

# **I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)**

**Lee Frank**

**Baby Me**

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## Baby Me

There seem to be no childhood photos of an unhappy me. I doubt anyone intentionally takes photos of unhappy children, yet these photos exist; probably children not happy when confronted with a camera. Some parents seem willing to take any photo rather than wait for happier times. Mine had no such problem with me. On page 27 is a photo with youngest brother, Robert, scowling because his hand was in a cast. I mention this because I spent six months with both my legs in casts. The special baby shoes with corrective lifts still exist. (Mom saved more than photos.) I also broke my collarbone at the age of one and a half. And no photos of a young unhappy me.

Was I suffering from happy baby syndrome? Were my parents incredibly patient, always ready to snap the moment I appeared happy? Could it have been . . . laughing gas? I suspect none of these. Although the truth with its innumerable corroborating minions of fact has vanished in the past, I have an opinion. I have this opinion because today people often ask me why I'm laughing, and I always say it's because I'm easily amused. I am. When around others, I always find something funny. If it's not obvious, then I'll create it.

Does this suggest I'm some kind of *delirioso*, a demented manic, spontaneously silly in spite of himself

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or the world around him? No, just that I easily find humor everywhere. (At least I'm always doing this in public.) Why? Because, like that happy baby, I'm often in pain and I know—now—laughter takes my mind away from it. I say I know this now, but I suspect I'm only relearning lessons taught to me by my mother. Faced with a baby subjected to painful braces what would you do? My mother taught me to laugh.

The many photos of me as happy baby may not be proof, but they are a reminder that the me of today can't take sole credit for his good humor. Photos do that. They remind us of our past selves. Re-mind. To think again. To visit our minds in the past. Anytime we look at photos, we revisit the past. Anytime we look into our minds to see what we remember, we look into the past. Those times belong to the past, just as these words do. My writing at this moment, this now, is *your* past. However, you're reading this in the present and it's my job to bring my past into your present.

I didn't always laugh. I know that for a long period, probably beginning in my teens and extending many decades, I was less amused. You'll see it in some of the photos. But right now, we're in happy babyland. In a place called Newark. At a time when the world was running ruinward. The depression lingered. The prospective World War Two (WWII) belligerents were exercising their muscles in Spain. Here are some headlines of the time:

AMELIA EARHART LOST AT SEA  
DUKE OF WINDSOR MARRIES WALLIS SIMPSON  
GEORGE VI CROWNED KING OF GREAT BRITAIN.  
GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE OPENS  
HINDENBURG AIRSHIP DISASTER  
NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN BECOMES BRITISH PM

Doing the minimal historical research for this book, I discovered an amazing fact. *My Life* mentioned two formative movies of my youth, both born in the fertile mind of H. G. Wells. One was *Things to Come* (also known by the title of the original book, *The Shape of Things to Come*). The other was *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (from a short story). Both influenced me, but in different ways. *Things to Come* was a vision of hope, a glowing Hollywood-Deco future headed for the stars. It was my instant connection to science-fiction at age eight or nine, experienced while accompanying my father to a double bill at the Little Theatre in Newark, New Jersey.

It was some decades before I understood the message from *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*. A deceptively simple film, it's the opposite of *Things to Come* in many ways. (Some people see it as an anti-technology tract countering *Things to Come*. Knowing Wells, I think not.) As a youngster, I rightfully ignored the love story, concentrating instead on the miracles. In time—about twenty years—I realized those miracles were a metaphor for power, and the real message was about the potential for abusing power. As I said in *My Life*, “It taught me that knowledge was not hiding in the answers, but rather should be sought by asking the right questions.”

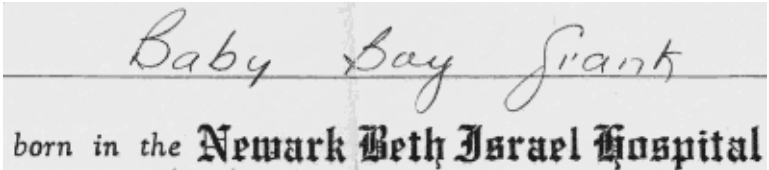
These two films were also close in origin. *Things To Come* from 1936 and the other from the year of my origin, 1937. When I searched (the Internet, of course) to learn more I was astonished. Here's the amazing fact: *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* opened in theaters the day I was born! When this date appeared on my computer screen, I was stunned. I knew it was released the year I was born, but the same day?

*My world is not filled with coincidences, only enough to satisfy the underlying mathematical reason for their*

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*existence. Some grab your attention. Like the month of July, 1991. In the first two weeks of that month the following actors died: Michael Landon, Lee Remick, James Franciscus, and Bert Convey. What really got my attention was that they were my contemporaries. (And of each other, of course.) I guess I was alerted to this connection when another contemporary, Jim Henson, died the year before.*

*More coincidences with the eighth of February: The more detailed calendars always listed it as the anniversary of the founding of the Boy Scouts. Lord Baden-Powell got the credit but I would have known none of this without my father's deep involvement in Scouting. How did he manage to get me born on that day, anyway?*



As proof of my being born, I can only offer this copy of my birth certificate. A little hard to read, but the name is Baby Boy Frank. My parents had insufficient warning and were caught short, namewise. Just kidding, but I don't know the real reason for my apparent namelessness. I do know it was never a problem until I wanted a driver's license. We, my parents and I, had to locate my earliest school records to prove I had legitimate claim to the name of Lee. As for the name, my firstborn cousins (on my mother's side) are Louise, Larry, and Leonard. All named for our deceased grandfather, Louis.

*This grandfather died at age 49 in the flu epidemic of 1926. All his children were long-lived, most passing eighty, with one at 94 and still counting. My father's mother reached 95. Of her two remaining children, her daughter*

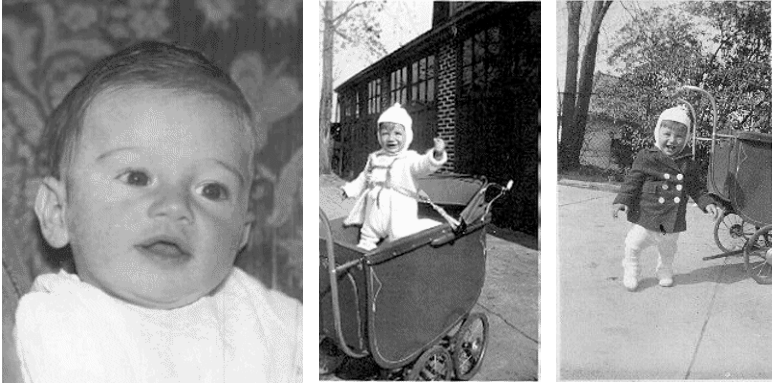
*is 93 and my father is 87. I've observed this about my deceased aunts and uncles on both sides: With one exception, those who took better care of their health lived at least ten years longer. Seems like a plan to me.*

*Another word about this name. Names are also part of who we are. Mine has a total of eight letters. I used to make this joke: We couldn't afford a middle name. I have, in the past, introduced myself as Lee No-Middle-Name Frank. I never, however, felt deprived, but I have been variously annoyed and amused when my name is reversed. And misfiled. Especially when the Army tried to change it, assuming I couldn't follow their simple instructions to write it Last Name comma First Name. I mean, what did they think the comma was doing there, anyway? But I got used to it.*

Having said this, I have some advice for parents: Don't give your children middle names. I know most people do, due to religion or tradition (oft indistinguishable) to do so. And there are benefits; for example, my nephew has this great combination of Jay Lewis Frank, which he can use in various ways (J.L., Jay L., J. Lewis, etc.). So why am I advising no middle names? Every time someone commits a crime, the news always uses the middle name, even if this person hasn't used it for fifty years! I don't think his pre-assassination friends knew him as Lee *Harvey* Oswald. Of course, you could also give your kids a middle name and tell them to always use it—so people will recognize them when they make the news.

All of us, my "L" cousins and I, were born, and the grandfather I never knew died, in Newark. These photos in the first two chapters are from Newark, where I lived until a few months past my eighth birthday. Looking closely at the early baby photos below you can see my growth.

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The first is my earliest picture, a month or so before the happy baby in the carriage. (That picture is in summer making me at least four or five months old.) The middle one above is from a later, colder time. I would guess winter and a child nearing one year, standing if not walking. Walking is the aim of the child in the third photo, a photo taken in early spring. This me is slightly bigger and a little unsteady (those bowed legs lack the support of their recent braces).

There are many other photos from this time. Most of these exist in albums, probably in the possession of other family members. My interest here are the different me's discovered in the photos found in the box mentioned in the Foreword. Every photo in this chapter was either found in that box or followed me as I moved away from Newark and that time and place.

Like most of you, I had two grandfathers. Unlike most of you, I never knew either. My father has never spoken of his father, nor have any of his siblings. Between my mother and father, I had nine aunts and uncles. (My cousin total can be found in *My Life*.) I did know my two grandmothers, as different as two women could possibly be.

My mother's mother died shortly before my Bar Mitzvah. She was lively throughout my youth, even remarrying. I have many memories of their apartment, most especially sweet butter on rye bread and seltzer on the back stairs (it could explode, I was told). Grandma Frank was older, lived longer—if you call her last years in a nursing home living. She was unbelievably hard of hearing, and now so is her son Norman, my father. I'm sure she also loved us kids, but back then it was a little frightening. Looking back, I have enormous respect for her toughness, bringing up six kids alone.

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