

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

Last Days in New York

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Last Days in New York



My last days in New York began with my first house at the Jersey Shore. I told this story in some detail in *My Life* and I have only the same picture used there to offer here. But there's more to the story of the crutches. I mentioned the VA had diagnosed me with arthritis in 1967, by X-raying what I thought was a broken toe. At

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the shore in the summer of '68, when my right knee expanded and kept its inflated state, I was driven to the local hospital emergency. I told the doctor about helping to push start a car. He drained a cupful of blood from my knee, put me on crutches, and sent me home. He did one other thing; he infected my knee. Seems I wasn't much of an emergency so he performed his little bloodletting in a room where they made casts and other non-sterile accouterment.

I thought that was the end of it. A little time off the knee, and I'd be back to normal. Hah. Aside from the lasting disability of the arthritis, I gained another permanent memento of this event. Although few people actually read Moby Dick, you've all seen Ahab's streak of white, from hair to scar to beard to whalebone leg. I thought I had dealt well with this shock to my system. My hair and beard had another opinion. As evidence, I present a small white streak from the center of my hair to a little left of center in my mustache and beard. (No mustache and beard in picture on previous page.) You'll not see it in any of the pictures for another dozen years—if you look closely. I mention it here because I never made any attempt to hide this streak of white. Could have parted my hair to one side to hide it. Didn't. You might even mistake the streak for reflecting light. Isn't. If you think you see something there, you're right.

A few days later my knee was back to grapefruit size and I was deep in fever. My brother Dennis drove down from Union and took me back north to the VA hospital in East Orange, New Jersey. Why the VA? Because, I thought, I was service-connected disabled and entitled to free care. I was there for ten days. I got, like they say, what I paid for. No, make that much less than I paid for. The VA, at least the people running this VA hospital, had

never heard of Hippocrates' admonition to "First do no harm." Since I had admitted myself, despite the unmistakable medical problem, they classified me as one more freeloading ex-GI wanting a bed and three squares a day. They put me in what I can only describe with unintended alliteration as the ignored ward. This was summer as I said, July in particular, and when an attendant asked me why I was under the blanket when the windows were wide open, I said I was freezing. No one took my temperature.

I was lucky. One older veteran a few beds over had his toes (ten) removed courtesy of the VA. I was not surprised. I recalled a number of people in Basic Training who had handfuls of teeth removed. If the Army dentist saw a problem, he simply yanked. Back then I was lucky, too. What I remembered most about my childhood dentist, Charley, was the pain. But he was good enough so the Army to let me keep my oft-mended teeth. Turns out Charley was never meant to be a dentist. He ran off to Mexico with his dental assistant and became a very successful artist.

With the help of my family, I limped away from the VA and checked into a real hospital. (Where else? Newark, of course.) There they confirmed the obvious: My knee was infected. They also discovered the damage was caused by more than pushing the car. The knee failed because it was weakened by arthritis. Now here's a cute one. I tell the hospital's staff rheumatologist the history of how I got there, especially the VA's neglect. He tells me he consults at that same VA hospital twice a week. Had they bothered to tell him, I could have had his services for free.

After the rest of July in the real hospital (and a substantial bill that should have been paid by the VA), I was back at the Jersey Shore. Our rented summer house was over a mile from the beach. I was on crutches, my

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right leg in a cast. This slowed me down a little. I did not immediately join our bar-hopping. I'd just spent a month on my back and it took a week or two to get back into shape. But soon I was riding one of my roommate's bikes to the beach. A little difficult, but made easier since it was what we used to call a girl's bike. With a lower connecting strut from wheel to seat, I was able to get on and off with the cast. Did I mention I was living with six women?



This was also the summer I fell for the Beatles. Most non-adolescent males, myself included, were not taken by their first mega-hits. How could we like the same music as screaming pre-pubescents? I even remember the then very popular Mitch Miller saying their popularity was solely based on their androgyny. (The haircuts.) But as they began to expand, I began to listen. I pointed out to other non-adolescent males that songs like "If I Fell" had real promise. By Rubber Soul I was sold. Revolver was definitely major work. But Sergeant Pepper in the summer of '68 moved them right onto the mantle with my other B immortals: Bach, Beethoven, and Bartók. (I know the album came out in '67. I was busy.)

When I returned to GBA for the new semester in September, I had a new plan. I was going to pry the cat, SUPER, out of the bag. I submitted an expansion proposal to the Dean. One: GBA had been told we were losing access to the Courant supercomputer we used for SUPER. Two: the School of Commerce was getting a new, larger computer, and we needed to convert SUPER to that new machine. This (Three), I asserted, would require a major programming effort. Which (Four), I pointed out, I could accomplish but not if I were also the sole person responsible for helping people use the program. What I needed (Five) was help with the conversion. I also needed (Six) help coping with the increasing number of people using the program. This meant (Seven) better documentation and instruction for users. What I needed (Eight), I told them, was a small, two-person staff. And (Nine) a budget. And a raise (Ten), if I were to be responsible for all this.

If I could become the leader of this small team, I felt I might spread the use of SUPER to the rest of GBA. I didn't tell them that. I didn't have to. They turned down my proposal and I turned my back on GBA. I continued coming into work, apparently doing my job, but I was fully engaged in looking for another job. One luncheon interview is described fully in *My Life*. Interviews paid for more than a few lunches. If you've been counting, you know I had been in computing for roughly four years. My experience, thanks to people like Larry and my cousin Ron, was excellent. I had one offer from someplace in Texas simply because I had experience with Courant's supercomputer. Didn't feel like going to Texas. I had another offer from Boston and they flew me there for an interview.

Impressed? Don't be. The only amusing part of this story: It was a last minute shuttle flight and they really

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did hold the door for me as I ran across the runway. While in Boston, I thought this was excellent fortune. Wrong, merely another educational experience. First, they showed me a flowchart for their big-time software plan. It was engraved on stainless steel. No doubt that their plan was set (in steel instead of concrete or stone.) Bad idea. Then they (they being various MIT professors trying to cash in on the boom in computing) took me to dinner. Unimpressed by the restaurant, I flew back sure I would not take the job. The insult: They never even offered it to me. The bombshell: This was software to automate a major brokerage house on Wall Street. Not only did they fail, their failure caused the house to go out of business. The kicker: They never reimbursed me for the plane trip.

I did have a number of good offers, but they were ordinary. I wanted to continue the work I had done on SUPER. None of the places where I thought I could do this were interested. I felt SUPER was a unique achievement, something I could build a tiny empire upon. I had seen others in the industry do precisely this and believed I had a chance, too. Wall Street needed this tool and so I pursued various opportunities there—with no success. At a brokerage house I recall as Whiteweld, I was told they only wanted people who'd worked on group projects. I said I could do that, but their eyes only saw I didn't have experience as a team player. I'm also sure they were skeptical when I said I did most of this work by myself. I couldn't even get an interview with S&P (Standard and Poor's) and I knew they were trying to develop exactly what I'd already done. These were two examples of many firms on the street aiming at a target I'd hit a year before.

Not a team player? What I didn't have to show them, back then, was the experience. Could I have presented my

Scouting career as evidence? Probably not. Most of my team experience came later, and not in the exact business format they were looking for. The other day I tried to count my time spent on the boards of non-profit organizations. It came to roughly twenty-six years. But that was long after these attempts at employment and long after my working career. Do I, therefore, blame this company for being too literal? Or any of the others for their shortsightedness in not hiring me? Not at all. Together, they helped me leave New York. This was what I really needed, not the job.

There were a number of good reasons I did not get the job I sought. I had no experience as the leader of a large project. They wanted a senior programmer with management skills, and I'd been in the game for only four years. Were they right to disbelieve I really created this software? Perhaps, but they never asked for proof. My big opportunity and I couldn't get my foot in the door. It's half the reason I left New York. And I present these particulars for another reason. About five years later, an acquaintance who'd gone back to school to get an MBA from Columbia said they were still looking for a tool like SUPER. He said no one at the University or on the Street had yet succeeded. Apparently, I was caught by being too far ahead of the times. It wasn't the last time.

New York was making good offers but not the one I wanted. Which, as I said, was only half the reason I left. There were many reasons. School had become a dead end for reasons of its own. NYU's diminishing night offerings led nowhere. I no longer had any reason to stay at GBA and use the free tuition. Even if I wanted to stay, I had no chance for job advancement with the degree I was seeking. My real opportunities were better programming jobs and these were plentiful in New York, even if they were not stepping stones via SUPER. But as I looked for a better job in the approaching fall season, the big reason for

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leaving became clearer. The weather, the impending cold, was aggravating my advancing arthritis. Time to go south. My last memories of that time in New York: Sitting in Cedar Tavern on University listening to “I am the Walrus.”

Would I have stayed in New York for the right job? Probably. Would I have stayed for the right person? Most likely. Bonnie and I were more off than on, but still friends. She was one of those women sharing the past summer’s house. When I left, she took over my apartment on Fourteenth Street. She visited during the next year in Florida. Funny thing, she (and her sister, of course) were originally from Florida.

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