

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

Ex-Army Idle Me

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The Cuban Missile Crisis came and went. So eventually did the rest of my Army career. The two-year tunnel had come and gone. I began breathing before it was over. This tunnel *did* have light at the end and I began bathing in it. I was even unaffected by the beginnings of Vietnam. As Intelligence skills went, mine were not in great demand. A few in our outfit, regular Army types, people with certain language skills, were not so lucky. Those of us getting out tried not to think of where our coworkers were being sent. A final irony: We had to put on uniforms and live for a few days on an Army post in Brooklyn to be officially mustered out.

I left the service with the rank of E-5 (Specialist Fifth Class, the equivalent of Sergeant). This promotion was the result of keeping a clean nose; the proof lies in my being awarded a good conduct medal. And one other reason. Before our time was up, we were asked by the our ranking Sergeant if we intended to re-enlist. We both knew that if we merely said yes, we would be promoted to E-5. Without any actual commitment to re-up. He knew we knew, and we knew he knew we knew. With tongue in cheek, everyone said yes.

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In *My Life*, I talk about spending the next six months living off the Government's unemployment dollar. I also talk about sharing an apartment, and bar time, in Kearny with John. What I didn't say there was this period coincided with a six month separation from Patty. At this distance, I'm not sure of the reasons, but I think it had to do with her need to be sure of us. I, too, wanted assurances, but didn't require the same degree of certainty. Patty wanted to plan a life together but I had no idea who I was or where I was going.

Although I spent most of this time in a Kearny bar, I didn't expect to find answers there. I suppose I thought I'd find them in the endless piles of books I brought home from the library. What I did find was that I was getting better at asking the right questions. One source of this was a worldview broadened by the Army. The concerns of Army Intelligence gave me a broader perspective of our complex political world. Their detailed investigations of various public figures forced me to address many moral questions. My answers rarely agreed with theirs, but I kept them to myself until I was free to speak on my own

Speak, and write. My notebooks were expanding rapidly. Looking back into these I find thoughts on prejudice, justice, environment, and politics. I find names such as Pericles, Burke, Pierce, and Coleridge. I also find this cryptic remark: 22 Nov 63. JFK — KIA. As a result of that debate seen on television in the lounge at Fort Holabird, I voted an absentee ballot for Kennedy. I had been in the Army less than six months. Three years later he was dead. KIA, for those who might not know, stands for Killed In Action.

A final word about the Army, Vietnam, and death. A few years after my military exit, my cousin Leonard was facing the draft. Vietnam was in full swing (not the right word, but better than saying it was going great guns), and

many young men were faced with difficult choices. At a family gathering, we talked. He was in this position because he, like me a decade before, had dropped out of college. We talked about the options, places like Canada. I asked Leonard what courses he liked. He said, "Computing." I said, "That's it!" I advised him to do everything he could to get himself assigned to any Army computing he could find. Although I was new to the field and knew little of the military's needs, I knew they would need skilled people. Leonard did so, stayed stateside, and kept to computing for a successful career. I like to think I may have saved his life.

Now out of the military, and grateful for the lack of employment, I was doing so well I bought a second car. The little—make that tiny—Fiat Bianchia (described in *My Life*) I bought on my Army pay was minimal transportation. In the Army, I saw my life as minimal. Now on the outside, I wanted to feel and act like a free man. I bought a sports car, a used three-year old Alfa Romeo Giulietta coupe. Red. I mention the color for two reasons. One, this was an Italian car and Italy's racing colors were red. The other reason is that now, over thirty-five years later, I own my second red car, an Acura coupe. The other thing they have in common is they're the two best driving cars I've ever owned.

This Acura, too, is used; three times older than the Alfa was. I mention this because even though I have far more money in the bank than when I got out of service, I can afford far less when it comes to cars. Cars, in case you hadn't noticed, have become proportionately far more expensive than any of our other living expenses. (Except medical care.) This present car cost some one twelfth of my present house. If that Alfa had been priced proportionately, this same house would have been worth

around twelve thousand dollars back then. Nonsense. The house was probably worth at least three times as much. This makes today's used car prices now about three times higher in proportion to housing. Look at the new car prices. Your basic family car is about a tenth of your basic family house, making it twice what it was thirty-five years ago. And the most popular motor vehicles today are not the basic family sedan but SUVs, Sport Utility Vehicles. They cost almost twice as much as the basic full-size Ford, Chevy, or Plymouth (or Honda, Toyota, etc.) Today, therefore, people buying into the American Dream of dependable, independent transportation are paying anywhere from two to four times, proportionately, what people did in the sixties.

Aside on car colors. My first car was black. It was my only black car. Since then I've had two each of colors red, yellow, green, brown, and silver. Of colors gold and blue, only one apiece. Here's the color sequence of how my cars and I have appeared to the world: black, light green, red, yellow, yellow, brown/tan, gold/white, light blue, dark green, gray, gray, brown, dark blue, and red. And here's another thing: I never owned a white car. The most popular color and I never owned one. (Rented yes, owned no.) None of these choices were made to fit any plan, they simply happened. I don't know why no white car, but now I'm not sure I want to break the pattern. Or maybe, since my first car was black, my last should be white? Symmetrical, but a portentous choice. And right now I'm thinking about buying another car and I can't decide what color. Black is completely out of the question for Florida. Should I buy white—from now on? Or add another gold or blue to the list? And can I find a second gold, since the color is now very rare. Anyway, most new car colors (except for traditional black or white) are the unidentifiable hues of clever marketing.

Italian racing red brings back other memories. I took that Alfa to Formula One races at Watkins Glen, N.Y. I attended only four of these races in my life, which is not bad since so few have been held in the U.S. Formula One, for those who don't know, is the most sophisticated and technologically advanced form of automobile racing. These leading edge vehicles have more in common with airplanes than the family sedan. Races are so demanding it's rare when half the cars finish. Racing at, and over, the limit is very dangerous. The danger is not what attracted me, then or now. It's the level of human skill and machine technology unmatched anywhere in human history. It's where advantages are regularly measured in thousandths of a second. Even driving a Formula One simulation on your computer will get your heart rate up. I've never simulated a whole race, being exhausted after only five laps.

Aside from the Alfa, I didn't spend much during these six months in Kearny. Unemployment didn't give me much. (The Alfa came from my Army savings.) Beers were only fifteen cents—small glasses—and library books were free. Gas prices in '62 were a now unbelievable twenty-nine cents a gallon. In between beers, I concentrated on library books. Beers filled most evenings; books most days. I did more than read, I made notes, wrote outlines. I also developed lists of books to read. Since my learning was still largely learning the basics, it wasn't hard to find most of my desired books in the library.

This extensive self-study program, courtesy of my six months of freedom, did not evolve any plans for my future. Nor did my extensive bar time. With my military obligation behind me, there was still nothing even dimly visible in my future. Perhaps, I had gotten used to living in the limbo created by the impending Draft and my indeterminate military future. Still adrift, I waited for something to develop. It took two years after my Army exit for opportunity to knock. Meanwhile, the free money was running out and I needed a job.

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