

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

**Lee Frank**

## **Sophomore Summer**

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## Sophomore Summer

That summer of '56 was a big one, especially compared to the previous. My friend Gil had returned from BYU (Brigham Young University; Mormon, remember?) with a car he'd purchased in California. It was a '53 Ford hardtop with glass pack mufflers, windshield visor, leather seats, a continental tire mounted on the rear—and California plates. In 1956 this was major cool. We could, and did, use Gil's car to haul his boat down to the Jersey Shore. However, our prime interest was not in what it could pull but what it could pick up. We spent a lot of time at drive-ins, the food variety immortalized in *American Graffiti*.

We also cruised the Jersey beaches, amusement rides, anywhere we had a chance to meet women. Well, not quite women. Our major success came with three soon-to-be-senior high school girls, whom I'll call Alice, Barbara, and Carol. Initially, I made a lunge for Alice, but she didn't reciprocate. Dick tried to interest Barbara, but she wasn't buying. Gil did have a few dates with Carol, but that didn't last either—and it was my doing. At a party, I decided Carol was interesting and that she might be interested in me. I managed to persuade her to my house when my parents were away. Before the afternoon was over, I was a goner—and I wasn't alone.

Carol and I began going together, but I don't remember the details of her split with Gil. Was it guilt I felt? Or the success of competition? Probably a little of both, but I'm also sure she made it clear it was her decision. This love was different from that of last summer. This was mutual and much deeper. She even embroidered a little red pillow with "My Guy, the Alpha Plus of RPI." This reciprocity was new, intoxicating, and gave my emotional world a third dimension. Love, I discovered, was about new highs *and* new lows. Experiencing these, I learned the gut meaning of "emotional roller coaster."

I learned other lessons the next semester when I took Carol to an RPI fall dance. Although now a senior in high school, she was only sixteen. Her precociousness had moved her ahead more grades than my meager half-year. Here I was, nineteen and a junior in college, dating a sixteen-year old. First, there was the problem of convincing her parents to let her come to Troy for the weekend of this dance. Easy, compared to acquiring a hotel room, but we managed. Hurdles accomplished, I felt I was your basic man-of-the-world.

*Before I get to the lessons of this weekend, I need to restate my policy on kiss and tell. I don't. I covered this in My Life in Bars, but I'll summarize here. I don't. Most guys I've met do, but I—for the third time—don't. I believe my attitude arose from an incident with another woman I "stole" from another good friend. (Players to be named later.) Initially, when he would tell me the details of their dates, I was interested. Then, when I met her, got to know her, these same details became painful. I didn't begrudge my friend his intimacies, but I didn't need to hear them when it concerned someone I knew and liked. Later, when I dated her, I never discussed our intimacies—not with him and not with anyone else. And I haven't ever since.*

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Then Carol and I had our first argument. My first major quarrel with a loved one. No spat or tiff this. I recall we were waiting to get on a bus for Albany—a day trip across the river to a movie—and I stormed off. I walked around the block in a world turned upside down. Before I made the circuit, I was overwhelmed. What I had done? Now I rushed back with heart-stopping anxiety for how she felt after my leaving her like that. I apologized, sort of, and we made up, mostly; but the future was changed. Forever. I had gained the painful knowledge of the difficulty of maintaining relationships.

Lesson Two also came out of our relationship but transcended relationships. During this weekend, there were other events, other parties. Although I was not a member of any fraternity, I had many friends who were. One invited me to his fraternity party so I asked her if she would like to go and she said yes. On our way, walking ever uphill from the downtown hotel, I thought about the frat blasts I'd attended in the past two years. I began to have second thoughts. I began to speak awkwardly, yammering about how these were big-time college parties and here she was a high schooler of sixteen. What she heard went past my poorly expressed notions to my real, underlying concern: Would my friends accept her?

She answered directly. Why shouldn't my contemporaries respond as I did? In simpler terms: She was good enough for me, why not my friends? Of course, and how obvious. This was a new truth for me but not the whole lesson. It was my first exposure to a principle it took me decades to appreciate fully: Listen to everyone. Be open to the truth no matter what its source. It hadn't occurred to me that a sixteen-year old would have better understanding than I of my own social milieu. Some big college man.

Incident from the end of the weekend. We were on the train saying good-bye. A train I'd ridden many times.

A train that told its visitors to leave before it did. I didn't. We were so wrapped up in each other, neither noticed the conductor's last call. I rode the train all the way back to Grand Central Station in New York. Did I turn around and ride back? No. Instead, we both returned to her house (Newark, where else?) prolonging each other's presence as long as possible. I inveigled a ride from her father back to the railroad station in time for the last train north. Riding north in the middle of the night (the aptly named milk run), I was too euphoric to dwell on my stupidity.

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