

The blue square.

By Andy young

Chapter One

Richard Candy was the drawing office manager, my boss, and the most openly gay person I had ever met, however this was the early seventy's when gay's were known as puffs, queers, shirt lifters, brown hatters, pillow biters, and fudge pushers. The only exposure I had to gay people at that time was on television, and that only amounted to Larry Grayson and John Inman, Larry was a comedian who's catch phrase was "what a gay day" or "shut that door", Inman, which I only thought much later in life must be a stage name, was the gay stereo type gents outfitter in the TV show "are you being served", both were usually laughed at, rather than with.

But Richard was the real deal, he carried the burden of his sexuality in his face, there were no paisley print cravats or well-manicured nails, no effeminate phrases or innuendo slipped into the conversation and he didn't stand like a little teapot. He just gave out a feeling of unease, a dark side to heterosexual males, it was as if he was living out a curse, he looked old before his time, being gay in the nineteen seventies was no walk in the park, well not until it was very late in the evening.

Perhaps due to Richards presence the rest of our office was very heterosexual, talk revolved around football, girls and beer, the presence of a gay in our midst seem to drive our conversations to macho extremes, it was if we were scared to show any feminine tendencies, we all denied ever having washed up at home, done any Hoovering, made a bed, or gone food shopping. But Richard was far too intelligent to be bothered by our "men's" talk, his revenge on us was directed at any chink in anyone's armour. He had an uncanny ability to spot character flaws and insecurities in most people, he would then take great pleasure in opening them up for the world, well our small world, to see. I never really encountered the wrath of Richard, he must

have spotted that I didn't care much about my own failings, I usually highlighted them myself before they could be spotted by others, so while I never intended to touch my toes for Richard, I got along with him better than most. I occasionally even made him laugh, when his face was miraculously transformed from a deeply furrowed sad curtain of flesh, to a bright engaging face full of character, it was all too rare. We knew he had been married, he had a photograph of his two teenage boys pinned to his drawing board, apparently they had disowned him when his secret was discovered, he would never see them again.

This is when I learned that life is all about contrasts and comparisons, a man judges a woman as fanciable compared to his current squeeze, he invariably buys a bigger or faster car, he goes for a new job for more money, he may be overworked for a pittance in the new job so long as it's a bigger pittance than his previous one. No one ever seems to question that it's all bollocks in the end, well I never did at that age, I still don't think many people understand what is really important in life. So perhaps because of comparison I was protected from closer scrutiny from Richard by Martin, the new office junior. Martin was from out in the sticks, a carrot cruncher and turnip kicker we would call him, more at home on a tractor than at a drawing board. His dad had told him that farming was dying and that he should get a career, perhaps in engineering, well he was right on one score, unfortunately Martin was useless in the office. From his first day when I showed him around the company, he didn't seem right for this environment, he bumped in to desks, he wore his suit like it still had the hanger in it, he looked frightened. I showed him the dylene plan printer and gave him a demonstration, but on his go he got his kipper tie trapped in the rollers, the powerful machine pulled his chin slowly into its jaws. He said nothing, just braced himself for a maiming, it must have been an all too common experience for him growing up on a farm after all, a plan printer, what's that compared to a combine

harvester. I wondered how many times in his childhood Martin had been bailed, ploughed, or harrowed.

Richard hated Martin, he didn't even play his usual game of searching for the chink, the weakness, the soft spot, it was just too easy. Martin was a fish out of water, this was not his world therefore Richard decided that this was going to be his hell. He became relentless, our office floor was of cream lino tiles with the occasional blue one for effect, what effect it was supposed to have we never knew, but next to where Richard sat was a blue tile.

At least three times a day Richard would scream, "Martin, blue square", Martin would stop what he was doing and rush to the blue tile and stand to attention.

"So Martin what on earth have you done now".

"I don't know Mr Candy", Martin would reply.

"Exactly", Richard would say, then sigh deeply.

When this ritual had first started Richard would take the time to fully explain Martin's failings in minute detail, as the months wore on he tired of this, he would simply look Martin up and down and say.

"Head at forty five degrees", Martin would lay his head on his left shoulder.

Richard would then smack his exposed neck hard with a twelve inch Blundell Harling scale rule, Martin would wince then without a word go back to his duties, Richard emotionless would return to using his rule for its intended purpose. The office would be quiet and tense for several minutes, then we would return to our football, girls and beer banal banter. I was young and did nothing to shield or protect Martin, I still regret this although I don't know what I could have done, but it still lies heavy on my conscience, thirty odd years later.

I knew things must come to a head sooner or later, there had to be a conclusion to this level of cruelty and bullying. One day in April Martin had his pad and pencil, he was collecting the lunch order list, perhaps the most important job of the day for the

office junior. I had first felt the pride of a promotion, when instead of taking the sandwich order, I contributed to it. In my first year at work my mom had always made me sandwiches but I forgot them on purpose when Martin started work so that I would know how it felt to order my lunch and have it delivered to my desk. Funnily enough it didn't feel right, the bread seemed to stick in my throat, was it guilt, I soon went back to my mom's cholesterol specials, cheap white bread, salted butter, luncheon meat and tomato sauce sammos, everyday.

Martin always left Richards order until last, he had to build his courage first, he would stand on the blue square, force of habit, and ask, "what do you want from the shop Mr Candy".

Richard would look up through his eyebrows, "Cornish pasty," he would bark, everyone else would pay up front for their lunch, Martin would give change on his return but Richard was strictly cash on delivery.

"What if they haven't got any pasties"?

Richard huffed again, "pork pie then".

Martin looked uneasy, the pie delivery to the corner shop was notoriously unreliably and had failed the previous week, Richard had gone hungry and Martin got three welts on his neck for reward.

"What if they got no pies", said Martin sheepishly.

"Then get me anything now fuck off".

Martin returned at bang on twelve thirty with a large white carrier bag stretched to bursting, change was dished out with sandwiches, crisps and chocolate bars. Martin came to Richard last.

"Well" said Richard sharply.

"They got no pies", said Martin, he took the last two items from the bag, he handed Richard a packet of cheese and onion crisps and a copy of Exchange and Mart, I

choked on my luncheon meat. Richard just stared at the offering of a potato snack and a magazine for second hand items.

“What the fuck is this,” he said coldly.

“They got no pies,” said Martin again, “and I know you like the Exchange and Mart”.

This was true, Richard would study in detail the cheap paper magazine and would highlight potential bargains to anyone who would listen.

“Gents racing bicycle with pump, needs attention, five pounds, what needs attention the bike or the pump?” or “cast iron framed stand alone mangle, two quid.” I don’t think that he ever bought anything from these pages, but for all I did know he may have had the worlds foremost collection of old mangles and aging bicycles, however I did know that a book of bargains is not an appropriate substitute for a meat and potato pie when your hungry.

Richard stood up, he was tall and gangly with sharp features, Martin was shorter and stocky.

Richard stooped slightly for eye-to-eye contact, “you fuckin sub human moron”, he said nose to nose. Richard poked his bony finger in Martins chest, Martin stepped back a tile. “Fuckin exchange and mart, free to good home totally useless office junior, suitable only for organ donation”. Richard stared, then slowly and deliberately moved his right hand across to his left shoulder, then whipped the back of his hand across Martin’s cheek. We all stood and stared, the crack of a slender hand on fleshy cheek had sounded like a gunshot, Martin stepped back a further tile and stared at the floor for a brief second, Richard moved forward, onto the blue square I noticed, I don’t know if Martin spotted this but I like to think so. The pent up rage from months of humiliation combined with well-honed muscles from years of farm work all came together behind one large meaty fist. In one swift fluid action he drew back then launched the callused bony mass at the end of his arm toward Richard, it connected to his chin with the crunching sound like a sports car hitting a tree. Several blooded

teeth burst from Richards mouth, he fell backwards into his chair which slid to the wall, we were silent, Martin stood and stared at Richard, daring him to get up.

Martin was sacked and I never saw him again, the last we heard of him he had been conned out of money his dad had given him and had stupidly bought some very poor farm land near to the edge of town. His dad had disowned him, Martin tried farming for a few unsuccessful years then sold the lot to a desperate housing developer for a very large fortune.

Richard also lost his job some years later after he was arrested for propositioning an undercover policeman in a public toilet near the ring road, which I always thought was an appropriate place for him to meet his downfall.

What about me, well that's what this story is all about, born in the fifties, childhood in the spoil your kids sixties, teenage and adolescence in the brilliant fun seventies, disillusioned in the eighties, hard working in the nineties, then re-evaluation, heartache and crisis in the new century, but for now my plan was simple, I was going to be a rock star.