

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

**Lee Frank**

## **Me, In and Out of College**

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## Me, In and Out of College

The train was not the only method of reaching Troy but it made sense when it was just me. Realizing the last chapter slipped well into my junior year, I'll backup to the beginning of that school year. I borrowed the family Dodge to bring my stuff to my new dorm in the Quadrangle. The trunk and back seat were nearly full, but my attention was directed to the front seat: Carol made the day trip with me. (Perhaps this is what facilitated the aforementioned—still in the future at this moment in time—dance weekend.) The campus was mostly empty. My building certainly was. I brought her up to the room. We kissed. I went down the two flights, across the Quad and out my favorite entrance to the street and the car. I loaded up and made the return trek to the room. I dumped my load and we necked some more. Emotionally refreshed, I made another trip. A productive and satisfying way to spend an afternoon. We drove back to New Jersey, returning her to her parents, the car to mine. I took the last train back to Troy. Another milk run.

*One item I lugged from the car and up those two flights of stairs was my footlocker. It had been my father's, now newly painted gray—and filled with my school books. My wrestling club had kept me in excellent shape. That footlocker is still, unlike me, in excellent shape. It sits at*

*the bottom of my closet, concealing memories. At Rensselaer, it contained my food supplies, hot plate, etc. While not RPI legal, the locker had a lock on it to conceal its contents. Along with the essential foods, like tuna fish, it also hid my snack of choice, peanut butter and Ritz crackers. Perhaps I hadn't left high school that far behind.*

Sex was only one expansion of my world. Sports was another. I mentioned wrestling, but for some other reason (I believe ROTC) I was excused from gym. I made up for the lack of organized physical exercise with many afternoons in the gym, the primary activity being pickup games of basketball. In between games, there was lots of practice and I developed a decent repertoire of shots and moves. This was the kid who, until his senior year in high school, was always picked last. Not that I was now the star. I wasn't, but I held up my end. Speaking of ends (couldn't resist), that tightend from our football team was also playing pickup basketball. Ellie had managed to break both his wrists and was playing to keep in shape. Kept us on our toes, trying to keep out of range of his forearms—the casts covered wrist to elbow. Ellie went on to become the star of our class's varsity basketball team. Nice to know I was a small part of his success.

My other game in gym was volleyball. John, my friend from wrestling, and I would challenge anyone—and any number. The two of us frequently played against four or more. Since we knew each other's moves, we always won. We also cheated. This was pickup volleyball and no one really knew or cared about the finer points of the game. John and I used plenty of fingertip control, not permitted in formal competition.

*Fingers. It was about this time I discovered I was allergic to gold. Well, maybe not an allergy. I was wearing a ruby ring given to me for my high school graduation by my Uncle Herman. Because I kept spraining fingers playing*

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*basketball, I kept moving the ring to an unsprained finger. After a few weeks, I noticed the wart on my ring finger had disappeared. Then I noticed a new wart on the finger now wearing the ring. I stopped wearing the ring. No more warts.*

*Sprained fingers weren't my only minor sports injuries. I remember the occasional twisted knees and ankles quite well because the pain is still with me. The fingers are also in pain and permanently twisted. I could spend time wondering how much of my current Arthritic damage is due to the stress I put on my body in college. I don't. Who really knows anyway? What I do remember, what I miss, is the fun of strength in motion, the freedom of being physical. My muscles also remember the movement. It's my joints that imprison my body.*

Besides extracurricular afternoons in gym, I was busy with the *Bachelor*. Working on the college humor mag was an extracurricular creative outlet, but this extracurricular activity was also extra-legal. I was under Academic Suspension and I thoroughly ignored it. The gym was easy since I didn't have to sign in. The *Bachelor* was trickier. At this point, Pete and I were farming out ideas and managing work by others. The masthead carried only Pete's name, since I was officially invisible.

Now the reason for the subterfuge. I had always been able to bring up a potentially failing grade point by crunching the final. When I received my final sophomore semester grades, I was flabbergasted. Physics II showed an "F." How could this be? I had a passing average before the final, if only barely, and the final wasn't very tough. When I inquired, I was told my final exam grade was a 24—24 out of a 100! Impossible. I never did poorly on an important test in my life. How could this be? Then I had a hunch: The reciprocal of 24 was 76, a much more plausible score. Naturally, I asked to see the test, suspecting a simple clerical error. They told me I could not see the test.

It wasn't destroyed, under lock and key, or highly classified. No, they would not let me see the paper because it was against *policy*. I argued to no avail against another injustice. To this day, I don't believe I failed that test. That year, the last thing I would do was obey their suspension.

*Nothing like my most serious problem in my junior year: Getting out of bed. I bought one of those large windup Big Ben alarm clocks. The problem wasn't hearing it. I always heard it—and I always shut it off and went back to sleep. Never remembered reaching out to shut it off. Next, I moved it beyond arm's reach on my desktop to the bureau on the opposite wall. Now I had to put my feet on the floor, stand up, lean across the footlocker, and reach for the alarm. This worked for a while, maybe a week or two. Then, somehow I was able to shut off the damn alarm and get back into bed without waking up. Time to be creative. I placed the clock under my desk. When it went off the next morning, I rolled out of bed, moved my chair out from under the desk, crawled under the desk, and shut off the alarm. Some system, huh? Well, eventually I slept through that, too.*

I was trying to treat my junior year simply like another year on the treadmill. This was one intention I brought with me that September. Another was to excel in grades, probably a reaction to the failure in Physics. (I'd show 'em.) These intentions fell by the wayside, made irrelevant by my lack of progress in Architecture, the only significant reason for my being at RPI.

I thought I was following (offset a thousand miles to the east) in Frank Lloyd Wright's footsteps. Here I was at Rensselaer, a major engineering school, intent upon learning the structural basis (oops, almost said foundation) of Architecture. And I was. However, I wasn't learning anything valuable about Architecture itself. Oh sure, they

taught the basics; RPI was preparing people to become professional architects, but little more. We weren't being taught any principles of design.

Was it my intention to become the next Frank Lloyd Wright? Not hardly. But I wanted to become more than merely another undistinguished, struggling architect. In truth, I wanted to be one of the ten best in the country. Was this another unrealistic dream of another ex-adolescent? I like to think not. I felt I had the potential to surpass my classmates. Well, not everyone.

Pete and I were the two rebels in the class. We refused to borrow solutions from others. We'd discuss assignments but never to share solutions, only to better understand the problem. Our solutions were rarely similar to each other's and noticeably different from our classmates. Sometimes we were rewarded for our efforts and sometimes penalized. We didn't care as long as we felt we had achieved a better result. What we shared, what we cared about, was learning—not grades. There was, however, an important difference between us. I knew I needed to learn more about design, and we both knew Pete didn't. Another case where my genius was merely borderline. (Hence the next book, *Borderline Genius*.) His was real, but you don't need to take my word for it; Pete is most certainly one of the ten best architects in the U.S.

*Now for a digression on the connections between designing buildings and designing software.*

*Did this attitude carry over when I became a computer programmer? Did I expect to become one of the best in the country? No, because there's a difference. Computing gives the satisfaction of actually knowing if things work. Compared to building a house, computer programming is relatively new. A large program can be much more complicated than a large building. You can never assume everything, every interaction, will work. In a house, this*

*would be analogous to hitting your head on doorways going from room to room, or finding a wall when you open a door. This generally doesn't happen when people build houses. (One reason it doesn't is there are architects and builders and construction workers—each with practical experience.)*

*Doors leading to walls sounds silly, but is exactly the level of problem you must worry about with computer programming. Does every piece perform and interact as expected, and without aggravating the living hell out of the user? Is their use transparent; do they work the way people expect them to? As long as they do, people don't see the effort it took to make it easy to use. You know you've done a good job when things work smoothly. I wrote a number of sizable programs and never heard a complaint—and few compliments. Because things work well, because people get what they expect, not many people know how good a job you've done. There's simply no way to compare, to know if you're one of the best.*

Here I was, barely turning twenty, halfway through a five year major in Architecture, and thoroughly adrift. I was going nowhere at RPI—and at great expense (for the times). Should I ask my family to sacrifice further? If I wasn't advancing on my, admittedly vague, path to the future, what was I to do? I had no idea. I felt I might find better instruction in design elsewhere. I also felt I had no right to ask someone else to pay for my uncertain career experiments. I took a shot at a standard approach and decided it wasn't for me. I was, as we now say, outta' there.

Before the year ended, I arranged incomplete grades for my remaining classes. Up to this point, I'd accumulated some ninety credits with no immediate plan to employ them. I was twenty and headed back for limbo (and Jersey). My last image before leaving Rensselaer was a pickup basketball game in the gym. That's the image, but

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the story is about one of our gym regulars who had just turned twenty-one. He promised his parents he would not drink until his twenty-first birthday. (At the time, New York State accorded eighteen-year-olds the privilege.) I picture him in the gym, but what I remember is his drunken bender after turning twenty-one. It seemed endless, and caused me to doubt the rationale of both his parent's repression and his reaction to it. The rules were followed, everyone was happy, and it was a complete disaster. I hope he survived.

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