

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

New York Me

Copyright © Lee Frank 1998-2003
All Rights Reserved

[Next Chapter](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Memoir Home Page](#)

New York Me

Living and working in New York took me through many changes. I was raised from nine to seventeen in very suburban Union. (There were farms less than a mile away.) The Newark I was born in was a city, but no more than a fraction (one-fifteenth) of the size of New York City. College was in Troy, a smallish city, perhaps a quarter the size of Newark. Military Service broadens many, but all it gave me was a visit to Baltimore. Thanks to GBA, for the last half of the sixties I was a New Yorker.

This was a new, a different me. Cosmopolitan me, if you will. Where to begin? Let's take my appearance. Working at a Graduate School of Business adjacent to Wall Street, required a certain level of dress. I figured if I couldn't play the degree game (I had none), I could at least play the dress-up game. Not that I didn't own any suits. I did. But they weren't up to GBA's standard. For one thing, I was vestless. First on my shopping list were three-piece suits. I decided I liked vests so much I bought some to wear with my vestless suits. In case you think my goal was to out-conservative the conservative financial community, two of these vests were silk brocade, black and red respectively.

I'm not suggesting I had an colossal clothing budget. One of the fun things in New York is shopping for bargains.

Oh sure, you say, I know about that. No, not if you've never been in the trenches. One place of legend was Klein's on Union Square. I'd seen cartoons (probably in the *New Yorker*) of women fighting over Klein's bargain tables. Trust me, the humor was in the punch line, not in the exaggeration. Which wasn't. Another fabled source of bargains was (still is, I imagine) Macy's Bargain Basement. This really was in a basement and really did have exceptional bargains. I found a wool suit, a dark brown that hid its lack of quality, for—are you ready?—eight dollars! OK, so this was over thirty years ago, but still. The other bargains I recall came from Alexander's. They were two in number, both Harris Tweed, one a sports jacket, the other a topcoat. I remember these because the last time I wore the sports jacket was in the winter of '93 at my mother's funeral in New Jersey. It was my last sports jacket, the suits (and vests) having disappeared years before. I gave it to my nephew. After thirty years, I think one of buttons was loose.

Suits are funny. The other day I noticed something in an old newsreel film I've seen a hundred times. You've seen it too and at least as many times. One of the first events early motion pictures recorded (over and over) was immigrants coming to America. What struck me, this last time, were the suits. All the men were wearing suits. Even boys had suit jackets over their knickers. At the dawn of motion pictures were suits common in so many countries? When did the suit become the common costume of the common man everywhere? How did this vision transcend continents? Was it possible that motion pictures of immigrants from one country showed all immigrants how to dress for America?

While the suit is still common worldwide, it's no longer as common as it was decades ago. Look at movies of the 30's and 40's. Everybody, from rich to poor, from domestic

to foreign, from young to old, even women were wearing suits. But it wasn't just the movie actors. Look again at the newsreels, look at old magazines. (Look at newsreels of the depression: The poor are wearing threadbare suits!) Suits were the common daily costume for—I almost said the first half of this century. Let's estimate from the 1880's to the 1960's. At least eighty years.

Not all my clothing was bargain basement. While there was nothing special about my salary, probably comparable to the high-thirties of today, I splurged on occasion. One was a suede winter coat, another was a pair of soft leather, low-cut Spanish boots. I mention these to give a sense of the changes in my outward appearance. Another clothing cue to this change was the loss of the white. This was, as I said, the sixties and times, as they said, were a'changin'. Why, I thought, should I buy white dress shirts when colors were available? I further cut the umbilical cord of convention by eschewing white underwear.

Before you picture me as a dandy, an out-of-control clothes horse, I offer evidence to the contrary. Note that I wore that Harris Tweed jacket for almost thirty years. The one tie I still own—the black knit—I've owned for forty years. And while I may be very particular, I'm not fastidious. As for style, I have my own, oblivious to trends and fads. It's fine if you think of me as one of the fashion unconscious.

Did living in New York effect changes even deeper than underwear? Undoubtedly. Usually we're not aware of these changes until we have reason to examine them. It wasn't until I left New York and moved to Florida, that I realized I preferred living in cities, that I'd rather walk than drive, that neighborhoods were more sustaining than

suburban sprawls. And though I grew up on libraries and museums in Newark, it wasn't until I revisited New York as a Florida tourist that I realized how essential these were to my sanity. New York was more than the Newark of youth writ large. More than unique, it offered everything. More than everything. New York is more than a dozen lifetimes could experience.

Did I take full advantage of New York's smorgasbord? Barely. I was, I'll remind you, working twenty-eight hours in the day and taking some twelve credits at night. This left little time for amusements. Although working out of downtown GBA, I spent about equal time at NYU's Washington Square campus. Two of the three computers I used were located there. One was at the School of Commerce, the other at the Courant Institute of Mathematics. For the few who might not know, Washington Square is the heart of Greenwich Village. I managed to miss many of the talents who began their careers in the Village of the sixties, names such as Bob Dylan.

In My Life, I talked at length about the New York USO and the free theatre I saw while stationed in Newark. How many shows? More than I can count, probably well over a hundred. Now it's only two years later and I'm living in New York, so how many do I see? A handful. And while time was my greatest constraint, cost was not irrelevant. Two-fer tickets were cheap, but not as cheap as the free USO. Besides, the free New York theatre accessible from Newark was confined to after work. Living in New York, those limitations disappeared and new opportunities opened up for activities like museums and art openings. And parties. Few social events are as exciting as meeting new people at New York parties. In new neighborhoods, in new apartment buildings, and in new lofts in the newly emerging SoHo.

While in New York, I excelled at two games: time and lunch. Mastering time in the sense of arranging my day to avoid conflict with crowds. My cousin Ron calls it living asynchronously. As mentioned in *My Life*, I was so good at avoiding crowds that I was caught in the subway rush hour twice because I forgot it was there. Mastery of time gave me the freedom to be a lunch maven. My day began by orchestrating lunch. Here's how it worked. I had office space at each of the three NYU computers I used. I'd show up downtown at GBA and make phone calls and talk to coworkers (or friends or a woman I was dating). Then I'd organize my work day—prepare this project for that computer—around this luncheon appointment.

My luncheon adventures were therefore built around two of the more interesting neighborhoods of New York: Wall Street and Greenwich Village. My choices were assisted by my NYU employment. At Washington Square, NYU maintained a staff cafeteria, and a faculty dining room called the Top of the Park (not to be confused with a commercial restaurant of the same name near Columbus Circle). The dining room came with full service, real silver, linen, crystal, and subsidized reasonable prices—and that was not my best place for lunch. Not with the numerous selections of Wall Street and Greenwich Village. Learning about New York lunches taught me this: even the best restaurants, where dinner might require a bank loan, were affordable for lunch.

New York, for many, is the epitome of city. (From the Latin civitas or perhaps civilas, and not too far from civilization itself.) Civilized, for many, means living in the greatest city in the world. New York offers every perc of civilization, but for me none surpasses dinner with a woman. I decided when I lived in New York that one of

most civilized things one could do was have dinner with a woman at a nice restaurant. Not necessarily an expensive restaurant, and not the best because it can be distracting. Nice doesn't need to be fancy. Conversation is also essential to being civilized. The restaurant that wants you to linger lets you know. And vice versa, where plenty of noise and fast-tempoed music say "turnover." To be enjoyable, the experience needs to be more than minimally pleasant. As does the food. As do you. All you need is the right woman. It doesn't have to be the woman. It doesn't even have to be your woman. It only has to be woman who is a woman, behaving like a woman. When the combination is right in New York, well, I feel that is the peak of civilization.

I took Fran to Delmonico's for lunch. Fran's father, divorced, had a seat on the stock exchange. Her mother was a former chorus girl. She and her mother lived in a fashionable northshore Long Island town. (Can anyone spot the cliché here?) Fran wasn't the first date I took to my little fifth floor walkup in Brooklyn Heights. I used my poetry to get the first one there—for the (hoped for) seduction. However, there weren't many dates given my schedule; it wasn't much of an apartment to bring women to, anyway. I believe it would fit into my present living hyphen dining room. Yet it's not without certain fond memories, even beyond the women. An old brownstone, the apartments above the first floor were a series of tiny rooms, mine at the top the tiniest of all. My living room was filled with a minimalist single bed slash couch, one chair, and a small bookcase for my small stereo. The bedroom, or bed alcove, had a single bed and small dresser with barely room to walk between. Kitchen and bath provided the basic necessities with ancient plumbing and antique appliances. (I remember buying beer for the old frig whenever I could find a six-pack—of no known kind—for a dollar.)

Fran was the first person who made me conscious of social classes. It was very important to her that she see me as LMC—so she could be clearly UMC. I argued MMC for myself. (Respectively, Lower Middle Class, Upper Middle Class, and Middle Middle Class.) Such stratification had never before occurred to me. I pondered its importance for her. Was she uncomfortable dating below her class? Was I, dating above? Was she trying to make me uncomfortable? I doubt “yes” was the answer to any of these.

But I was left with questions. Am I really comfortable dating above my class? I thought I was with Fran, but was I? Although I don't seek out people of any social class, lately I've been wondering why I rarely date someone with a car as good as or better than mine. Is that not clearly a class statement? Why then do I pride myself on being at ease with anyone?

Are, as Hemingway jokingly chided Fitzgerald, the rich only richer? Or are they truly different? Certainly not innately, but unquestionably in experience. My experience, for example, has been a life lived on a budget. I don't worry about pennies, but I do limit my weekly out-of-pocket expenses. And while my budget is flexible enough to permit small freedoms, I am never free to spend recklessly. My infrequent (maybe once a year) impulse buying rarely exceeds a hundred dollars. For some the impulse might be a thousand. others perhaps only ten. (If you can casually drop ten or a hundred thousand, I'd said you're wealthy.) If these tenfold increments are a measurement of class, then class does determine behavior.

I wonder. If I had been there when Hemingway was jostling Fitzgerald, would I have been quick enough to slam my two cents on the table? It's only taken me thirty years to come up with this rejoinder: The rich are different; they have the option of living differently.

Back to the Brooklyn Heights walk-up—and up. I was amazed to discover this apartment offered priceless New York evening amusements. My only windows opened on the darkened backyard canyon separating the back of my row of brownstones from the back of the row on the next street. From here, I could look into perhaps six times as many rear windows as in Hitchcock's film of the same name. No night passed, if I chose to look, without two or three scenes in the human comedy. But the windows were nothing compared to the roof. Being the top apartment, I had access to the tarpapered roof, gently sloping to the street in front. Under the night sky, I could see over the apartments on the opposite side of my street to the lighted upper half of the Manhattan itself. I could also see into the front windows of those apartments. One contained a pair of loving lesbians who liked to bathe each other in front of their unshaded windows. I hope some of my replacements were writers.

Here's a strange observation. This apartment, my first, was in Brooklyn Heights. My last, about ten years later, was on West Sixty-sixth Street. My second was on Eighth Street, the third on Fourteenth. I had moved in an almost perfect straight line from first apartment to last.

After two years in Brooklyn Heights, I chose my second apartment on Eighth Street to be closer (two blocks) to NYU's Washington Square campus where I attended classes and used office space for GBA. At the beginning and end of my work or class days, I walked through famed Washington Square in Greenwich Village. From Brooklyn Heights, I always took the subway. Always, except for the world's largest exception.

On the night of November 9, 1965, I was working with Larry at the Courant Institute's computer on Mercer Street, a block east of Washington Square. Then the lights, as everyone knows, went out. Being inside, we thought it was the building. Once outside, it was plainly more than this one building. The information that the blackout blanketed New York came quickly. People used phones and radios, portable and car. In much less than an hour—and no one expected it to last even half an hour—everyone knew we were in the midst of something big. (By now everything was dark; the lights went out at 5:16 PM, and daylight was gone before six.) The something big became known as The Great Northeast Blackout of 1965. Having the city in total darkness was not just exciting, it penetrated the ennui of the most jaded New Yorker.

First, we declined the invitations of those returning to their offices for makeshift parties. (And yes, there were liaisons of convenience. And yes, even though you may have read this was a myth, we knew of at least one pregnancy as a result.) Larry and I decided to walk downtown, roughly two miles, to GBA's main office. On the way, we were amazed to find traffic flowing smoothly, if slowly, without traffic lights. We were further amazed to find people positively cheerful. This loss of electric power had also blacked out the jaded New York killjoy.

Arriving at our GBA annex over the Automat, we walked up the flights to the various office floors but found the doors inaccessible from the stairs and no one responding to our knocks. (Stairs in these buildings are exclusively for emergency exits; once in the stairwell, you can only leave the building.) The next day at work, Wednesday, we learned we had missed a good party in progress. Oh well.

By now it was three hours without power and easy to conclude it wasn't returning in a hurry. Since Larry lived in New Jersey, I offered my living room couch. We

were now downtown, so we simply walked across the Brooklyn Bridge. We were not, assuredly, alone. Without the subway's transportation of the masses, thousands were on foot in every direction. We walked across, had a decent night's sleep. The next morning, the subways were rolling and we headed for the entrance down the street. It was through the lobby of the St. George hotel where we stopped to buy copies of—can you believe it?— the *New York Times*. Larry's suggestion. (Printed where else? Newark.) I still have my copy.



About the Brooklyn Bridge. When it was built, its twin towers were almost as tall as Trinity Church, the tallest structure in New York until 1890. (And for the longest period, 1846-1890, eclipsing the Empire State Building's 41 years.) The Bridge's massive twin towers, dwarfing the barely visible thin spire of the church, were the largest structures on either side of the East River it spanned. Span as a description doesn't even come close. It soars, the gothic arches of its towers and the sublime spider web of its cabling feel more like a church than an engineering feat. And engineering marvel it most certainly is, still standing with only minor repairs after well over a hundred years. (Highly recommended is David McCullough's The Great Bridge:

New York Me

The Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge.)
Feet, if I may use the pun, is what the design is about. Yes, it moves vehicles from each side of the river to the other. But their roadways are on either side of the walkway, below and largely out of the sight of the pedestrians walking down the center. Oblivious to the vehicular traffic, walking—on a wooden boardwalk no less—takes you across the river and through the towers. As you cross in the gentle arch of the footbridge, you're aware only of the river, its ships, the cities on either side, and the other, lesser bridges.



The 13 feet of the Trinity steeple taller than the Bridge

[Next Chapter](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Memoir Home Page](#)