And in another car we have some other people coming.

KIKI: Sharon, Amy.

ROB: Sharon, Amy, Michelle are in the car behind, and then more people, including a surprise military presence, will be greeting us there so...

This was a big surprise. As we were getting ready to go to the service, I got a call I wasn't expecting from Ian Tilson, the chairman of the Doncaster Branch of the REME Association. That's for retired members of the Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, and it's the regiment Frank would have gone into if he'd been able to stay in the Army.

Ian called me from outside the funeral home worried that there was some kind of mistake. There didn't seem to be any funeral scheduled today for Frank. There was some frantic confusion until I realized that they were still keeping confidentiality and not telling Ian about the service, per Kiki's wishes.

But real the surprise was that Ian was there at all. I had told Bill Baynham about Frank's death the week before. You might remember Bill from Part 2. He was in the Army with Frank in the early 1960s. Bill initially told me that he was going to see about getting military type honors for Frank's funeral. But then I heard back that he was not successful, that it wasn't going to happen. But now suddenly, it is! Frank is going to have Army regimental colours presented at his funeral.

ROB: Oh there it is!

KIKI: Wow.

ROB: Oh, I'm so pleased.

KIKI: He would have been impressed.

Kiki said that Frank would have been impressed, and she's right. We're looking at Ian, a handsome man probably in his 70s. He's standing at attention to greet the hearse as it pulls in. Ian wears a dark blue suit with a military looking cap, white gloves, and carries the regimental colors, a kind of a flag, on a tall pole. He then marches formally in front of the hearse as it pulls in.

I feel a little lump in my throat as I watch this happen. Frank never got over being kicked out of the Army. More than his eye, more than his broken family relationships, it was this that haunted him. I remember driving toward the airport to get to Berlin less than a year ago:

FRANK: What I wanted to do and I got this in my head. It was in my heart. I wanted to join the army and I wanted a crown on my shoulders. This was my dream.

ROB: Then for that dream of yours to just be taken away so suddenly.

FRANK: It was heartbreaking. It destroyed me.

And now Frank's body is being led into his funeral with a military procession, just as it would have been if he hadn't lost an eye and hadn't been discharged, but was able to pursue his dream. I don't believe that the dead can sit in heaven or wherever and watch what's going on on earth. But right now, I hope I'm wrong.

We park and I see that a decent sized crowd, 20 or so people, are gathered outside. One of them is Bill Baynham.

[sounds of car doors being closed and walking]

ROB: Bill, Rob Collins.

BILL: Hello, Rob.

ROB: I didn't know you would be here, I'm so pleased, and thank you so much for everything you did to set this up. That would've meant everything to Frank.

JACKIE: We're a little bit early, Rob, we can't go in yet because the other service is still there.

ROB: OK, just let me know when I can go in.

That's the funeral director, Jackie, giving me instructions.

JACKIE: We've got Karen, the chapel attendant, and she's going to go through the button system.

She's talking about the buttons in the chapel to start and stop the music. Besides being the officiant, I'm sort of the DJ too.

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

The chapel we're in is really quite nice. I'm pleasantly surprised. It has 8 or 9 rows of pews, which could probably seat 80 or so people. On the altar side above me, there's a large modern stained glass panel of different shades of blue. And on the other side, above the door, a huge window letting in lots of sunshine.

ROB: Jackie, I'm ready when you are.

JACKIE: Thank you,

ROB: Where would you like me to stand?

JACKIE: OK, so if you stand there, because the bearer's going to walk in first with the flag...

Frank had chosen three pieces of music to be played, beginning with Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* as the processional.

[music plays]

Ian processes first. He formally carries the REME colours. Then me, followed by the casket. Which is covered with flowers, and it's wheeled in by attendants from the funeral home. Then followed by Jackie, who walks ceremonially. Then there's Kiki, with Greg's hand on her shoulder, then Sharon and Amy, then everyone else, 20 or so people, most of whom I don't recognize. No surprise uninvited family members, I observe with some relief and maybe a little disappointment. Gloria had told me that she wouldn't be able to attend.

Jackie and Ian stand at attention by the casket, with Ian bearing the colours, while everyone finds a seat. Then an attendant places a framed photo of Frank holding a glass of Guinness on the casket. The attendants and Jackie bow toward the casket, and Ian lowers the colours to his side, at ease. He places them on a stand by the casket and sits down. I press the red button.

ROB: 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, I'll be saying a little more about who I am and how I got to know Frank, during the eulogy in a little while. I was honored to be asked by Frank's companion and friend, Kiki Jennings, and his friend and neighbor, Sharon Walker, to serve as the celebrant for this service. Today is a team effort from the three of us. And I want to begin by offering a few words of remembrance on behalf of Kiki and Sharon. Kiki was Frank's best friend... [fades out]

I go on to share a few stories and fond memories from Kiki and Sharon. We then have a musical reflection. Frank chose the song "My Way," by Frank Sinatra. Of course.

ROB: So a few words from me. I got to know Frank a little more than three years ago, by accident. I'm a video and radio producer, but that's not why Frank contacted me. He was trying to contact a guy named *Rod* Collins, R-O-D. I'm Rob Collins, R-O-B...

I tell that story, and then a brief version of Frank's biography.

ROB: Those of you who knew Frank well, as I think I did, know that he was a... complicated person. And first of all, he didn't hold back—he said it as it was, he didn't sugarcoat anything. So I'm now going to follow his example. And even Frank himself described his own personality as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He had a dark side. Yet in my experience, Frank was also capable of great kindness, and he could be endearing, as we heard some earlier from Kiki and Sharon. Frank called me a few weeks ago when his health started to deteriorate badly. I missed the call... [fades down]

I talk about how Frank asked about my father's health even as he was dying, and go on to talk about how Frank made me laugh.

ROB: And have Elton John sing “Candle in the Wind” at Frank’s service. And Frank, without missing a beat, said, “Well for me it should be ‘Pissing in the Wind’.”

[sparse laughter]

I blather on for too long probably but finally get to my point.

ROB: There’s a famous poem by Dylan Thomas called, “Do not go gentle into that good night.” I think of Frank when I hear that line, “Do not go gentle into that good night.” Frank didn’t go gentle into anything. It probably would have been better for him if he had, and definitely would have been better for those around him, if he had.

Frank talked a lot about fate. As I mentioned, he thought it was fate that he mistyped an email address and accidentally reached me. But I’m not sure Frank really understood what the word “fate” typically means. Because Frank fought fate, desperately at times. He would not accept the way things were. He could not tolerate the word “no.” He would not go gentle into that good night. But I think that life is more interesting because of people like Frank, who fight fate. And I’m glad he was alive.

I want to close by showing you something Frank made. You can have a closer look later if you come to St. Bernadette’s. But this we think was a block of polystyrene that Frank somehow carved out these three holes, a square, a circle, and a triangle. And Frank made this “square” peg and he wrote this inscription to talk about this contraption. It says: “There is no such word as ‘can’t’. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Yes, you can fit a square peg into a round hole.”

So I won’t be able to do this as well as Frank did, because he was pretty good with his hands, but he made it so this square peg, yes it goes into the square hole, but look it also goes into the circular hole, and it also fits perfectly... I promise, it does, I can’t make it work, but it fits perfectly into the triangle too. Trust me, it does, I’ll show you later.

And I think that’s clever, but to me, Frank was this square peg, fighting his whole life to fit into various round holes. It didn’t usually work. It mostly caused friction, for Frank and for those around him. But every now and then, using some sleight of hand when necessary, it did work. If there’s anything beyond this life, I hope Frank found a way to make it work and squeeze in there, too.

Our recessional is another of Frank’s favorites, called “The Goodbye Song.” The words are printed in your program. I want to thank you... [fades out]

[Music] *I wish you all a last good-bye.*



More after a break.

[break]

After the service, we go to a reception Kiki and Sharon had arranged at the St. Bernadette's Club, a bar up the street from their houses.

ROB: Marie, is that a Guinness in your hand?

Marie was not a drinker.

ROB: Are you drinking a Guinness in Frank's honor?

MARIE: Yes, I am, but I really don't like it to be honest.

ROB: Thank you for--

MARIE: Yeah, I'm doing this for him.

Ian Tilson, the representative of REME who presented the colours at the funeral, is here too.

IAN: We both wore the same cap badge when we were fifteen year olds, which is made up of the cross, the cross swords, and the cartwheel, the swords for fighting, the cog for mechanical engineering, and the cross for looking after our Christianity.

AMY: We once had, Frank loved his barbeques, we had loads of barbeques with him.

This is Amy, Sharon's daughter, now a student at the University of York. But she grew up with Frank as her next door neighbor.

AMY: And we once had a barbeque in mid January, and it was thick snow outside, I think it was about minus two degrees, and Frank decided that was the perfect weather to have a barbeque. And we had a barbeque, and it was nice. I don't know how to describe it, he was like family.

ROB: So you've known Frank for 30 years?

KEVIN: Yeah, maybe more, I don't know.

This is Kevin, a drinking buddy of Frank's.

ROB: So if you were telling someone who'd never met him, how would you characterize who the man was?

KEVIN: What you said today up in the alter. He had a black side to him as well, and by Jesus when that came out you knew it.

ROB: He had a dark side, but he could also be a lot of fun, yeah?

KEVIN: Oh, honest to God, a heart of gold.

The Guinnesses flow. Somebody put a photo of Frank on the corner of the bar where he stood to drink, as the English do. It's a really nice send-off.

The next day, Marie and I take a train to Carlisle, near the border of Scotland, a few hours away.

TRAIN WORKER: OK. It's Carlisle, it's got a castle called Norman.

ROB: What's its last name?

TRAIN WORKER: Oh bloody hell. [laughter] Are you Canadian or something?

We're going to Carlisle to meet Gloria, Frank's ex-wife. I'd wanted to meet her before, but as I'd mentioned, she was reluctant while Frank was alive. We join her at a restaurant near the train station. She's a handsome woman, well dressed, with short hair.

ROB: You told me, Gloria, that once you heard the news, that it came as a shock and that you-- I think your words to me were something like, "it might surprise you, but I never stopped—"

GLORIA: Loving him.

ROB: Loving him.

GLORIA: But Frank was a charmer. He could charm the hind legs off a donkey. [laughter] For want of a better expression. But he was a charmer.

But Gloria tells us that Frank changed over the years, beginning early in their marriage.

GLORIA: And he was working as a fitter on vehicles. And Frank slipped on oil, and fell 10 foot onto solid concrete. He was in a coma at first, and when he eventually got out, he took to drink. It was like his whole personality had changed. His womanizing got worse, his drinking got worse. He'd disappear. I didn't know where he was. We were sat one night. And he started raking in the

fireplace. I said, "What are you doing?" "Nothing." I said, "Well, what are you doing in the fireplace?" He said, "I'm looking for drugs." "Oh, you start doing drugs Frank?" "No, I just got some, and I owe these people money." And I said, "Oh yes? How much do you owe?" "I don't know, but I have to go out, I have to go and see them now. But they might come round here." Now, I was in that house, it was mom and dad's house, a bungalow, on my own, with my son. "They might come round and visit you for the money I owe them." I sat that night with a 6-inch carving knife, in the lounge, looking out the window, until mom and dad got in, which was about two in the morning. Because I was so frightened of what they were going to do. But he wasn't on drugs at all, he was going out to see another woman.

ROB: Oh, so he was just making up the whole story?

GLORIA: He made up the whole story, and gullible me.

Gloria had more stories like this, and worse, and so I ask her if Frank being a charmer could account for why she would still love him all these years later.

GLORIA: Don't get me wrong, since I was divorced I've been out with a couple of men, but they weren't Frank. Frank was a snappy dresser as well. He dressed lovely. I'd meet a fella, and he'd come in an anorak, and I'd think, oh my God—

In case you didn't catch that, as I did not at first, Gloria said that she would go on a date, and the guy would be wearing an anorak, which is a parka with a hood--not very fashionable, as Frank was.

GLORIA: —and he'd come in an anorak, and I'd think, oh my God. No, that's not my Frank. [laughter] Maybe I'm just one of these people that, when I fall in love, I fall in love for good.

[pause]

ROB: But Gloria as a person, did she surprise you?

MARIE: Yes she did. I think she was very well-mannered, and very delicate.

ROB: But she was kind of spunky too?

MARIE: Yeah, at the same time. I wouldn't have imagined her like this, because Frank was so different.

ROB: I like that she wanted to note that she's made a darn good life for herself. Frank told her when they got divorced, you're never going to make it without me,

and she said, I'm gonna go do it, and she did it. She was high up in a chain of drugstores, training people, opening stores.

MARIE: I don't think Frank deserved any woman like Gloria, unfortunately. She was very sweet, and she was so in love. I never could have guessed that.

I think I understand Gloria's mixed feelings about Frank. I definitely understand why she needed to cut off ties with him. I don't know if it was traumatic brain injury, Post-traumatic Embitterment Disorder, or something else, but Frank could be toxic.

It was much easier for me. I only met Frank a couple of years ago, and was only with him in person for a total of around 15 days. For the most part, I had the Atlantic Ocean as a buffer, which of course his family didn't.

On the other hand, as I've put together this story over the past few years, Frank has been in my head a lot. After my wife and kids, I may have thought about Frank more than anyone. Of all the people in the world, why give him so much time and mental energy?

Well to me, he was a delightful trainwreck, one of the most fascinating and frustrating people I've known. But on bad days, I wonder if it was a waste. I mean, not totally, I know that I did help Frank, in many ways. I know that he died more at peace because of me. Because I heard him, and worked for him, and cared for him.

But if my goal was to help people, I surely could have spent my time and energy and money in more constructive ways, on more deserving people, than Frank Carver. That's how I think about it on bad days.

On good days, I feel like this suburban dad did indeed end up doing something pretty interesting. Whether it was because of a random typo or something else, I ended up connecting in a profound way with someone who had cut off almost everyone else in the world. And I met a lot of wonderful people along the way. It may have been irrational, or extravagant, or obsessive, but on good days—most days—I'm glad it happened.

I've said that I thought Frank was a square peg in a round hole, fighting all of his life to force reality to conform to his expectations. But I've learned that I'm a bit like that too. I'm the one who turned a typo into an overseas investigation. I'm the one who wanted to believe in Frank's story despite plenty of red flags. And I'm the one who kept trying to force a happy ending that none of the people involved especially wanted.

But maybe that's OK? Maybe sometimes you *shouldn't* do the sensible thing. Maybe you *should* fight fate now and then. Maybe you *do* keep shoving that square peg where it's not intended to go. It makes life more interesting. Like Frank did.

KEVIN (singing): *And how the years have flown. For far too long, I've been a stranger here.* [fade down]

This is back at St. Bernadette's Club in Scunthorpe, at the reception after Frank's funeral. His friend Kevin offered a song.

KEVIN (singing): *I remember well, that rainy day, the day I came back home. I never thought that I could be—*

[cell phone ringing]

That's Kevin's cell phone ringing. He keeps singing as he fishes it out of his pocket to silence it. Kiki started giggling at this, saying later that she thought it was Frank calling.

KEVIN (singing): *For the boys and girls, who crossed then ocean wide, and leave their friends and all their loved ones on the other side. So take me home, where I belong. I've dreamed and dreamed of home for much too long.*

[applause and laughter]

SHARON: Frank's ringing!

ROB: Have we had an official?

SHARON: No, we haven't.

ROB: Who needs a drink?

[cross talk and laughter]

ROB: Well thank you very much.

KEVIN: You're welcome.

ROB: Cheers, cheers to Frank.

ALL: To Frank.

[glasses clink]

Goodbye, Frank.

[music]

Square Peg was written and produced by Ashley Hall and me, Rob Collins. Marie Huynh was our co-producer and Beth Fereday associate producer. Ana Sandra was our researcher, and Jessica Abel our editorial adviser.

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Our music came from a number of sources. The main theme is called “So Sweet” by Ayden Blackbird, licensed through PremiumBeat, and the secondary theme was written and performed by Ryan Corbitt. The rest of the music came from Pond5, Motion Array, Dreamstime, Audio Jungle, and SoundSnap.

The French song at the end of Part 7 is called “Ingenu” by Aulx Studio, licensed through Premium Beat.

And finally, the song at the very end is called “Dreams of Home,” and it was sung by Kevin McLaughlin and written by Brian Warfield used by permission of Skin Music, care of Bardis Music.

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