

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

**Lee Frank**

## **Working in Florida**

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## Working in Florida

I decided to leave for Florida before winter hit New York. Did I have a plan? No, not beyond heading for Fort Lauderdale, a place where my boyhood friend Dick had once vacationed. That was the plan, just packing the minimum and heading south. I thought I was going alone. In a phrase that had not occurred to me then, I was free, white, and thirty-one. It hadn't occurred to me because I had no more thoughts about my state than my appearance. I was only aware of my worsening condition and the hopeful balm of a better climate.

I didn't go alone. I talked about the upcoming trip in the office, and Jim, one of our graduate-student interns, asked if he could come along. I said, "Aren't you here to get an MBA?" He replied, "I'm bored, why not Florida?" I said, "OK." Since neither of us had a car, we arranged to deliver someone else's. These driveaway services are all over the U.S., and even without experience it was a cinch. Throughout the next decade, I used these services many times to make the trip back and forth from New Jersey to Florida. This first time was the only time I had company. There were other differences.

When we were given our pickup instructions, we were told it was a late model Cadillac. And the trunk was locked. The owner, we were told, was transporting some personal

belongings. Preoccupied with cruising to Florida in a Cadillac, we never questioned what we would do if we had a flat. And fortunately, neither of us had much luggage. The first thing that went strange was the radio; we checked it out as soon as we picked up the car in a midtown parking garage. It had an automatic signal seeking feature never meant to function inside a large steel-framed building. The radio went dead almost immediately.

At our first stop for gas—at a real gas station with real garage and mechanic, relics now from an age long past—we were told it was merely a fuse. We replaced the fuse and felt better knowing we had not damaged our client's car. And now we had music! Jim's job as copilot was finding the good music, not always easy on a cross-country trip. It got very difficult later that night. We were off the main road looking for any town with a decent and affordable motel. Trying to make distance this first night had taken us somewhere into the Carolinas; still, we hoped, heading south. It was long after midnight and long past the time to stop. We'd been on an empty two-lane blacktop for twenty minutes, when Jim's radio fiddling really focused our attention. We stared at one another as the music ripped the dark, laying open the surreal night. The words shouted "Why don't we do it in the road?" We both said, "What in the wide, wide world of rock 'n roll is this?" What it was, we were told when it was over, was Paul McCartney's latest from the Beatle's latest, *The White Album*. It had been released on November 25th, the Monday before the weekend we left town. (We'd spent Thanksgiving with our families.) We both knew this album was out but we'd both been too busy getting ready to leave to pay attention. Now it felt like a pushpin on the maps of our lives.

The rest of the trip was unmemorable with the exception of Georgia. In late '68, Georgia had completed

only a few miles of I-95. We traversed most of the state on lesser roads, often within sight of pickups displaying jam-packed gun racks in their rear windows. Here we were, two long-haired hippies driving a Cadillac with New York plates. OK, our hair wasn't that long, but I did have mustache and beard and it was hard to imagine we didn't look like hippies to our rustic brethren. Not long after this trip, we saw *Easy Rider*, with its pickup-shooting-hippies conclusion. That stuck too close to home.

We arrived at Fort Lauderdale, took a room at the Howard Johnson's on the beach, and removed our meager luggage from the back seat. We delivered the car to its owner in exclusive Bal Harbour. As we waited to collect our meager fee, he opened the trunk. It was filled with small electronic parts and products worth thousands. He had used us to make a stock shipment. After that, I never accepted a driveaway with a locked trunk.

We took the bus to a nearby car rental agency, where I rented a week's worth of minimal transportation. On our way back to Fort Lauderdale—on A1A, the scenic route—Jim asked if we could stop at bar called the Castaways. Why shouldn't he try for job, he said, at a place with action. Fine by me. While I waited for his interview to end, I decided to check the phone book for computer companies. I found a time-sharing company in Fort Lauderdale. At the time, time-sharing was hot technology. (Now, it's just another ho-hum online service.) I called and asked if they were hiring. They were. I made an appointment for the next day. The next day I found their office, we talked, and they made me an offer for not so many dollars a month. I asked for a few dollars more to bring my yearly salary to nice round even thousands, as it had been at GBA. Slightly incredulous, they agreed. Oh yeah, Jim didn't get the Castaways job.

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I didn't view my luck in getting this job as one hundred percent good. They objected to my hirsute state, so we negotiated a compromise. I dropped the goatee, shortened the sideburns, but keep the mustache Fu Manchu style, a la Broadway Joe. (Namath, quarterback of the New York Jets and New York man-about-town.) That wasn't the only compromise. This was my first experience with employment in Florida. When I pointed out they were offering me fully one-third less than I had been offered in New York, I was told this is how it was in Florida. I was told it was cheaper to live here and therefore we workers needed less income. Yes, it's true you need fewer winter clothes but that's the only saving. The first non-savings I noticed was paying the same for supermarket orange juice. Thirty years later and Florida still pays smaller salaries. Why? Because they can. Because enough people will still sacrifice to live here.

*I spent the remainder of '68 and all of 1969 working for this company. This was the year three major New York sports teams won championships. I felt I was their personal representative in Florida. First it was the Jets, with Broadway Joe and his now immortal "Number One" gesture. That was January of 1969 and pretty amazing. But nowhere near as amazing as the Amazing Mets in September. (I still have the Rheingold beer coasters commemorating this miracle.) Finally, the '69 Knicks were NBA champs, a season begun in '69 and ending in April of 1970. (But by then I was gone from Florida.)*

*Coincidences are especially easy in sports, an activity whose life blood is numbers. Yesterday, as I write this, Mark McGwire hit his sixty-first home run to tie Roger Maris's record. Yesterday was McGwire's father's sixty-first birthday. Maris hit his sixty-one home runs in nineteen sixty-one. This year, McGwire hits sixty-one and I'm also sixty-one. Maris's record stood for thirty-seven years. Thirty-seven is the year I was born. The next day McGwire hits*

*number sixty-two to break the record. The day was the eighth of September, 1998. That's 9/8/98. And he hit it at 9:18 EST. See how easy it is?*

I didn't mind the sacrifice. The Florida winter was certainly better for my arthritis and well worth the price. My other goal was a job that would advance my career. This job did so, and more. Not only was I learning about online programming, I was getting plenty of non-programming experience. This smallish company, twenty-some employees, needed help in areas like advertising, sales, and personnel. I was willing and took every opportunity. I recall one resume of a programmer with seventeen years of COBOL experience. Here I was, only my fifth year in this business, recommending we not hire this person. We had no use for his COBOL experience, I said, and we have no idea if he can learn anything new, which is what we really need.

I learned about firing people, too. One was there only for the summer, a college student who couldn't follow directions. I didn't like the idea of firing anyone, but he wasn't cutting it and it was my job to tell him so. After this, I thought a lot about letting people go. I decided keeping people who couldn't do the job wasn't doing them any favors. Sooner or later, the real world would intrude and they'd have to face up. Better they find their limitations sooner than later.

Sandy was another story; he was stealing. A coworker, I didn't have the power to fire him but I did make sure he was fired. One night, as was my wont, I came in after 2 AM to try a routine that might crash the machine. Generally, we had no users online after midnight. There was Sandy in the machine room monitoring a long printout. I said, "Hi," and went about my business. I was curious so I sneaked a peak when he stepped out of the room. It was someone else's project, definitely not Sandy's affair.

The next day I confronted my boss, Rick, with this information. As big as Rick was, he couldn't hide behind his conspicuously clean desk. I told him what I had detected the previous night and asked him why Sandy would be doing this? It took a Rick a few moments to remove his gaze from nothing in particular on his desk and let this sink in. Now that I had his undivided attention, I asked him if he knew of any reason for Sandy's actions. He realized he had to do something. He said would ask Sandy.

The following day, Rick called me into his office. As usual, I stood right in front of his desk. (This was my little trick to keep him focused.) He said "Sandy confessed. He told me he was stealing the program to sell it on his own."

"So, what are you going to do?" I asked.

"Nothing," came as the reply.

"Nothing?" I repeated for confirmation.

"That's right," he casually reaffirmed as his eyes began to wander again.

"That's wrong. Rick, there's no way you can ignore this."

Slowly he came back from his attempted escape into trivial paperwork, "Why not?"

"For any number of reasons," I answered. "For one, are you sure you can trust him not to do something like this again? For another, if he told you so willingly, this won't remain a secret." This got his attention. I locked it in place with, "And if he doesn't tell people, I will." I explained this guy had been goofing off for months. That I'd been apologizing to everyone for his strange hours. And now I find out he's been using the time to steal! "Rick," I said, "everyone has been wondering for months if this guy's carrying his share of the load. How do you think they'll react when they find out he's been stealing their work?"

Rick sat there, staring at me with the dull recognition that this was indeed a real problem. He didn't have an answer, so I provided one: "It's simple. They'll want him out of here—and fast. And you'll lose their respect if you don't fire him. This is easy." (Today we'd say a no-brainer.) "Keeping him harms the team; firing him helps the team. In fact," I said from recent experience, "firing him helps him face reality. And better sooner than later."

He fired Sandy the next day.

If you're beginning to think I doubted Rick's abilities as boss, you're right. This incidence of theft wasn't the first I uncovered. At another, earlier, early morning session, I found some strange online activity from one of our customers. This was coming from the branch of a large technology company in Detroit. I can't name them for reasons soon to be apparent. They had found a way to search our internal files and were copying these to their terminal. Since our computer room terminals duplicated any activity, I brought a printout of these actions to Rick. Undeniably they were stealing. He said he'd call them up and tell them to stop.

I said, "Stop? Hell, let's call the cops."

His face soured, "We can't do that. They're a big company and we wouldn't stand a chance."

"Chance?" I replied, "This isn't a civil suit, it's criminal. And besides, we could use the publicity; you know, catching the big crooks stealing from the little guy."

Rick was unconvinced. "We don't want the publicity. We don't want to tell our other customers we're vulnerable."

"But we caught them!" I said, "Doesn't that show we're on top of this? And besides, this online stuff is new. A story like this could easily get us national publicity."

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“Forget it. We’ll just disconnect them and tell them why. They won’t do anything. And neither will we.”

I stared in disbelief at his do-nothing policy. Later, when I brought Sandy’s theft to him, I knew about Rick’s reluctance to act. I expected his resistance and I was prepared to overcome it. This first time, our chance to report this online theft and get much needed publicity, died there and then. One more lost opportunity for a marginal company.

I had had run-ins with Rick before this online theft. His job was to supervise the programmers. For this he received the title of vice-president. The overall boss, the actual head of this small company, was the president. Like the company in Mountainside, his real job was head of sales. Sales, even in this hi-tech company, took precedence over the technical workers. The problem was Rick’s experience was also in sales. He and the president had been sales buddies, working for one of our biggest (known only by two letters) industrial giants.

In the beginning, I wondered about Rick’s management style. When I discovered his background in sales, I understood. After a couple of encounters, I resented his unwillingness to act. Like most of my fellow programmers, I felt he was just an obstacle. But after a few social encounters outside the office, I realized his true talents. He was a born salesman, smoozing and storytelling with the best. Instead of opposing people for what they lacked, I began to find, and appreciate, the abilities they did have. Rick belonged out in the field, helping our so-so sales force.

It never happened. Although salesman at heart, Rick stayed as the reluctant and inept head of programming. I left. I guess it’s interesting that each of the two jobs I found on my own lasted only a year. And both ended

because of problems with a raise. In the first, Mountainside, it wasn't the size of their minuscule offer but rather their refusal to increase it by the few pennies I requested. Why did I ask for more? Because I was running the department (of eight) I had joined as a novice. In the instance of the second job, the one in Fort Lauderdale, the raise offered was ample, but I left because everyone got the same raise. I knew I was contributing more than most of the staff. I felt this identical treatment to be an insult, and typical of their incompetent management.

Before I left Fort Lauderdale, as befits a prudent person, I looked for a job. I had a few interviews with little promise for me and less interest from them. The reason for their attitude was the same reason I got the first job with no effort. Many people, even experienced programmers, wanted to work in Florida. With many choices, employers could afford to be fussy. My most recent experience didn't fit the needs of these latest prospects. It was simply an accident that my skills did fit my first, and as it turned out, last Florida employer.

What were my options now? I had planned to leave this job at the end of the year. Without another job offer, I did anyway. Here's how. Our monthly paycheck came in the middle of the month. I had a two-week vacation coming. I told them I would be taking it during the last two weeks of December. The day my paycheck arrived I told them I was leaving on vacation and gave them my two weeks notice. I left for vacation and never returned.

I suppose my original plan was to keep looking for work. But as the opportunities dwindled I made other plans. In November, I had bought the second of my two yellow cars. Like the first, it was a convertible, these being my only two true convertibles. The first (a used Ford) was brought after six months on the job. This was Florida, why not a convertible? The second was a brand-new bright yellow monster of a 442 convertible. The 442, for those

who might not know, was Oldsmobile's muscle car. My reason for buying this car, however, had nothing to do with power. I was looking for the biggest car loan I could get. Why? Because my credit was non-existent, having never had a loan over a thousand dollars. The Olds fit the bill.

Or so I thought in November. Within a month my career had come to a halt, and the 442 had become a liability. A nice toy, but still a liability. Here I am in Florida in December, out of work, and no prospects. What do I do? I head back to New Jersey, my decision again influenced by a single physical fact: my arthritis. I had had a bad flare-up in Fort Lauderdale, and didn't want to risk another without some safety net. (What I hadn't learned yet was this aggravation was the result of Florida's summer storms on my arthritis.) My brother Dennis flew down, we partied for a few days, and then drove back to New Jersey.

*At this point, you're aware of this 442 and the Alfa-Romeo sports car I owned some six years before. You might wonder if I had, as they say, a need for speed. I told you about the circumstances of my one speeding ticket. So, do I speed or not? Yes or no depends on your definition of speeding. Mine goes like this: How fast will they let me go? As long as it's safe in the situation, I exceed the speed limit—slightly. With exceptions. If I'm on a freeway in heavy traffic, I keep pace. In California, that pace was often ninety miles an hour. In traffic, it's unsafe to be much faster or much slower than the other cars.*

*Now that I've told you my formula for speeding, here's a notable exception. Returning to New Jersey with Dennis and a fully loaded 442, we're headed north on the Florida Turnpike. It's mid-December and no one else is driving north. No one. The road is empty. The road is straight. It's a divided highway, a clear road, and a clear day. I tell*

*Dennis I want to see how fast this thing will go. I explain it's not a fair test, being fully loaded and all, but I depress the accelerator. As we pass a hundred, I move the car to the middle of the road, straddling the dotted centerline. The convertible top balloons like a sail, providing more drag. The speedometer keeps moving up, past its last digits of one three five . . . and the car is still picking up speed. Ahead I see an overpass. At the speed we're going, it looks too small. I take my foot off and we slow down. I never did find out how fast that car truly was.*

Before I get back to New Jersey, I have two more stories from this time in Fort Lauderdale. I include them here because they say a lot about how others perceived me—and what I learned about myself.

After his failure to get the Castaways job, Jim didn't disappear from my life. After staying a week in a nearby motel, I found an apartment even nearer my new job. How near . . . well, if you don't count the vertical travel in the elevator, less than a hundred yards. The apartment had one each of large bedroom and living room. Jim asked if he could crash in the living room until he found a place. I said yes. He stayed on for a few weeks, coming and going at all hours. Occasionally, he would tell me stories of women he'd met in the park or on the beach (did I mention I was also a few short blocks from the beach?) and the sex he'd enjoyed with them. I didn't pay much attention because I was concentrating on my new job. I didn't especially notice when he acquired a large duffel bag that sat in the corner of my living room.

If I'd thought about it for a minute, it would have been easy to guess. On the trip down, Jim made a big deal about smoking pot. He made a bigger deal when I said it didn't interest me. On our only night on the road—somewhere in the Carolinas—he insisted I smoke.

Although he raved about the wonderful effects of this experience (or was it the experience of the effects?), I wasn't very interested. To humor him, I shared a joint. Then I proceeded to argue with him that I didn't think the effects were very . . . effective. My mind was already free-ranging and pot was unlikely to take it anywhere it couldn't go on its own. I also said I had no need to "chill out" since I felt I was fairly, well, cool.

*Thinking about this last statement, I need to clarify. I didn't think of myself as cool. Nor did I think others saw me this way. I did think I dealt well with pressure. The standard reaction to such pressure in the previous decade was coming home after a hard day's work and saying, "I need a drink." I never did. Never felt that way. And while this might appear as merely my opinion, I offer the evidence, given in previous chapters, of my approach to tests. I liked being under pressure. If there weren't enough, I created more. Since I enjoyed it, I didn't feel the need for release. Not alcohol in the fifties, nor pot in the sixties. (Nor cocaine in the seventies, nor--well, you fill in the rest.)*

*None of which is to say I'm never stressed. I'm not saying I've never said I need a drink; but I only need one hand to count the times. Some people say this a couple of times a week, some every day. Like anyone else, I get into situations I'm not prepared for and it's difficult to adjust (or exit). That can be stressful, but these times are very rare because I'm usually prepared. As you will see later on.*

I was also teasing Jim, and he—despite his ballyhooed calming effects of the marijuana—got very annoyed. I was amused by my ability to debate (and bait) him to the point of anger. This despite the supposed soothing effects of the pot. I let up, he chilled out, and we hit our respective sacks. That was the last time he smoked

or offered it in my presence. Except one. That one time is the real story here. It began with an invitation from Jim to watch the NBA All-Star Basketball game at the home of some newly acquired friends. When Jim brought the still full duffel bag, I realized this was a small party to celebrate its sale. At this point I was glad to see it go, so I was more than willing to attend.

Sitting around the kitchen table before the game, everyone was smoking. It was easy for me to say no at first because I was concentrating on a particularly egregious arthritic flare-up. We got into a discussion of my pain and everyone said the marijuana would relieve it. I was in enough pain to give it a try; I would have given anything a try that evening. As the joints circulated, I began to feel some real effects. And I immediately recognized the mechanism: It produced a discontinuity in consciousness. The effect was similar to the discontinuity in the visual field produced by strobe lights. The continuity of the pain also disappeared. In the plainest words: I felt no pain.

We went into the living room to watch the game. Earlier in this book I mentioned playing basketball in college, so it should come as no surprise I enjoyed the game on television. (Next to Formula One racing, I prefer professional basketball to any other sport on TV.) I assume I was enjoying this game, but I have no explicit memory to confirm this. What I do have is the memory of what happened at half-time. During the half-time break of the 1969 NBA All-Star Basketball game, I saw Lydon Johnson's speech saying he would not run for reelection. When it was over, I said to everyone, "Did you see that?" I don't recall their responses because I don't think anyone was communicating by then.

The point of this story should be obvious. It was 1969 and Johnson's speech had taken place—obviously—before the 1968 elections. This was 1969 and the speech was

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history and Nixon was President. Johnson's speech had occurred at half-time of the 1968 NBA All-Star game! A year later, and I had seen it as a perfect flashback. However I was so high, I didn't figure this out until the next day.

*This wasn't my only flashback to '68. Once upon a time, I thought I had passed on Woodstock, rejecting an offer to travel upstate for the weekend of the concert. I thought it happened in the summer of '68 (so many things were happening then). I thought I'd been asked by my GBA coworkers, or more likely student interns, and I'd said no. I had this memory of saying something about not wanting to camp out with all those amateurs. A memory that I had the opportunity to go to Woodstock and declined. But no, I didn't and I hadn't. Woodstock was Friday, August 15th 1969, and I was long gone in Florida. Why did my memory reconstruct this event as happening a year earlier? Is it possible this single marijuana experience confounded other memories of 1968 and 1969?*

The next day at the office belonged in Dante's tenth circle. I couldn't add two and two and I was supposed to be on the job as a hot-shot computer programmer. I could carry on seemingly coherent conversations if they were short, but that was it. I was paranoid beyond belief, sure I would be found out and fired. So I hid. I picked up a large printout and found an empty room. I did variations of this for *four* full days. I was lying low, scared out of my wits that they would not return. Eventually they did, but I never returned to any form of marijuana. The fact this stuff undeniably had been laced with something stronger, probably hash, didn't ameliorate my repulsion.

This experience greatly helped formulate my position on pot: Don't do any drug that isn't Federally regulated. If you can't be sure of the contents, don't take the risk. I

am also of the opinion that people who smoke pot tend to smoke cigarettes, which is even more harmful. Another reason not to smoke.

Jim never found his place in Fort Lauderdale. Soon after this incident he headed for San Francisco. Got a post card saying he was happy there. Since this was '69, we'd also have to say hippy.

Hip was something I never tried to be. Hip has to do with appearance, a subject of little interest to me. (Beyond combing my hair and choosing my clothes.) Hip is also part of an acronym I created for another one of my varied assignments for this little company. Rick had asked me if I could come up with a system to track people's work. I came up with WHIP, or Work Hopefully In Progress.

I didn't mind helping Rick solve his management problems (resulting from a lack of management skills). I saw it as an interesting challenge. For WHIP, I created a simple program to chart the data derived from a simple form. The form was the problem. Every programmer had to fill it out on a regular basis for the system to function. Logically, I used myself as a guinea pig to see if the system worked. It did, but it was impossible to get other programmers to use it. Almost no one filled out their form unless I constantly badgered them.

After a month of pushing this particular rock uphill, I told Rick I was giving up. Rick, in his infinite management insight, turned the system over to Harold, my officemate. You might think Rick simply assumed I wasn't sufficiently diligent in browbeating our programmers. I don't think he put that much effort into the decision. Maybe he assumed Harold would persist beyond a reasonable effort. He was right.

Harold was a nice guy and probably a competent programmer, but I never looked too closely at what he

was up to. I tried to keep some distance with Harold because, well, because he was a tad too religious for me. Now, I don't mind a little religion here and there in the right place. If it doesn't hurt anyone and makes you feel better, I have no objection. It's when it doesn't know its place that it irritates me.

I got along with Harold. I think I can get along with anybody. Harold liked to talk theology. I think I can talk anything with anybody. I enjoyed these talks with Harold. Gave me a chance to stretch my brain and search for areas of interest. I also preferred to find points of agreement instead of simply arguing. The problem, my problem, is I do this so well the other person thinks this is who I am, that this topic of great interest to them is of equal interest to me. I'm sure Harold did.

But when Rick gave Harold the job of (excuse me) WHIPping us into shape, things changed. Having given up on the system, I joined the others in not filling out the form. This displeased Harold. I tried to explain why the system wasn't working, why programmers are the opposite of bean-counters, inherently indisposed towards such form-filling. This explanation did not satisfy Harold. He felt as Christians (he actually said) it was our *duty* to help Rick solve this problem. I swiveled around from my desk facing the opposite wall, looked Harold straight in the eye, and said, "Harold, Christ was not an organization man." Harold didn't talk much to me after that.

*Side issue about how programmers work. Occasionally, Rick used to wander around peeking into offices to see what people were up to. Although vice-president in charge of programming (and programmers), Rick had never participated in our arcane art, so the following should not surprise you. Rick looked in to see me with my feet on the windowsill, staring at the outside world. He asked what I was doing. I said programming. He made*

*some incredulous, possibly snide comment. I responded by pointing out I did some of my best work staring out the window. I was telling the truth if even my attitude was a little smart-ass.*

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