

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

A New School Kid

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I did not graduate from this school. We left Newark for Union after my first semester of third grade. It was summer and I was eight; the year was 1945. A war-ending summer, beginning with VE-Day (May 7, 1945) and ending with VJ-Day (August 14, 1945). Newark was now behind me, but not lost forever. I was still attached to the Cub Scouts in Newark. I still returned to Newark for the Mosque Theater (with my mother), the Little Theatre and used bookstore (with my father), and the museum and library (on my own).

Before you say, “Oh sure, they left Newark to avoid the incoming Blacks,” I have no memory of seeing any People of Color before we left Newark. We simply left the older Newark for the newer suburbs. After the war, everyone who could afford to do so did so. Our house in Union was not brand new, but the houses half a block away were. Farms were two blocks away, and the Tuscan Dairy—a major source of half-and-half to this day—was little over a mile away. But we never really left Newark, not our friends and relatives there, not my father’s involvement in Scouting. His original Jewish troop became Black, as did most of its leaders. He stayed there until he retired. (Look for the Black faces in the pictures of his eightieth birthday party.)

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At age eight, I was commuting to Newark by bus (busses, there were two). Our first family car was still three years away and the family traveled by bus. I attended Cub Scout meetings there for a few years, but my Newark connections naturally withered away. What I remember most was the museum. In the basement were working models of various complex gear arrangements which provided endless fascination. And among the many pieces of art were a few paintings by Max Ernst. Through these paintings, and others, I learned to see the world in many different ways.

Two years ago, one Amy Ernst visits our poetry group here in Sarasota and mentions her grandfather was this same Max. I tell her a little of my experiences in the Newark museum, and how much those paintings affected me. At age eight, I never could have imagined any connection to people whose work hung in museums.

Before we moved to Union that summer, we visited our future family home in a borrowed car. Soon after, I did something a mite adventurous for an eight-year old. I convinced a friend to accompany me on a trip from Newark to Union—on roller skates. These were not today's rollerblades or even fancy shoes with attached hi-tech wheels. These were inexpensive clip-on skates. With metal wheels. I had made the trip only once by car but felt I knew the way. What I didn't know was how long it would take us. We made it a little over halfway before turning back. Our biggest obstacle had been climbing up the Chancellor Avenue hill. Now, on the return, it was downhill. We went for it, racing down the steepest hill we'd ever seen. Fortunately, there was a side street interrupting the sidewalk (did I mention we were doing this on public sidewalk?) before we were halfway down. We dove into the grass just before the sidewalk ended. Scared, but triumphant, we were more cautious the rest

of the way down this monster of a hill. Did my parents punish me when I returned? Probably, but perhaps it was tempered by amazement. Followed by instructions for the bus. (Those two previously mentioned busses.)

There were a number of reasons for choosing the summer to move. One was the ability of my new brother, Robert, to travel. I'm writing these words on March 11, fifteen days before his birthday. Was he three or four months old when we moved? Was it June or July? I remember nothing of the move or that summer. I do remember entering school in September and being put back one semester to begin third grade over again. I never felt that smart since, not ever again for the rest of my life. But I wasn't smart, it was simply the luck of having just learned what the rest of these kids had never seen.

It didn't last. They pushed me forward into fourth grade. While only half a year advancement, it seemed more to me. Now I really *was* one of the smallest kids in class. I was never big, but now my size was suddenly diminished by this half year. At that age, girls are more mature than boys and the extra half year was very noticeable to me. Add the obvious fact: A number of these kids had been shifted backwards to accommodate the one year school cycle. The two semester system of Newark had been a better fit for me. Now I had classmates older than myself, many by more than a year.

Age wasn't the only factor moving me ahead. I'm sure there was some testing involved. At this point in my life, I was literally too smart for my own good. Since they had no program for advanced learning, all I received for my "promotion" was a decade-long social handicap. Am I complaining? If I could have foreseen those ten years, I might have fought my advancement. Looking back now, I shudder to think of myself as fully integrated into school society. By increasing the distance from most of my classmates, the system unintentionally gave me the extra leverage to resist peer pressure.

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This school was Franklin school, a good mile from our new home. Here I first encountered school-crossing guards, and I became one in my last (eighth grade) year. This school is also the school where my two brothers spent their entire grammar school careers. Dennis' journey was my responsibility for his first few years, as was Robert's his.

The small size stigma lasted through my second year of high school. By then I was Mr. Stocky. Short and fat wasn't enough, I was also wearing glasses (note the squint of the Franklin graduation picture.) You'd think this would be sufficient social chagrin for a fledgling teenager. Not this kid. In the summer of 1948, I managed to lose my front teeth.



Hiding my missing teeth

I and my two brothers, now aged 54 to 62, have all our hair. Not too unusual until you examine our uncles. Mike and Morris, on my mother's side, had *very* receding hairlines as did their father. Of my father's brothers, Mort was bald, as was Herb, Jack didn't have a lot of hair nor did Abe. My father has all his hair, except now it's very thin (which would be less noticeable if he kept his hair

longer.) If you look at those genes, how do you explain the exceptional hair of my brothers and myself?

The front teeth incident went like this: My Mexican (did I mention Mike and Mela moved back to Mexico?) cousins were visiting and went off on borrowed bikes—headed for the most dangerous hill in our neighborhood. I went after them. Was I concerned for their safety or feeling left out? I don't know, but I do remember heading down this steep hill trying to catch them and being forced onto the gravel shoulder by a car coming up the middle of the road. The bike went down and as I turned (to see if any cars were also being forced to follow me off the road) the hub of the rear wheel swung around and caught me flush in the mouth. My two top front teeth were reduced to stubs and capped and recapped forever after. Of my bottom two front teeth, one was lost and the other minimalized and repeatedly capped (and root canaled) until finally being pulled and bridged a dozen years ago.

So where did this good-looking kid come from? I have no idea where this haircut comes from. That very short hair will reappear a few more times. And I recognize the shirt. No, I don't mean that shirt, but rather shirts like that. I've always seemed to have shirts like that. Have one in the closet right now.



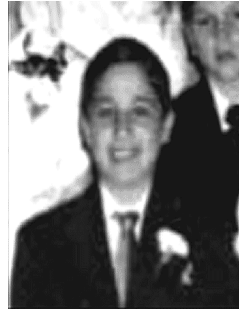
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Here I am with another inexplicable hairstyle. Was this an attempt to return to bangs or only uncombed? Obviously, I lost the shine from two photos ago. Have I forsaken grease for the natural look? Perhaps, and interesting since my hair now is as natural as it can be. It hasn't been cut for nine years. Not even trimmed.



How much more out of sync could I be? Easy. Here I am posing for my Grammar School Yearbook in a Boy Scout uniform. Was not this photo opportunity scheduled? Of course. I was in uniform because my Scout meeting was right after school. But my two fellow Scouting friends in this same class were not in uniform. My conclusion: I was uninformed due to a prior absence.





Here's the same kid at the actual graduation photo. Suit? Hair combed? Flower in lapel? Evidently required. But did I only comb my hair for this photo? Was it always as unkempt as it appears in the previous photos? My guess is I was searching for a way out of the bangs. The bangs, though perhaps not my choice, did become a easy style to maintain. In retrospect, I often chose hairstyles for convenience. For over thirty years, I've parted my hair in the middle merely because it was easier. I'm not even sure I remember how to part my hair on the side. (Left. I'm right-handed. Also dress to the left.) Maybe I'm just not a morning groomer.

Of those two friends, Gil was the reason I was in a Scout Troop based at his Mormon church. Continuing Scouting in Newark, graduating there from Cub to Boy, would have meant joining my father's troop. Was I rebelling? Seeking independence? Nah. I simply preferred hanging out with my closest friends to being a stranger in Newark. Strange thing about that Mormon church; it was near Oraton Parkway, where I was the baby in those first photos from Newark. (A true local parkway, it was soon largely overrun by the paralleling Garden State Parkway.) Did I feel strange being the only Jew (yet-to-be-Bar-Mitzvahed) in a Mormon Scout Troop? Not at all.

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Funny thing is I ran into a guy at a computer conference in the 80's who was the only Christian in a Jewish Scout Troop. Discovering we shared a number of other unusual experiences and interests, we went around telling people we were twins separated at birth. (One of more obscure connections was this phrase: OOTW. Hints: Radio, music, Barococco. Answer: DeKoven.)



Our house experienced great changes as I moved from grammar school to high. The first pictured here was my Dad's first new car, a 1948 Nash. Why a Nash? ("Viaduct?" as Chico Marx said in *Cocoonuts*.) Not sure, but he never made that mistake again. Somehow, this beast lasted seven years. Somehow, my Mother learned to drive on it. Despite its uncomplicated design, it had numerous breakdowns. Somehow, they both survived.

The other major, perhaps *the* major change, was television. It came the next year in the form of our first—black and white the only choice—television set. It quickly took a pivotal position in the crotch of our living and dining room "L." (We turned it to watch during dinner.) My generation preceded the one weaned on TV. The advent of television changed America even more than the cataclysmic events from 1962 (Kennedy) to 1974 (Nixon.)

Once on my own, I relegated TVs to the bedroom. My living rooms have always been for entertaining people, for conversation unbound by sales pitches. Yet, when alone, I still choose to eat watching the tube. I guess I prefer conversation at dinner, and if I can't talk to a human, at least I can talk back to my television.

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