

ONE ACT PLAY

SQUARE PEG

- (OT) I guess that my long-term problems began at the point of conception. Now, to impress my parents, whoops, I'm still trying, two competing sperm, two amongst approximately 40 million; energetically swimming up fallopian tubes, aiming to achieve their key objective. Fertilisation. In this case, a pair of Olympic type champion swimmers, penetrate the walls of two independent eggs. Possibly, at just around the same time. Thereafter, implanted in the uterus. Result – Dizygotic or fraternal twins. Born, at a time, when my parents, particularly my mother, would have been considered to be, old.
- (M) Yes, I was nearly 39. Late for twins, well any baby really. Twins! Blimey.
- (F) I'd been 39 three months back, the bloody war changed everything. It was all bloody hard work.
- (OT) Possibly, a pre-world war II romance and definitely a post-World War II marriage. January 1948. My sister arrived later the same year, followed by my twin brother and me. Entering into what, in its latter stages, would become, for me as an observer, an essentially loveless marriage. How that marriage fared in its earlier days, I can't say. Mum and dad may have been perfectly suited to each other. May have seen in each other what they had always wanted from a marital union. But 'love', as I began to witness it, is a fickle thing. I grew up thinking that a lack of a loving touch and normal conversation was the norm. As was arguing and, for my mum, crying. She often seemed so isolated. What brought all this on is anyone's guess but not something I could have ever discussed with them. Not singularly and certainly, not together. But it had an impact, certainly.

- (F) Children should be seen, and not heard!
- (OT) So, back to the labour ward. I doubt that it was called a delivery suite in those days. And, in a matter of forty minutes, forty, I became a middle child. Into this world ahead of my twin brother, but, as I was later to discover, to no great advantage. An older sister, and now a younger, 'baby' brother. The new 'baby' (*disdainfully*) of the family. Forty minutes that would turn, over-time, into hours, days, weeks and sometimes months of despair and a growing lack of self-worth. My developing - depressive self - essentially established as two placentae presented themselves to waiting nurses, who carried them safely away, to be discarded as medical waste (*short pause*). There I lay, in a hospital cot, unaware of the many instances of insecurity and self-doubt, ahead of me.
- (M) Well, fancy the little un taking all that time to arrive. Don't know why it took 'im so long. Bit slow off the mark I suppose. But he made up for it later. Lots of successes, later.
- (OT) Not that I haven't had good times. I've had lots and I have many happy memories. Insecurities in my early childhood and teens, certainly, but the real impact of my upbringing only began to take serious shape in my thirties. Perhaps, as I began to recognise in my own parenting, what I'd not been offered as a child myself. Having children was a real gift, a real joy, something I'd always wanted. So many things to cherish (*short pause*) and I've always been so proud of both of them. I'm not, by the way, claiming here to be a perfect father, who is? And some of my mistakes have returned to haunt me when I've been low. But more generally, and over time, I began to sense that my existence had always been somewhat fraudulent. Wrapping myself in both a shroud of denial and quick wit. An ability to ad-lib and amuse. Always able to find a quip, a bit of banter, sometimes a sarcastic remark and, often, an exaggerated tale. All for effect. Artistic licence and humour, as a protective shield.

My mother, as I grew older, constantly fretting and still shedding tears (*short pause, thinking*). My father, less communicative.

(M) Why don't you just do as your told!

(F) Don't speak to your mother like that!

(OT) Mum was intensely jealous, always had to be told things first. She was also insecure (*short pause*) and, as already noted, too often unhappy. Some of those traits became embedded in me. Certainly a tendency to over worry about things that didn't really need worrying about. Always trying to feel valued. As such, evolving my own growing levels of anxiety in my early childhood and teenage years, leading eventually to a diagnosis of clinical depression, from my thirties onwards, and on more than one occasion.

In important ways, I suppose, I never felt truly loved as a child, young person. Well, certainly never really understood. As a result, I've found it difficult to 'value', or even love myself. Perpetually searching, but never achieving, the unattainable perfection that I craved for. Invariably trying to 'prove' some personal worth, based on standards that I never felt I met, nor often could. Striving to demonstrate to my parents that I had real, palpable, merit.

(M) He never told us that he 'ad these problems, but then when 'e was older we never saw 'im much.

(OT) Unfortunately, that desire, to 'prove my value', has been a debilitating part of me for so long, extending beyond the death of my patents, who both lived long lives.

(F) He always seemed fine on the phone. And 'es sister and bruvver never sais anythink.

- (OT) Until I was eight, we lived in a rented, terraced house in the East End of London. As it happens, I'm not a true cockney, because Bow Bells were out of action in 1952, the year of my birth.
- (M) Oh, look at 'em in their union jack nappies, right in front of that photo of the Queen. Coronation day. Street party. Only one neighbour 'ad a television, so we watched, in groups, frew their front winda. Lovely. I shall always dress them the same. And I did. Every day. During school holidays, outings to the seaside, when they visited their aunts, uncles and cousins and, of course, when they went orf to Sunday school. Well, they're twins, ain't they? Not identical, but, well, it's nice to 'ave 'em looking, well sort of well, matchin', ain't it. Well, they're the same, ain't they. Not just bruvvers, closer than that (*pause*). A muvver knows, don't she?
- (F) I'm out a lot, me, workin'. Saturday mornin's too, sometimes. Home all day Sunday. So, when they were old enough, the twins could come down to the pub, meet some of their mates, have a kick around outside and 'ave a bottle of pop and a packet of crisps. Then, they'd go 'ome, over the old railway bridge, and I'd follow a bit lateah. Sunday lunch: then, fall asleep in me armchair, tea, including tinned fruit with evaporated milk, then I'd wash up, listen to the Home Service – 'Sing Something Simple', while they, when they were babies, was put to bed. Always the same on a Sunday, until me mates started dying and I stopped going for a drink. I worked hard, gave the boys a work effie. Taught em wrong from right, just like me dad 'ad done for me.
- (OT) It was a family struggling financially. A non-communicative grandfather seemingly glued to his fireside chair. There in the morning and still there as we went to bed. Occasional smile, occasional words, but never a hug. I don't ever remember him playing with us, but I've got a few photos with him holding me on his lap. A mother and father who, when I was old enough to genuinely recognise its relevance, barely speaking civilly to one another. A sister, four years older always thoughtful,

kind. I've stayed close. And a twin brother, more often than not, not getting the blame for the results of sibling rivalry. And, sometimes placing me firmly in the shit. We do get on well now though.

(F) The younger twin stole a pair of shoes the older one 'ad bought. I was so angry, because when he'd worn 'em out he 'id them in my special tool cupboard. I was so angry, cos 'ed moved me box of screwdrivers. It's a place for everythink for me. And fings were out of place. I told the older one of for that, for moving my screwdriver box.

(M) Me an' me daughta, we was very close. You know, a muvver daughta fing. Shared a lot we did. But the twins argued a lot as they got olda.

(OT) Mum, almost always taking his side, was a key ingredient here. The baby brother's word seemingly seen as 'truth', or at least, 'more credible'. A father, distancing himself from any such conflict, apart from the occasional show of rage, and no real smacking that I can remember. Well, it was easier to ignore it. A much quieter life that way. And the penalty for my assumed misbehaviour (*pause*) the constant threat of being taken to Dr. Barnardo's and left there for good. More damaging than I knew at the time, even though that threat was constantly upsetting.

So, my insecurities, as previously mentioned, set firmly in stone, at such an early age. I'm talking three and upwards.

(M) I thought I was doing as any mum should. It was important to teach the twins the difference between right en wrong. And he (*pointing to OT*) was the naughtier one. His younger bruvver sometimes told me. More 'onest he was. So, fretening to put em in an 'ome, whenever they misbehaved, brought em to their senses. I mean, it was for their own good. He (*turning towards OT*) used to cry a lot, an offen ran to 'ide under or behind a chair, but you have to be cruel to be kind. Don't ya? His bruvver never got upset, well not like (*pointing again*) im. And it did the

older one good. I mean, after school he got a good job, he did. In an office he did! (*pause*). I left school at fourteen. I used ta clean offices, did em well. Ya see, cleaning was my fmg once the kids was at school. But he (*nodding in OT's direction*), he was never as easy as the uvver two. Never. 'is bruvver got 'imself a good job too, toolmaker (*pause, smile and with pride*), just like 'is dad.

(F) I never used to say very much. Too many other 'fings' to be doing, see. I was the breadwinner. She (*pointing to M*) did the kids. And, I found it 'ard to show affection to any of em. I mean, let's be fair, no one 'ad done that sort of fmg to me as a child. But, it didn't do me any 'arm. I stayed on the straight and narrow, I did. All me life. Always worked hard, gave the wife enough to keep us fed, holiday to Essex every year, even went to the South Coast once. Read the paper every day, voted for Labour, looked after me dad till he died..... but, being, ya know, touchy feely long talks to the kids playing football or cricket with the boys Well, I was too busy doing more important fings – ya, know, like (*pause*) working, painting and decorating, setting the coal fire, filling out me pools coupon. But they was never short of the fings they needed. Never.

(OT) I mostly enjoyed primary and secondary school. But I was frequently ill in late August, prior to a new school year. Early signs of anxiety. I had some success, academically, but, relative to my brother, not at sport. Now 'sport' was so much easier for my parents to understand. My brother excelled at sport, could have been a professional footballer. These achievements were always regularly acknowledged (*long pause*). I passed the eleven plus, my brother failed, my mum insisted we both go to the same comprehensive school. Five years later the school asked me to stay on for 'A' levels, but not my brother. Mum said we both had to leave. I was sixteen. The path not taken. Well, we were twins, weren't we, we were the same, weren't we, we had to be treated equally, didn't we (*anger becoming more evident now*). (*Long pause, allowing audience to take this in and for OT to calm down*).

- (M) We had to treat them the same. Couldn't have one leaving school and the other one staying. That wouldn't have been fair, would it! Jobs was what they needed.
- (OT) Careers advice: what does your dad do? He's a toolmaker. Right, I've got a job for you in Mile End. Engineering firm. As a junior draughtsman. And I've got a job for your brother, in Aldgate, toolmaker.
- (F) A job in engineering, just like their father, and their grandfather before them. How could they do any better than that? And him (*nodding towards OT*), in an office!
- (OT) My brother thrived. I was, in so many ways, a square peg in a round hole. Not that I didn't enjoy some of the work. When I worked for British Rail, Engineering, I got to travel for example. Many trips to the valleys of South Wales. In some ways, similar to East End, working-class communities. But it never felt quite right, I struggled with much of the technical stuff and, with each new post, the novelty quickly wore off. I couldn't get fired up about any of the positions I held. And, though I made some really good, life-long friends, I knew I had to 'move-on' (*pause*). So, I moved into teaching. But even there I was always looking for 'something else'. It wasn't until my early sixties and retirement, that I managed to really re-shape that square peg and squeeze my way out of that, round hole.
- (M) Never satisfied, that one (*just looking at OT, gaze continues throughout this monologue*). He don't know what's best for 'imself. Don't know which side of the plate 'is bread is butterd' Left his first job after just six months. Working at a drawing board he was. In an office. In an office. Said he wasn't happy, said he wanted to 'move-on', do somethink different.
- (F) Doesn't know how lucky he is – as is muvver says, he got a job in an office, office! I never got to work in an office. Sits at a desk he does, drawing diagrams. And he's only 16. He should bloody well count

himself lucky. Bloody lucky. He says they treat 'im like a slave. 'As to go and get their lunches, papers, you know, run errands. Well, he's only just bloody started. Ain't 'e. I mean, bloody 'ell. Never satisfied. He says they ain't giving him anyfink worthwhile to do. Worthwhile - at 16. He has to draw fings. He says 'es capable of doing more. That he 'as more about him than fetchin' their fish and chips. Than being a 'skivvy' (*pause*). Bloody skivvy. I 'ad to do all sorts of shit when I was 'is age. He'll learn!

Pause

And he did, (*turning to OT*) he only went en got 'imself a job with British Rail (*pride*), in an office, at Paddington station. Bridge department. Part of a bloody team, he was. Used to travel a lot, to South Wales, on a free ticket. His grandfather, my dad, worked for the railways until he retired. So, now my boy could look forward to years of work and a gold watch (*pause, sigh*). He gave it up after just nine years. Me dad, he worked for 'em for 51. Bloody stupid. Said he was looking for something better. A chance to 'move-on' (*pause and then with disdain*) Move-on. Bloody 'ell.