

SQUARE PEGS

**By
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CHARACTERS:

EDITH: *An elderly woman.*

FRANK: *Her elderly husband.*

SETTING:

A park.

(Frank walks in followed by Edith. He uses an umbrella as a walking stick, she carries a bag. He goes to walk past the bench, but she calls him back.)

EDITH: Here'll do.

(He keeps walking.)

Frank! Frank!

(He finally hears her and turns around.)

I said, this'll do! Come and sit down.

(They both sit. He props the umbrella up on the bench. She begins to unpack sandwiches from the bag.)

Ah, this is nice. Not too sunny, not too windy. No screaming kids and flying frisbies. Peace and quiet, ay Frank.

(She holds the sandwiches out to him.)

Ham or cheese?

(He takes one.)

That's ham.

FRANK: Hmm?

EDITH: That's ham... You don't like ham, you like cheese.

FRANK: I know I like these.

EDITH: Not these, CHEESE. You always have cheese. You picked ham.

(She tries to take it from him, but he resists.)

FRANK: I want this one.

EDITH: For forty years you've had cheese. Why would you want ham?

FRANK: Well, why offer it to me?

EDITH: What?

FRANK: Why do you offer it to me if I always pick cheese?

EDITH: Did you take your pills this morning?

FRANK: Yes, I took me bloody pills!

EDITH: Just take the damn cheese, Frank.

FRANK: What if I want ham just this once?

EDITH: Oh, for goodness sake! Take the ham, then!

FRANK: There isn't any jam.

EDITH: Not jam, HAM!

FRANK: I wouldn't mind jam. Why don't we ever have jam?

EDITH: Because you always like ham and I always have cheese. Why would you want jam after forty years?

FRANK: I dunno, a bit of variety can be nice sometimes.

(He surrenders the cheese sandwich and takes the ham. He starts to unwrap it with some difficulty. Edith observes him closely.)

EDITH: You don't love me anymore, do you Frank.

FRANK: What?

EDITH: Is there someone else? Is that it?

FRANK: What the hell are you on about, woman?

EDITH: It hasn't always been easy for you, I know.

FRANK: Just because I fancied a bit of jam instead of cheese?

EDITH: You never really fitted in.

FRANK: Oh boy, here we go again.

EDITH: And then when you left with me all your friends deserted you.

FRANK: I didn't have any friends left, Edith.

EDITH: Because of me.

FRANK: Because of the clown killer! You know that as well as I do!

EDITH: You could have kept doing what you loved.

FRANK: I didn't love it.

EDITH: Making children laugh.

FRANK: Children hated me.

EDITH: Bringing joy to the world.

FRANK: I didn't fit in, they didn't laugh, there was no joy.

EDITH: And you left because they didn't want me anymore...

FRANK: That's not why I left.

EDITH: No one wanted a bearded woman. It wasn't unusual enough. All those European migrants...half the women in the audience had more facial hair than I'd ever have.

FRANK: Look Edith, we've been over all this before. I left because I wasn't meant to be a clown. I took you with me because I loved you. Now, let me eat me bloody sandwich in peace, for God's sake!

(They eat in silence for a moment.)

EDITH: You hate me for not giving you a son, don't you.

FRANK: What?

EDITH: You always wanted a son...

FRANK: Don't start, Edith.

EDITH: And I couldn't give you one.

FRANK: We had a beautiful daughter...

EDITH: But she's not a son. A son you could take fishing and hiking and/...

FRANK: I hate fishing and hiking.

EDITH: I'm so sorry he died.

(Pause)

FRANK: It's not your fault. Not your place to be sorry.

EDITH: I don't know...Maybe it was. Maybe I did something wrong...

FRANK: Don't be ridiculous, woman. These things happen.

EDITH: But why, Frank. Why do they happen?

FRANK: How would I know? I'm a clown who became a postman who became an old man. How would I know why babies are stillborn?

(Pause)

EDITH: You may not think you blame me, but you do.

FRANK: What now?

EDITH: I felt something change when it happened. You stopped...

FRANK: Stopped what?

EDITH: I don't know...Stopped looking at me.

FRANK: You're crazy. I've been looking at you for forty years.

EDITH: No...I mean, *really* looking at me. Like you couldn't bear to look away.

(Pause)

FRANK: It was nothing to do with the baby. I didn't blame you.

(Pause)

It's just...time. Forty years is a long time to look at someone.

(Long pause. They are both lost in their thoughts. Frank eventually closes his eyes as though dozing off. Edith tries to eat her sandwich but has no appetite.)

EDITH: I know you loved our Rose. But it's not the same, is it. A son to a man is like a daughter to a woman. It's like looking at yourself when you were young. It's like a second chance to make things right...to be a better you. You get to mould them the way you should have been. Rose was mine...and you were alone.

(Pause)

Well, maybe you thought you were alone, but you never were. I was always with you. I could never thank you enough for taking me from that wretched circus. For making me more than a freak show. You made me feel desirable and human and...the same as everyone else. You bought me my first depilatory kit...

(Pause)

Of course, you weren't the first, Frank. I don't think I ever told you about Hector, did I. Hector lived next door. We used to play together. When I was fifteen he kissed me behind the rhododendron bush. I fell in love instantly. He was my first...

(She pauses with a faraway look as though remembering.)

When he was seventeen he ran away with a boy he met in high school. His family never spoke of him again. Turns out he was really only attracted to my beard. A few months later I ran away myself. But you found me, didn't you Frank.

(Pause)

Frank?

(She turns to him and sees he's not moving. She shakes him, trying unsuccessfully to wake him.)

FRANK!

(She holds his wrist to feel his pulse and then drops it in dismay.)

The first time in forty years we've actually talked and you have to go and die on me. You'd do anything to get out of a real conversation, wouldn't you, you old coot!

(Angrily) Why they ever called you Frank I'll never know...you're the least frank person I've ever known. Ducking and weaving for cover every time I discussed anything more personal than the weather and the cricket. I know you weren't deaf. You just pretended to be to get out of answering questions! You know what I'll have to do now, don't you. I'll have to get that granny flat behind Rose's house. She's been harping at us for years to build that bloody flat and now I'll have to do it. You bastard! I've got to put up with four barking labradoodles and a nosey spinster because you couldn't keep your heart beating for a few more months. What happened to that pact we made? How could you let me down now? We were going to get in the Holden and go hell for leather off the Great Ocean Road cliffs as soon as I turned eighty. But oh no, you couldn't wait for that, could you.

(Beating him on the chest with her fist to emphasise each word) ALWAYS SO BLOODY IMPATIENT!

(Suddenly he coughs and splutters, coming back to life as a result of her CPR.)

FRANK: What are you hitting me for, woman? Can't a man have forty winks without someone bashing him to death?

EDITH: You're back!

FRANK: It's not my bloody back I'm worried about, I think you broke some ribs! You been drinking your Steradent again? You're as mad as a cut snake!

EDITH: Are you all right?

FRANK: Of course I'm all right. As right as I can be after ten rounds with Muhammed Ali!

(She kisses him on the cheek. He looks at her like she's gone completely nuts. They sit for a moment in silence.)

EDITH: It's my eightieth birthday next year, Frank.

FRANK: I know, I know...I haven't forgotten.

EDITH: You remember what I want, don't you.

FRANK: I'm old and deaf, I'm not senile...yet.

EDITH: Maybe we should get you checked over by the doctor. Just in case...so we know you'll make it.

FRANK: What am I gonna say? I'm just checking I can live long enough to kill myself?

EDITH: It's important, Frank. A lot can happen in twelve months.

FRANK: Okay, okay...I'll see the quack. Stop your nagging, woman. I'll probably need painkillers for me broken ribs anyway.

(Pause)

EDITH: Let's go home and have a cuppa.

FRANK: Fine.

(He stands with difficulty, feeling his sore chest. The umbrella remains propped up on the bench and neither notice it. Edith picks up the bag, takes his arm and they start to exit.)

I feel like I've forgotten something. Have we got everything?

(She doesn't look back.)

EDITH: I've got everything I need, Frank. Absolutely everything I'll ever need.

FRANK: Except your marbles...you've lost a few of them, I reckon.

(They exit.)