

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

Leaving Brooklyn

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I did not, as I said, live all my New York days in Brooklyn Heights. But before I move into Greenwich Village, I should mention the sisters, Bonnie and Wendy. The first worked at the Courant Institute. During our first conversation I asked her out. She said she was going to meet her sister and I could come along. We met her sister and took a subway somewhere. As I sat on that subway between two attractive sisters, I experienced the normal male fantasies. Should I try? It might be interesting, but I doubted they would appreciate it. I picked Bonnie. We dated, on and off, for several years. Even after she'd gotten married, we still met for the occasional lunch. I still get Holiday cards from Wendy.

They lived in Sheepshead Bay, at the very end of the world of Brooklyn. I would take the subway there to pick up Bonnie, we would go into the city, and I would accompany her back home. This meant returning to my apartment, at the other end of Brooklyn, on a weekend anywhere from three to five AM. Trips like that on the subway taught me which cars to ride, dismounting right next to street exit. Sheepshead Bay was more like the Jersey Shore than the rest of the urban Brooklyn I'd seen. I've been to at least six different Brooklyn neighborhoods and they're each unique. To illustrate this phenomenon, Thomas Wolfe (the earlier) wrote a short story: "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn."

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Last words about Brooklyn Heights. It was not healthy for me. The heat in the radiators radiated away before reaching my top floor. Winter at the top with an uninsulated roof was . . . what's the word? Cold. Yeh, that's it. Cold. Maybe even damn cold. I had an electric blanket, my first. (Never needed one at RPI, as cold as that was.) It didn't warm up the apartment, so I ran hot water in the shower. Bad idea. The added humidity got into my bones, literally. One day while exercising—to keep in shape, not to get warm—I broke my toe. When the VA X-rayed it, they said I had arthritis. And one more unhealthy thing happened in this apartment. Because of the extreme cold, I stayed in bed for a number of days with an infected scrotum. Ten plus years later the doctor tells me my sperm count has the odds of a lottery, most likely caused by the combined heat of the infection, the fever, and days under the electric blanket. Not healthy.

Although I was working for GBA downtown, more of my day was spent at NYU's Washington Square campus attending class and using the two computers there. Both were much more powerful than the one at GBA. Washington Square, the focal point of Greenwich Village, also had a social life. I moved into the neighborhood in 1967, to another top floor apartment. I was now on Eighth Street, only two short blocks north and half a block west from Washington Square's famous arch. This was only a fourth floor walkup, without the extra flight to the front door—thus effectively two flights closer to the street than the Brooklyn Heights apartment. And since it was a newer building, the stories weren't as high, making the climb even easier. Other pluses were rooms fifty percent larger and real heat.

While I didn't have roof access from within the apartment, it did have a skylight (in the bathroom) and a fire escape. These were used exclusively by the neighborhood burglars. As I said, the Village had a social life, but I didn't realize how varied it was. I lived here for six months before the first burglary—stereo, TV, typewriter, and the ruby ring my uncle Herman had given me for high school graduation. I replaced the necessities and they struck again. This time they used the skylight. When the detectives arrived, I pointed out the perfect set of fingerprints on the shower curtain bar. (In removing the skylight, the burglar blackened his hands.) The detectives were not interested. This was just another petty, most likely drug-related, crime and they had neither the resources nor the interest.

This was where I learned that society's institutions primary interest is their own survival. The structure of the institution—its buildings, its people, its public image—takes precedence over its functions. The organization is a living thing and as such its first concern is survival. It co-opts any attempt to reform its function by absorbing such efforts into its existing structure. No longer able to fully perform the job for which they were first created, they publicize only the portions of the job they can do. Since they won't show us, we can't tell what they're not doing. Until we need those services. One example: Motor vehicle regulations are now enforced are a means of checking for more serious crime, never for correcting a violation. The simple goal of safer cars has fallen by the wayside.

The third burglary found nothing for two reasons. I had not yet replaced the items from the previous crime and my arrival interrupted a more thorough search. When I opened the door, I heard noises. Someone was leaving by the fire escape. I froze. Listened. Decided it was better

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to lock the door and come back with the cops. The apartment was only slightly disheveled and I apologized to the police for the inconvenience. They left, and I took final inventory. I left an hour later, bought a paper, selected an apartment on Fourteenth Street, and went to the rental office there. The agent was busy but I said I was ready to move in right away. In a hurry, I typed my information onto his rental form. I found a friend to stay with me that last night in the old apartment. The movers came the next day and I was in the newer and much nicer, apartment in a few hours. The only casualty of the move was a small telescope from the nights in Brooklyn Heights.

The best you could say for my two previous apartments was they had character. The new apartment belonged to the newer, high-rise buildings of New York. One large room instead of many small ones, modern plumbing and conveniences; it even had a parquet floor. And one window opening on another close-by high-rise. These neighbors kept their blinds mostly closed, as I did. Now I had a doorman and an elevator instead of steps for exercise. It cost more, but not that much and I was more than happy to pay for the security.

What I lost, chiefly, was the short walk to Washington Square. This apartment was six blocks further and I rarely had the extra time to stroll. The neighborhood, too, was less interesting, but not dull. There are few boring neighborhoods in New York. Most of my time was still spent at GBA and NYU at the Square, but more of that time was shifting to work and away from school. As I mentioned, school was becoming less enjoyable simply because it was becoming less. Also I was busier at work with the expansion of a new project. The summer after the FinLang paper, Mike, the high school intern, and I began implementing my basic design. We spent weeks

flowcharting, more weeks programming (sometimes with me dictating code), and a few months debugging. Mike continued to help part-time after he went back to school. When we were finished, we had an English-like front end for users to manipulate standard financial databases, such as Standard and Poors. In another few months, I added an interface to the standard UCLA BioMed statistical package. Users could now perform sophisticated statistical analysis on data easily retrieved from financial databases

I have a non-apocryphal anecdote from that summer. We needed more space for flowcharting, so we took over a large empty classroom. One day we filled the blackboards of three walls with detailed flowcharts. It took the whole day, and we had no time to transcribe this design to paper. We made what we thought were unequivocal messages on each blackboard instructing the custodians not to erase this work. When we returned the next day, the blackboards were clean. When we inquired, we were told the custodians did not speak English.

The plan for FinLang became the reality of a working computer program called SUPER. (We didn't tell the school the joke: It stood for Standard Und Poors Enformation Retrieval.) It became an integral part of our computer support for students, faculty, and the deans. Sort of. Our group was expanding and its relationship to the school was changing. Now I had GBA student interns to help with SUPER. Larry left, I thought for a better job. His replacement began playing a different management game. She added people and spent a lot of time meeting with faculty members. By the next academic semester, the new reality became apparent. It was political. I had produced a very effective tool for research and its use was now carefully controlled.

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GBA had, through the Investments Workshop mentioned in “NYU Me,” bragged about the importance of such a tool. Now we had this tool, but few people at GBA knew about it. Our new Computer Support Group leader made sure a few professors in one department controlled access to SUPER. They, and their students, became the exclusive users of this new tool. None of this was immediately evident, and few people beyond myself knew the truth.

One incident confirmed my growing suspicions. Word of SUPER’s existence had leaked, mostly likely from the students. At the end of a semester I met—at a neutral, non-GBA location—with one of GBA’s newest and brightest professors. He told me about the kind of research he wanted to do and the tools he needed. I realized he knew nothing of the capabilities of SUPER nor its potential for the work he wanted to do. Up to this point I had refused to jump to evil conclusions about university politics. Now I had proof. Was I shocked? Dismayed? Dumbfounded? Yes, all these described my reaction. And worse. This rising academic light told me he was leaving GBA specifically because they couldn’t provide this tool, my tool, for his research. Politics had triumphed over education, and I had learned another lesson: Higher minds are not necessarily high-minded.

The GBA professors were, at best, just people. Some were regular Joe’s (no Jane’s I can recall at the time). A few were elite and let you know it. More were also wannabe millionaires. One in particular did not seem to fit in, even among such a variety of persons. Marshall had a reputation among students and faculty alike. Like, they didn’t. I don’t believe I heard anyone refer to him as Lord High Executioner, but that was my impression even before I met him.

I received a message to come to his office because he wanted some project run on the computer. I knocked, heard a gruff “enter” and did so. His office fell into the category of cluttered. Fell hell, it won first prize. Marshall was on the phone talking, as I soon guessed, with a student. No, not talking, yelling. No, more like screaming. It seemed the student wanted an extension for a paper. Marshall made it unequivocal—to the student, me, and every office in the corridor—that there was no way on earth (or heaven and the specifically mentioned hell) he would grant this extension. His punctuated his intention by slamming the phone into the cradle. (Phones were stronger back then.)

If this demonstration was for my benefit, to send me groveling into a corner, it didn't work. I thought he was extremely rude and a jerk. A rude jerk. He brusquely explained what he needed from me and I gave him to understand, in as few words as possible, that I understood.

A week or two later he showed up in my office wanting to know where his results were. He made this point by pulling over a chair, sitting as close as possible and shaking his not inconsiderable fist in my face. All the while this was going on I was becoming more and more detached. For one thing, I couldn't take this kind of behavior seriously. This was the Graduate School of Business of a major university. I found myself smiling as he increased his tirade, thinking to myself, “Buddy, if you worked on the docks, you'd be dead. You're lucky you're in academia and not in the real world, because they'd never put up with this crap.” With the smile still in place, I said I'd take care of his work as soon as possible, explaining I had many projects including one for the dean. He left saying I had better something or else my job something something and maybe my life something. I didn't laugh out loud or tell a coworker until he left the floor.

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I finished his project as I had scheduled it in the first place, using interoffice mail to avoid delivering it in person. That was, I thought, the end of it. Months later I'm walking up Sixth Avenue in the Village and I hear my name shouted from across the eight lanes (six moving, two parked). I locate the sound and there's Marshall running across the street through the mild midday traffic coming straight for me. Uh oh, I think as I brace myself. He reaches me, grabs my hand and thanks me as he continues to shake my hand. Inexplicably, I'm now his long lost friend. I smile weakly and accept his gratitude for my work. I decline the offer of a beer and rush off to a made-up appointment. I leave him standing there on the sidewalk (west side of Sixth, below Fourth), hoping I hid my astonishment, hoping no one I knew saw us, hoping the word of my being Marshall's friend has vanished with the moment. And thinking I now knew too much about this sad human being; even a little of why he is the way he was.

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