

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

**Lee Frank**

## **Sophomore**

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## Sophomore

Entering my sophomore year moved me onto the campus and into the venerable RPI Quadrangle dorms. The freshman dorm was new and off campus. Now I was on campus and with a new roommate. I was there because I was not in a fraternity. Many friends were, and other friends weren't anywhere. They simply didn't come back. Don't recall anyone ever discussing the possibility of dropping out, but people did. (And eventually I did, too.) Grades were always being talked about, but never quitting school. A few disappeared during the year, and most simply never returned. A few transferred, some stepped back into community or junior colleges. To get their grades back up, they'd say, to return to RPI. Didn't happen.

As a freshman, I had discovered other ways to express myself. That first year, with fellow architecture major Pete (a different Pete from the same-named roommate), I joined the college humor magazine. We began by creating small ads, done cooperatively and separately. This next year, as sophomores, we contributed everything from ads to articles, fiction to illustration, even cartoons. The following drawings of mine were not used for our piece on the pseudo-Latin classifications (engineering school humor). I was told they were too sexy. Pete and I wrote the material and ended up using his illustrations. Fine by me; they were better.



primus learnis



stationarum amoris

The name of this stellar (and subsidized) publication was the *Bachelor*. Were we trying to imitate *Playboy*? We wished. My simple illustrations illustrate the school's control over our material. We didn't look upon it as censorship. We were only trying to survive within the system. This was still the fifties and, despite the liberating influence of *Playboy*, most of us—students, workers, incipient radicals—were still very much inside the system. Revolution was equated to Red, and people still said it was better to be anything but. (Our freshman “Revolution” prank poked fun at this attitude.)

Needless to say we tried, we thought cleverly, to slip our disguised sophomoric double entendres past the administration's censors. And occasionally succeeded, which brought our risqué up to the level today's PG rating. Before *Playboy* (BP), the world was G-rated. Or so it seemed. *Playboy* in my day, in its beginnings, was only flirting with today's R rating. Ratings, for such things as sex, were still in the future and our only interest was Rensselaer's rating system: grades.

I talked about people disappearing from school, but haven't said a word about my academic status, *my* grades. How's that for keeping things in perspective? Few people were able to achieve a “gentlemen's C” at Rensselaer. I

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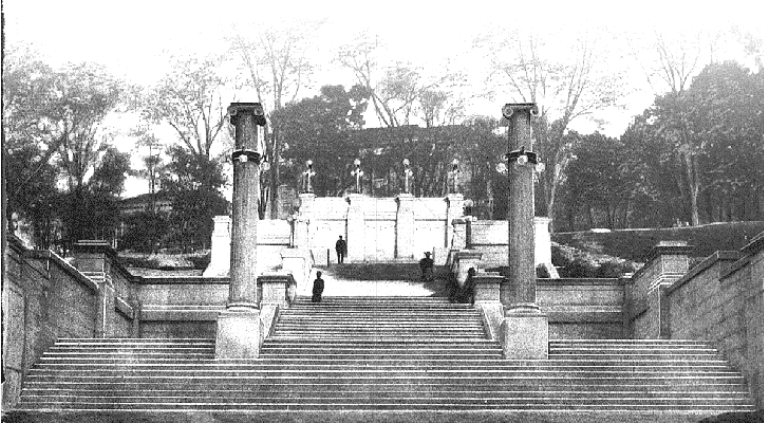
came close, but not because it was my objective. I had no specific plan for my grades; certainly no aim for any form of graduate school. I never saw grades as either ends or means. From each course I learned what I needed or what was necessary or what I felt was important for my future. Let the grades fall where they may. And they fell all over the place. Except for one physics course at the end of this sophomore year, they were all passing.

*I can't discuss grades without mentioning my test-taking abilities. By the time I had entered high school, I had learned how to take tests. I became so good, I turned taking tests into a game. Before I left high school, I was supremely confident in this ability; I got into college largely because of my SAT test scores. In college, I passed more than a few courses because of high grades on the final. (That is, I did what was minimally necessary.)*

*My first measure of personal achievement on a test was speed, to be finished before everyone else. Sometimes, if I wasn't bored, I would use the extra time to review my answers and improve my score. If I thought I knew the material, I wouldn't bother to study. If no preparation was required—as in the next two examples—I was completely free from anxiety or apprehension. IQ tests in Psych 101 were a challenge; a game I thought I won because I finished first. (If you want to know my score, read the next book in this series.) The height of this idiosyncratic approach to tests came in the middle of this sophomore year: The dreaded Draft Deferment exam. A poor score here meant the military could draft you right out of college. I was out late the night before. The exam began at eight AM and I could barely keep awake. With my future in jeopardy, I whipped through the test and napped until they collected the results. I passed. No, as we used to say, sweat.*

For me the primary advantage of advancing to sophomore was living on campus, in the Quadrangle. The freshman dorm (and cafeteria) was a good half-mile from

the campus. The dorms of the Quadrangle formed the east boundary of the campus. They opened westerly to the athletic field and stands, and from there to the venerable buildings of RPI. Did I mention the school was, for an engineering school, ancient? Founded in 1824, Rensselaer was, at that time, mostly buildings from the previous century: ivy-covered red brick walls and green copper roofs.



RPI Approach

The western boundary of the campus was The Approach. The campus sloped downhill, east to west, from the Quadrangle to The Approach. From The Approach to downtown it was steeply, very steeply, downhill. The Approach faced downtown Troy, intended as sort of an entrance—for incoming just-off-the-train, freshman and townspeople alike—to our Olympus. We frequenters of the town's minimal pleasures used The Approach but rarely saw it. We trudged up this small mountain with our eyes on where to place our next foot on the next step. The Approach wasn't much to look at in my day. Today, over forty years later, they're still trying to restore it to its former glory.

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My favorite entrance onto campus was the east one into the Quadrangle. This was a simple archway under the dorm. From this darkened tunnel, you entered the light, the raised grass of the field within the Quadrangle, and the contiguous three-story dorm buildings on your left, right, and behind. (More red brick accented by green roofs and green ivy.) Visible beyond the raised field were a few roofs of classroom buildings. This tunnel was wide enough to accommodate a car so they thoughtfully precluded the possibility with a three-foot high concrete post at the interior end. One winter in the Quad, we had snow so deep it filled most of the tunnel. They began clearing it with a snowplow from the street outside the campus. We watched as they removed the exterior and upper layers of snow. We watched as they lowered the plow to break through onto the campus—and squarely connected with the concrete pillar. As the sound reverberated throughout the snow-hushed Quadrangle, we laughed and moved onward to class. They finished the job with hand shovels.

Did I mention snow at RPI? Snow was the one constant of our school year. It was on the ground from Thanksgiving though Easter. Continuously. The snow came with our national ration of winter. My first year in the Quad, I used the window outside my bed as a refrigerator or freezer, depending on how cold it was. How cold was it? In my second year, my room was on the second floor with an exposed steam pipe going through to the third floor. This pipe in my bedroom provided so much heat I never turned on the radiator. Once, the temperature outside soared to thirty-two degrees (Fahrenheit). I opened the window. A rare warm day, it felt like spring.

*A word or two on the dorm rooms of the Quadrangle. My first year there—as befits a first-timer-to-the-Quad sophomore—was in an attic room. The room layouts in the Quad were mostly two small bedrooms, and one large living*

*(sitting?) room. And most notably, high ceilings. Although these first attic rooms were small, their lack of stature also kept the two of us with bedrooms from having another roommate in the third room. Not so the next year. Those three rooms were much larger and a third roommate occupied the supposed common room. But these three rooms were originally built for two, and we, the three occupants, often marveled at the original intention of the designers, of such luxury for two students.*

I recall using the Quadrangle field for two activities. In early fall, while the field was still green, we were too involved harnessing our new work load to notice the field. By late spring, with the field newly green, we rushed out to exorcise our cabin fever. The common sport of this commons was lacrosse. In my years there, Rensselaer was a recent NCAA champion, the equipment was cheap, and it took hours to master simple throws and catches. The other activity was less typical. I had, through roommates, become peripherally involved in the school's radio station. From said station, we liberated large sixteen-inch plastic promotional disks and tossed them around the field. This was BF (Before Frisbee) and they did not fly as well as the pie plates. But they were a translucent red and frequently shattered, splendidly, upon impact.

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