

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

Working

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

Working

The six months of freedom disappeared and I found my first real job. On my own. I called on a classified ad from the newspaper and went for an interview. The job was essentially indoor-sales. I was given a desk, a phone, and a catalog the size of Cleveland. The company, and I as non-roving sales representative, sold scientific lab equipment, mostly to schools, manufacturers, scientific laboratories, and the occasional military installation. Most of these sales came by way of bids. Customers, some as big as county school systems, would mail us a stack of pages listing items they wanted and we indoor-sales people would fill in our company's prices and return the bid. Less frequently, we'd get phone calls expressing either urgency for some item or curiosity about our inventory or prices. Said inventory resided in the large, attached warehouse.

This warehouse—perhaps the office was the appendage—was organizationally separate because it was unionized. Our products were delivered by truck, making our warehouse part of the well-known Teamster's Union. I quickly learned, having been unintentionally prepared by my previous military career, to identify the various separate structural components of this company. First, this was one branch of a company with a number of branches spread around the U.S. These branches were

warehouses plus sales offices. A branch office was arranged as follows: A Vice-President of Sales managed a small staff of real live, outdoor, salesmen. (This was 1963 and I doubt they had a single saleswoman anywhere in their organization, strictly a good old boys network.) This group rarely spoke, let alone mixed, with anyone in the office. They did buddy up to the warehouse supervisor when they needed an item in a hurry. The Sales Vice-President was ostensibly in charge of the whole operation. I rarely saw and never spoke to him. He only spoke to his sales (outdoor) force and two other people, his Executive Secretary and the Office Manager.

The Office Manager ran the Office. He had total control over our indoor sales staff, from six to eight, and an equal or greater number of "girls" who did the billing and bookkeeping. The warehouse was also his responsibility but he always treated the head of that operation as an equal. Not surprising since the warehouse supervisor was also the leader of the Teamster's local, with the ability to shut us down with a single command. And I remember our Office Manager had a secretary because she was the one who told me that the salary for entire office staff (as distinct from outdoor sales or warehouse) came out of *his* salary. A penny saved in office staff salary was a penny he earned, an actual penny in his pocket. The important bids went through his hands alone. He was always in the office when we arrived in the morning and when we left at night. She told me that he worked weekends. Every hour of work he did in our stead was an hour he didn't have to pay us. Yet his overtime earned him only our meager hourly wages. I thought he was nuts.

With the exceptions of the real salesmen, the secretaries, the bookkeeping supervisor, and the head of the warehouse, the rest of us were true minimum-wage slaves. The head of our little indoor sales group, Wayne,

Working Me

left during my first six months because the Office Manager had put a ceiling on his salary of \$108. Wayne's skills, especially his speed with an adding machine, amazed us newcomers. When those abilities went to work for one of our competitors, I sensed a bad business decision. I was the new kid, whose one real job had been the Army. My true business education was years away. But I knew foolishness when I saw it. And I saw a lot of it on this job.

I wasn't the only one. It didn't take long for new employees to begin showing zero respect for this company. I mentioned one of these, the drinking, in *My Life*. Another was theft. Although the warehouse was under separate control, occasionally we of the indoor-sales force would enter it to verify inventory numbers for a rush bid. There were two reasons for this verification. One was the uncomputerized inventory. Updated by hand, it was rarely up-to-date. The other was that the warehouse people were usually too busy—or too unionized—to check inventory for us. Once in the warehouse, our more disgruntled and daring people would nick minor articles. I still have a lifetime supply of lens cleaners. (The warehouse was also our unobserved exit to the parking lot and hidden booze.)

Another way we surreptitiously expressed our disrespect was the updating of our catalogs. Every few days the company would mail each branch office packages of update pages for the catalogs. Again, without the computer, a single change on a page required printing a complete page (both sides, naturally). Sometimes they'd send us little slips of paper and try to get us to manually change one number in the catalog. They felt more secure with new pages. The problem was we'd have to take time out of the work day to make these updates. Usually they'd languish in desk drawers, out of sight, until we had the time. Newcomers quickly learned that the rest of us did not treat these updates as high priority. There was no easy way for management to know when we made these changes. Or who among our group was current with every change. The

simple solution—for us to take turns, staying off the phone until we finished the updates—was beyond this management.

What I was learning, although I certainly didn't see it at the time, was the potential of computers. This catalog was not only prices and discounts, but what was more important, our complete product line. For everyone to be selling, especially quoting on large bids, from idiosyncratically assembled catalogs was silly. For catalogs to be several steps removed from inventory was asinine. And inventory was so inaccurate, people felt free to pilfer. The combination of these methods, a system from the nineteenth century, created a negative synergy typical of the day. My next job, strange but true, turned out to be in computing.

An interesting thing about this job, for me, was the telephone. I have always had a reluctance to make phone calls to strangers. Before this job, I had real problems calling someone I didn't know. If I had to call for a dental appointment or some such, I would stare at the waiting phone for endless minutes before I could pick it up—if I did at all. After this job, it became only a minor aversion. The job required making many such calls to clarify bids, inquire about possible substitutions, or ask for time extensions. The calls, difficult at first, eventually became mechanical.

About the same time I started this job, I started back up with Patty. Our first date after a six-month separation was six hours stretching the limits of anxiety, uncertainty, confusion, and relief. It took us more than a few hours, a long drive and dinner, to decide to get back together. By the end of dinner I was pressed up against the ceiling. Then she went to the bathroom. After some minutes, I realized she'd been gone for more than a few minutes. Then it was ten. I began to lose my grip. Was she all right?

Working Me

Was she having second thoughts? If she came back with a changed mind, would I survive the night? I sat at the table, outwardly immobile. Inside, I was bouncing off the walls. My mind was shredding. Finally, and I do mean finally, she returned. She seemed OK, only a little subdued. She said it had taken her twenty minutes to compose herself. We had both melted under the effort of the evening, the strain of overcoming a truly fearful unknown.

I don't think we lasted six more months. When not physically entangled, we were trying to untangle our future. She was a few years out of high school and pushing hard for a husband and a family. I was stuck in a dumb job with no place for advancement. (What could they do, make *me* the Office Manager?) She knew the future she wanted and I was still lost, careening without a career. How could I commit to marriage and family? Was I willing to make the best of it? To settle for menial jobs? A menial life? Was love enough to keep us afloat? I didn't think so. She did. She had more confidence in our future than I did.

Perhaps I had read too much Dostoyevsky. Perhaps it was because I preferred the darker playwrights, Ibsen, Strindberg, and even Miller. Our future was clouded by the shadow of Willy Loman. I'd spent too much time, in fact and fiction, in kitchen's like Ralph Kramden's. I wanted more. I wanted better. And not solely for me. I didn't feel I could offer her my non-existent, at best nickel and dime, future. I had tried to reason us apart. I learned she wouldn't give up on me unless I treated her badly. I felt I was right in forcing a breakup. Knowing it hurt me more than I was hurting her didn't make it easy or pleasant. It was something I had to do to give her the freedom to get away from me. Looking back, I know I was wrong. She knew that somehow I'd do better and she was right to think so. (Look how well I'd done in the Army.) But I was afraid I wouldn't, condemning us to a life of arguments over worn linoleum. It was a chance I couldn't take. A chance I was afraid to take.



Now I can see Patty spoiled me for most other women. If she could love me, then any other woman had to be her equal. Few were. The two pictures here don't do my memory justice. Brains and beauty are but two of the more difficult requirements for other women to match. Bravery is a third. Her father's abuse would have destroyed a weaker person, yet at eighteen she was able to cope with his return. And it was her firm stand that turned him away forever. Her essential goodness transcended her circumstances. And her optimism, which I mistook for wishful thinking, might well have been my greatest loss. I was too unsure of myself to accept her belief in my abilities and in our future. Looking back, it's easy to see these were years of learning the hard way.

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