

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

**Lee Frank**

## **Freshman Summer**

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## Freshman Summer

As befits a newly, if only slightly, matured collegian, I worked that summer. The job was in a related engineering field: structural steel-detailing. The company was also related: my father's. And my uncle Jack's, my uncle Mort's, and even my uncle Herb's. My job happened during the brief period when the surviving brothers rejoined in business. (My uncle Abe, former head of the nominal family company, had died suddenly of a heart attack four years before.) This summer, the brothers were working in the same office, as independents and various partnerships. My nepotic advantage propelled me right up to position of gopher.

This summer, like many of my summers in New Jersey, is best remembered for the beach and not any job. Working in summer does not collect memories; going to the Jersey Shore does. This particular summer provided one particular memory: I destroyed the '55 Ford of the previous picture.

That summer I was eighteen and driving without supervision for the first time. In those days, New Jersey had no provisional driver's license. You might have been one of the lucky ones to get Driver Ed in high school. Most of the rest of us learned after turning seventeen, from our parents. At seventeen, we queued up for our learner's

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permits. My father extended the supervision required by that document to well after I received my license—until I was eighteen. His leverage was simple: I could not borrow the family car until he had observed my driving for a full year.

Did I resent this restriction? Not terribly. It was his car, and only his second new car at that. I know by the end of the year I was very appreciative for the extended practice. I learned a lot in those twelve months, and I would recommend the same to any beginning driver. Now, my first college summer, I was allowed the use of the family Ford (the one pictured in the previous chapter with that strange looking kid.) I don't think I used it a dozen times. I know I used it the last time anyone did.

A year from high school and I was still hanging out with my two high school friends. My college friends were scattered around the country. Back at home, things were back to usual—with some new twists. No longer dependent upon our parents (primarily Gil's) to take us places, we traveled to the Shore on our own. Dick was the first to own his own car, a '50 black Ford convertible. Gil got into college on a basketball scholarship; Dick became a working man. Rather than deplore his lack of future, Gil and I envied his early security, benefits, pension, etc. The next summer, Gil came back from college with his car, which appears in the "Sophomore Summer" chapter. By the summer after, I too had a car. But this was freshman summer and we used Dick's car to go the Shore on our own, borrowing Gil's father's car when we towed the boat.

*This boat was the second in a series of three built by Gil and his father, with help from Dick and myself. (We even made the boat trailer from a junked auto front end. My job was re-packing the wheel bearings.) It was an open fourteen foot runabout with an outboard motor. We used it*

*to fish, snorkel, and water ski. Its predecessor was a canoe built from orange crates. Really. Its adventures were limited as was my involvement. I hadn't helped much and only participated in one trip down the Passiac River. (Sufficiently memorable for whitewater and a four-foot waterfall.) The runabout provided many more memories, many more than can be chronicled here. The next boat, two years hence, was a twenty-five foot cabin cruiser and appears in a later chapter.*

This was also the summer I fell in love. Or at least I thought it was a fall. In retrospect, it was more of a stumble. We think we fall, but the first few times are only preparation for the our first truly great descent into lover's hell. Here I was, eighteen, feeling my first overwhelming attraction. (Overwhelming, because it *was* the first time.) This at an age when most young man are compiling sexual statistics. Preceding years were not without attraction but I was unsure as to how to proceed. My confusion lasted longer than most. Like most adolescents, I had been overpowered by incoming information. Unlike most, it took me longer to find my way.

*I wonder how many people move on to life's next stage through imitation instead of finding their own way? They see what others of their age are doing and they do the same. Eventually, some find their own way. Some don't. I had always been strongly motivated to make my own choices. That could be one explanation for my late development. Or maybe not. I had been a late developer physically. Was my sexual tardiness a result of intellectual forethought or just the dictates of my genes? Either way, over the years I've come to believe a certain amount of circumspection is a useful survival trait.*

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*A mini-review tells me I haven't told enough about my late development. Here I am, a next semester college sophomore, and I haven't said a word about one of a young man's most important passages: shaving. I probably shaved a few times in high school, mostly for practice and to simulate an experience others were complaining of. I'm sure I watched my father as he applied his shaving brush with the shaving soap from his shaving mug. How he applied his safety razor (most likely Gillette) to remove soap and whiskers, and how he washed face, razor, and mug when he was finished. (I had some some facial hair but it was so fine and sparse as to be invisible.) A once over with his equipment and I was good for weeks.*

*Things changed when I went to college. Dad had switched to a Remington electric, and I borrowed his mug, brush, and soap. In college, some friend touted me on Norelco as being perfect for light (and slow) beards. And excellent for taking off the long hairs from many days of neglect or an abortive beard attempt. I still use a Norelco (actually now a Remington, because Norelco's patent—it's been that long—has expired). I can't count how many over the years, but now I also use a safety razor (any throwaway brand) after showering.*

*I also borrowed some clothes from Dad for college. One was an ancient (or so it appeared to me) motorcycle jacket. I recalled stories of Dad riding with his friend Ralph. Ralph is the one who recently widowed the Audrey of the dart story. Another item was a maroon corduroy sports jacket. It will appear again after a few chapters.*

This sexual attraction, in retrospect no more than a strong infatuation, came in the form of Gilda. She lived down the Shore and her parents were friends of my parents. She was fourteen, had the figure of a woman, and didn't act her age. I was eighteen and didn't know how to act. I'd survived a year of college but my social

skills weren't up to the level of a high school sophomore. Dating alone was way out of my league. Safety in numbers, for everyone concerned, meant double-dating with Dick. (These were weekend, daytime dates; her parents were not fools.) Sometimes it was his car, sometimes I borrowed the family Ford. The last time, it was the Ford.

We'd picked up Gilda and headed a few small towns north to pick up her girlfriend, Dick's date. We never got there. Halfway, on a empty, very narrow two-lane concrete street, the Ford climbed the curb and glanced off a telephone pole. Daylight, a clear, sunny Jersey summer day, and no plausible explanation. And no one was hurt. The car, though, was undrivable, and eventually declared unrepairable. I had no answers, and only later were Dick and I able to piece together a mosaic of facts.

The three of us were in the front seat with Gilda in the middle. The moment before we went over the curb, she turned to reach for something in the back seat. I remember pressing her back, holding her against the seat with my right arm. Dick did the same with his left. Had her hip turned the wheel to the right? We didn't think so. I do think I was watching her maneuver so she wouldn't hit the wheel. The pole was perhaps twenty feet or so ahead of the spot where the right wheel left the road. Dick had time to brace himself (and Gilda). Surprised, I did have time to react and hit the brakes. At under thirty miles an hour I had my foot on the brake pedal before we hit, but the brake had no time to slow the car.

Reconstructing after the fact, Dick and I wondered why there was so much damage to fender, bumper, and tire. We had glanced off the pole and back into the roadway. The car was still facing in its intended direction, now stationary and well past the pole. Then I reminded him that the right front bumper was ineffective, damaged a week before in an accident by my normally very careful parents. I also pointed out there had been some tire

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damage and perhaps the tire had suddenly lost pressure. Neither of us recalled a blowout, but a sudden deflation could have easily pulled us over the two or three feet of road separating us from the curb.

None of these answers were acceptable to parents or police. I returned to that small town (whose name I had not known despite years of Jersey Shore experience) for a hearing on my reckless driving citation. The town, like so many in the U.S., was named for a more famous European town—Interlaken, Switzerland. With no explanation, I was guilty and paid the fine. It was the coat room incident all over again: My fault, and I had no defense. (This time the source of the injustice was the Law.) Some years later, I experienced a related fact. I was driving on wet pavement and the car suddenly shifted sideways—an unexpected slide. Instantly I recognized the sensation as the exact same one I had felt in Interlaken. (Even though I had no conscious memory of this sensation after the event.) Then I remembered there had been a squashed cabbage on that Interlaken road. Was it that simple? Had the car slipped on a cabbage?

*I saved this traffic ticket—my first—for many years, a perverse souvenir. Another reason: It was one of very few tickets. I can recall only two other moving violations. And only three parking tickets. My second ticket came on one of my first drives into New York. Driving the '50 Ford I owned from '57 to '60, I made a left turn in a confusing intersection and missed the sign denying me the right to make this turn. Would have continued unnoticed, but the old tires on the Ford squealed, alerting a nearby police car.*

*The last ticket came on a trip from Sarasota to Fort Lauderdale around 1978. Driving a rented car, I was headed east to the Fort Lauderdale airport and then north to New Jersey via air. Instead of flying north from Sarasota, this detour provided a hour or two to show one of the new*

*microcomputers to my Uncle Mike in Fort Lauderdale. Keeping pace with the sparse traffic, I didn't see the small plane tracking our speed. Rounding a bend in the road, I stayed in line as they pulled over the rest of the cars. I had no excuse—just keeping up with traffic—when it came my turn to be cited, but I was annoyed at being ticketed without an opportunity to appear in court to contest it. And I knew I could, having learned in college about instrument calibration and errors in such devices. I could have pointed out the variations caused by the speed and direction of the plane. But I was in New Jersey that evening and not about to return to fight a fine less than a hundred dollars. I mailed in the money.*

Eventually the insurance company coughed up the dough for the destroyed Ford and my parents went car shopping. I convinced them to upscale in a big way (for them). It was now September, the new cars were out, and they bought a '56 Dodge Royal Lancer. It was their only excursion above the basic Ford, Chevy, Plymouth class. If you're old enough, you'd remember seeing this Dodge. It had lots of chrome, triple bullet taillights, and a bizarre three-tone paint job of black, white, and pink! (Officially known as ivory-charcoal-coral.) You can see two of the three taillights, if you look carefully, in the photo on page 107.

After the accident, the summer went quickly. The workdays were a blur, but weekends were full of boating memories—and the pursuit of women. As I said, dating Gilda was a daytime thing. In the evening, Dick and I went hunting. Veterans of Olympic Park, we quickly mastered the rides and other boardwalk amusements of Asbury Park. Having few social skills, we used our amusement ride experience to pick up girls. Occasionally, we succeeded. Once we succeeded beyond our expectations.

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Few rides offer the opportunity for direct interaction with the other participants. The most notable exception was the Fun House. Asbury's version had many features and we mastered every one. The distorted room, for example, made it difficult for people to control their movements. We easily positioned ourselves to be of assistance to the right (young female) people. We knew where to stand to check out the effects of the hidden air hoses on skirts. But our best maneuver was the corner turntable. This was circular disk disguised as part of the floor and placed at the end of a wall. One was supposed to go to the end of the wall and then around it to head back in the opposite direction—all uphill. Here you are, walking up a completely dark hallway and the wall on your left ends and you have to negotiate around it as the hall reverses direction. But the floor at the end of this wall is a freely rotating disk and it sends you backwards; unless you know what's about to happen and grab the end of wall to pull yourself around. We knew.

So here we are following these two nicely-dressed, reasonably attractive women, and lo and behold, they reach the end of wall and come backwards into our arms. We act surprised. A conversation starts. We think we're picking them up. I'll bet they knew we were following them. Why do I think so? After the Fun House, our foursome goes on a few amusement rides and then in Dick's car for a convertible ride. And we find out they're twenty-five, honest-to-God grown women with secretarial jobs. From New York, no less! After half an hour, I begin to see they were bored and we were the only available diversion. This day was an afternoon of clumsily courting a fourteen year old and an evening providing conversation for women eleven years older.

As for details of who did what do whom, you can stop looking now. As I said in *My Life*, I don't provide those to anyone. Not in print, nor in person. Not to strangers, nor

to friends. As I said, I was always a late bloomer and this new social success was no exception. I still had a long way to go. I could have plunged ahead blindly, metaphorically following my sword into battle, but that's never been my style. My goal was not necessarily prudence. I had no goal. Not knowing what I was getting into made me stop and think, gave me cause to pause.

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