

Wired

By Ira D. Levofsky

“Car 41, this is dispatch, investigate suspicious vehicle parked on the side of the road backed in by Bakers Farm. It’s been stationary for several hours.”

“Roger that pulling in now. There seems to be only one occupant sitting on the tailgate of a late model pickup truck. I’m investigating now.”

The date: Thursday, September 19, 1963. Sunrise 6:22 AM.

The number one song on the AM radio charts, Moon River by Andy Williams.

The weather: Light rain and 67 degrees AM.

The headline: John F. Kennedy announced to the nation that the United States would bid for the 1968 Olympics, we lost. (They were held in Mexico City)

And that very same day around lunch time, my father announced to all of the boys on the Jersey docks, his son Frankie was born.

I wasn’t named after Franklyn Delano Roosevelt, Frank Robinson or Frank Zappa (with or without the Mothers of Invention.)

As a Jersey boy born in the 60’s I was named after someone who really mattered, and was burdened with following in the namesake of a local born, worldwide hero. A man, who in the 1960s from New Jersey was arguably the greatest man who ever lived, the Chairman of the Board himself, the one and only Frank (Francis) Sinatra.

Back in the day when cigars cost a nickel and were available with blue “it’s a boy bands”, they were handed out and smoked freely on every corner, dinner table and on the factory floor. That day, my dad taking a sanctioned break with the blessings of his shop steward walked the Jersey dock handing out cigars and proudly announcing the arrival of me, his son.

Each cigar taken and pat on the back given was accompanied by a chorus of “pretty soon your son will be working right next to you carrying on the family tradition as a Local 313 brother, just like you and your father did.”

With a nod of the head and a smile on his face my father kept on handing out the cigars. All the while he was muttering under his breath, “like hell he will. My son is going to make something of himself and not sweat his life away like me and my dad. Why we were always treated like slaves under the Pharos whip and by all that’s mighty he will have a better life than that.”

As the only child of a blue collar New Jersey family, with very few cousins or relatives of any kind for that matter, I received plenty of attention from my parents. Especially early on in life I was the center focus of their lives.

Back in the day before cable TV or any TV for that matter, music was the distraction of everyday life and of course from early morning to way past my bedtime Sinatra records were playing continuously in the background of our small two bedroom row house.

By the time I was five years old, I was already singing my share of Frank Sinatra standards. At eight years old, I was more interested in Frankie Valle than Frank Sinatra but I was careful never to let on to dad that my musical taste had broadened as I grew older.

I was sure it would have crushed him if he heard me belting out a chorus of "Big Girls Don't Cry." Yea, the one thing I can say that I did for my old man was to always respect his way of life especially when I was around him.

In fact when my dad was home, every time I entered the room he was in I came in singing a Sinatra tune. As far as he was concerned at that moment there was nothing wrong in the entire world worth worrying about especially, when his only son was serenading him with one of his namesake's hits.

One day, suddenly, life as we lived it day to day just, well, all changed. Dad came home with a long drawn out face and the first 10 seconds in the house hollered at me to stop singing and get the hell out of his way. I was 13 years old and he was 47.

Within one week, I was standing graveside holding my Grandmas and Mom's hands trying to make sense of it all. Heart attack I heard someone say.

On that damp and chilly Wednesday morning in the middle of October, the Union representative who 13 years earlier took a cigar to honor my birth handed my Mom an American Flag to honor my father's death.

I remember her holding the wooden box with a glass front, and the flag inside all folded up in a triangle shape. He told her quietly almost in a whisper that not only was the Union and the brotherhood very sorry for her loss, but also that he himself served alongside my dad in the Navy. He said that he had lost a true, lifelong friend. Then he said out loud for everyone to hear, that he "presented this flag on behalf of the President of The United States and a grateful nation".

There were a total of seven men at the funeral from the local Veterans of Foreign War Post 1705 and they lined up with rifles for a real military salute. All old guys with grey hair or no hair under their hats, they were dressed in military uniforms which had gotten worn and tight over the years.

They lined up in a row and in near perfect unison each fired their rifle into the air three times. The synchronized shooting made each of the three shots sound like a very loud single blast and totaled the traditional 21 gun salute. I remember thinking that this must be what every well practiced shooting team sounded like.

When the shooting was all done, all seven soldiers walked around picking up the shell casings which ejected from the rifle after each shot and landed on the grass by their feet. Some of the casings still had smoke coming out of them. Much later in life I learned that the bullets were blanks and it was probably slow burning gun powder still smoking out the open end of the shell.

One of the soldiers walked over to me and handed me one of the bullet casings along with a small American flag on a wooden stick and saluted me. With that, my mother took my hand and we walked away.

Life went on in fact the next four years were a blur and next thing you know I was seventeen and graduating a year early from high school. Was I gifted or just over protected by my mom as an only child and increasingly so once my dad passed away? I spent more time home studying than out playing stickball with my friends from school.

Graduating early was probably a byproduct of hanging around the house reading, studying and of course according to my Grandmother listening to Sinatra instead of that horrible rock and roll music.

In high school I had kind of a casual girlfriend or two and a date for the prom. That's where I got my first real kiss in the back of my friends Plymouth and that's night I fell instantly in love. The very next day I got smacked in the face by a dose of growing pain reality when the same girl who kissed me was tonsil and tongue deep in the mouth of my neighbor Richie at the basketball court behind the school.

Lesson learned.

Here I was my first day, fresh out of high school and already standing in line at the Union Hall for a job on the docks with Local 313.

After all, what else would I do? This is what my father and grandfather did their entire lives so it made sense I follow in the family business. After all as my mother and grandmother always said, "The docks have always kept a roof over our head and food on the table."

With the docks being pounded in my head for 17 years and without any guidance or real world knowledge, I went to do the only thing I knew; follow in my father's and grandfathers footsteps.

I got to the docks bright and early but had trouble getting a visitor pass from the guard at the gate. Being seventeen and not having a driver's license meant I had no valid identification to show for entry. Luckily for me a group of my father's co workers were going through the gate and vouched for me so I was let through.

After all of the trouble just to get on the dock, you could just imagine how impressed I already was at the security and importance of the job. Walking up the dock towards the Union office many of the same guys who smoked nickel cigars in my honor, now older, fatter and one step from retirement welcomed me like the changing of the guards at the crypt of the Holy Grail.

"We really miss your dad and you are a welcome reminder of what a great guy and conscientious worker he was" said the Forman. "Let's get you signed up. The brotherhood takes care of everything and just like your father and grandfather we've got your back. Don't worry about the Union dues they come right out of your check.

We can start you right over there in your father's old spot on B dock. Don't be too surprised if someone calls you by his name. You are after all the spitting image of your old man."

Then I was told to go to the employment office down the hall where a very pleasant woman with really tall hair and way, way too much perfume on handed me a pile of papers to fill out.

When I was done and handed them back to her she said. "Congratulations Frankie, now all you need is to go to Newark on Friday and take the physical then you can start Monday next week. Welcome aboard."

There I was, 17 years old and already a working man and a union brother. Walking three feet above the ground all the way to the bus stop I couldn't help but think how proud my old man would have been of me that day if he were here.

As I waited for the Number 15 Jersey Transit bus which I took to get to the docks I was thinking that this bus would be my mode of transportation to and from work until I was established and could afford my own car.

Standing there planning my daily commute in my head, I figured I needed to get a 15 minute head start every morning so I wouldn't miss the bus. The bus that dropped me two blocks from the docks would pick me up 10 blocks from home and I was a really fast walker. No, better make it 20 minutes; I wouldn't ever want to be late to work because I missed my bus.

By the way it was New Jersey Transit Authority, but being from New Jersey you were given the birthright to call it Jersey Transit. When someone called it New Jersey Transit, this is how you could instantly tell they were New Yorkers or Connecticut visitors even before you saw what crappy drivers they were.

Sitting on the bus smiling like the cat that ate the canary I started thinking about celebrating my new job. I wanted to tell my mom but she was working a double shift as a maid at the airport Hilton.

I would need to stay up late so I could surprise her with the news that I got a job because she got home just after midnight. I was happy and proud that I could soon help her out with the bills so she wouldn't have to work as hard as she did ever since my father died.

The few friends I did have were still in school for another year. Everyone was as broke as me and instead of working after school they were either doing homework or playing sports.

I was never really much into sports. In the school gym I shot a basketball underhand once and instantly got the nickname Slam Dunk Sally. Basketball scholarship, don't think so.

Football meant pads and hitting each other which my mom said would never happen. Tennis was for the rich kids and the shooting team which I liked, was disbanded right after the Kennedy assassination.

There was one sport I liked and I was pretty good at it. I really looked forward to the Saturday morning bowling league at Sterling Bowl. All the kids met there at eight in the morning every Saturday and we had teams and bowled until noon.

There was pizza and lemon aid and a guaranteed good time regardless of the weather. As much as I enjoyed it, my mom couldn't afford to send me every week so I had to drop out.

Thinking back, I did get that foot fungus from the rental shoes so athlete was not in the cards.

Since I wasn't allowed to get a part time job in high school, until that very moment when the Foreman said "you're hired", I had no income and was dependent on mom giving me money or dipping into my birthday money which I had in a savings account at the Manufacturers Hannover Bank by the train station in Bergen, the town next to mine.

But I was determined to celebrate my new success in life and there was this one girl, Cecilia, who I was kind of friends with at school. She was a waitress in afternoon at the coffee shop which was right where the bus I was on to go home would stop to let me off every day.

Cecilia was a tall pretty girl with long brown hair and always had a smile on her face when she talked with me. Lately I noticed she was getting a little chubby, which didn't happen until she started working at the coffee shop. Must have been the free pie.

Anyway, she always talks with me and laughs at my jokes. Once when she didn't make the school dance team she was really down in the dumps and that's when my lifelong Sinatra training finally paid off. I sang "These Little Town Blues" to her cheering her up to the point of laughter.

What a great Idea. I'll ask her, Maybe Cecilia would like to go to a movie or bowling to help me celebrate my new job?

Feeling extremely confident about my chances for a date with Cecilia, I got off the bus a few stops early in front of Manufacturers Hanover Bank and took out \$10 from my savings account in anticipation of the upcoming celebration. A lot of birthdays passed to get that cash saved up and standing at the teller window I started to second guess myself and got cold feet about taking that much money out of the bank.

But this day would be worth it I thought to myself and pushed the withdrawal slip through the tray at the teller's window. She looked at the slip and said "Ten Dollars, that's quite a bit of money."

Now really nervous, I blurted out that "I got my first job and was going to take my girlfriend out to celebrate." The teller smiled and with a quiet nod of approval put a five and four singles and four quarters in a long skinny envelope and slid it on the tray to me.

What a nerve-wracking experience, I ran out of the bank like I stole the money and headed to talk with Cecilia.

By the time I got there, I walked into the coffee shop feeling 10 feet tall and ready to charm her off of her feet. \$10 in my pocket a new job and a big smile, what a great day, right?

Just inside, right next to the coffee shop entrance was the kitchen door. Walking past it, I could hear loud voices. It was Cecilia's boss yelling at her. It seemed she spilled coffee on someone and they walked out without paying the \$1.95 for their meal and he was going to take it from her pay.

She came out of the kitchen and over to my seat at the far end of the counter with a tear in her eye and without any greeting, asked me "you want coffee or a soda?"

I said, "I heard your boss yelling while I was walking in. It seems like soda is a safer bet, but, I'll take a chance on you and go with a hot cup of coffee." That got no reaction at all. No matter how much I tried or what I said or did to lighten the mood nothing seemed to work. She didn't even crack a smile.

I tried to make small talk for just a few more seconds but she was visibly really upset and spent most of her time far away from me wiping things off at the back counters.

With my coffee cup empty for the third time and me still being safe and dry, I called Cecilia over and said. "Hey, look, I'm sorry you spilled the coffee and got in trouble with your boss."

"I got a new job today and took \$10 out of the bank to celebrate and I was going to ask you to a movie or bowling or something. Now I have a better idea. Here's .50 cents for my coffee and a \$2.00 tip to cover the money you owe your boss.

I can't think of a better celebration than helping a friend in need."

With that said I put the money on the counter, gave her a manly smile and a wink, all Frank Sinatra like, then walked out the door feeling pretty dam good about myself. I did it my way.

Getting about halfway down the block I heard someone behind me calling Frankie, Frankie.

It was Cecilia. She ran up to me and grabbed my arm, spun me around and gave me a big kiss on my cheek. "Frankie", she said, "I get off in 30 minutes and you still have \$8.00 to celebrate with. I would love to go with you."

I said, "Well its \$7.50 actually." Yea I know but as it turns out this was the beginning of things to come and the next three years went by really quickly. In what seemed like the blink of an eye Cecilia and I were married, but more about that later.

It was time to go for my job physical and leaving home early Friday morning I had quite the new found spring in my step. An hour and a half and two busses later, I arrived at the Newark New Jersey Department of Health building. This was a huge five story high building with giant pillars; hundreds of steps and big paintings all over the place of old guys in robes and suits. Exactly what all great buildings look like I said to myself.

There was a circular desk in the middle of the great big lobby with a guy in uniform sitting at it. As I walked over I noticed the guy was old and fat and the closer I got the worse it got. He was missing a couple of teeth and had a big coffee stain on his shirt which was missing a button. I laughed as I imagined him sitting down and his stomach busting out and shooting the button from his shirt across the room.

Considering myself lucky that I wasn't in the line of fire of the button when it was set free, I walked up to him and proudly proclaimed that I was here for my medical exam so I could start my new job on the docks as a third generation brother in Teamsters Local 313.

Barely looking up from the sports page with an emotionless tone in his voice, he barked at me a single word "basement".

Well, I had a few words for him come to mind too but held my tongue like the gentlemen I was raised to be and without dampening my great mood, down the stairs I went. At the bottom of the staircase was nothing but a dimly lit hallway lined on both sides with solid wooden doors.

The floor was covered in blue and white tiles. I walked ahead trying not to step on any of the blue tiles. Good thing no one saw me or they would have thought I was a drunk.

As I went further along that hall reading all of the doors, I finally came to the one I was looking for. There above the door marked B507 was the sign reading Medical Exams.

Two and half hours later there I was walking back up the stairs but instead of being high above the ground as I was when I got there, I was barely able to lift my feet to walk at all. The entire trip home was a somber quiet time. Actually I was trying to make sense of what just happened to me.

I just had my first and worst life experience and I could remember only four words from the entire two and a half hours that just passed. Cough then Bend Over.

Another three hours later found me squirming in my seat at the coffee shop. As a shy guy with a onetime Plymouth education all I could say to Cecilia about the exam was it went fine but my stomach hurt from all of the pushups and sit ups they had me do so I was going home.

After a few restless nights, Monday morning finally came and with the nightmares of the exam itself almost gone, off I went to the Local 313 office to retrieve my working papers which allowed me onto the Jersey dock to start my new career.

This time the guard greeted me with a "Welcome our newest brother" and opened the gate with a big smile. On the dock each worker I passed had a smile and a good morning and received an equal greeting in return. I felt great, like I had been traveling for a long time and just arrived at home.

Walking into the union office the very pleasant woman with tall red hair and way to much perfume asked me to go in to the meeting room marked number four. She directed me to a door just down the hall and on the right.

Lucky door number four I thought to myself as I went in and sat down at a big square wooden conference table. Spending the next ten minutes looking at all of the paintings of tug boats and giant ships on the walls, I spotted one painting of an old man with a pipe and white beard wearing a blue Captain's uniform and hat. Exactly what every real ship's Captain looks like, I thought to myself.

Just then in comes the Foreman with a stack of papers in his hand. A frown replaced the smile he had on at our last meeting.

“Frankie”, he says, “I have the results from your medical exam here and it says you have a heart problem. I’m afraid we can’t hire you. We suggest you get yourself to a doctor and see what they can do for you. Good luck.” And out the door he went.

Sitting on the bus in disbelief I had no idea what to do. Furthermore I can’t believe that doctor in Newark knew anything about my heart from sticking his finger up my, well you know.

I was devastated and after the longest bus ride of my young life knocked on Cecilia’s door. She was really wise for her years and sitting on the front porch with Cecilia that night she convinced me that I should go get another medical opinion and oh yea, I got my second real kiss.

Bus rides seemed to help clear my head so I jumped on the number 22 which did a big circle around my town and dropped me right back where I started. Deep in thought, gazing out on that rainy night the street lights had a soft halo reflection around them on the windows. In this peaceful surrounding with no additional pressures on my mind, it suddenly hit me.

Where better to get a second medical opinion than from the doctors of the United States Navy. I thought to myself why not follow in my father’s other footsteps. The Viet Nam war was over and peace time in the Navy sounded like a great way to see the world, save money and get an education. At least that’s what the posters on the bus said.

Getting up the next morning I had an entirely new set of goals. Join the Navy, learn a trade and see the world, just like the sign said. The bus dropped me off right in front of the New Jersey recruiting center. In there I met uniformed professionals who discussed the many options available to me as a sailor in the United States Navy.

After hours of rigorous testing, the kind I like, reading, math and science questions, I was led into a room with a round table and asked to wait. Less than a minute later, three very impressive men all in uniform came in and sat down with me. Two were in kaki colored uniforms and one in a white uniform. Very quickly it was clear to me that the man in white was the boss.

He introduced himself as the company Commander, shook my hand and said that I had everything I needed to succeed and was exactly what the navy was looking for. One of the kaki guys handed me some papers and with a big smile told me I was set up with an appointment for a physical the next day in Ft. Lee Veterans Hospital. They got up and walked out.

I was the big winner. Not only would I get a medical examination from real doctors, I had the opportunity to learn a real trade and build my future, with the Navy.

Even though I knew I would look great in a Navy uniform, not wanting to upset Cecilia or my mother with the possibility that I would soon enlist and shove off, I decided to keep the whole experience to myself for a while.

On the bus to Ft. Lee New Jersey which is just across the river from New York City, there were plenty of the usual recruiting signs and posters. I looked at the Navy poster above the bus window and pictured myself on the deck of that ship sailing around the world. Wow.

I walked up to the VA Hospital in Ft Lee New Jersey and right from the front steps of the building, this trip made the Newark experience look like amateur day for medical delinquents. This was a real life hospital.

My physical testing began right away in an examination room right behind the reception desk. There was a nurse in a white uniform and another woman in blue surgical clothes. After listening to my heart and breathing they put a blood pressure cuff on me and had me run on a treadmill. I felt like my hamster, his name was Washington.

Only 20 minutes from the time I walked in the nurse, smiling but in a serious tone, informed me that I had flat feet and was woefully out of shape for my age. Was it because of my new relationship with Cecilia and availability of free pie? Who knows, I'm not a doctor.

Never the less, pleased that I didn't have to cough or bend over in front of the nurse I went as directed to a room on the second floor identified by a sign which read Medical Intervention.

I went in and sat down at a big conference table. A few minutes later, in walked a clean cut man wearing a lab coat with Dr. Howard embroidered on it. He had round glasses and a clipboard in his hand. That is exactly what every real doctor looks like, I thought to myself.

He introduced himself as Dr. Howard, sat down and spoke directly at me, not to me. He talked as if he had done it a thousand times before.

"Frank, he said, we have detected an issue with your heart function. Tell me about your family history. Did your father have a history of heart problems?"

"Yes, he died of a heart attack."

"And how old was he?"

"47 years old. He died when I was 13, it was very difficult on my mother and.."

Interrupting he asked, "And your grandfather? "

"Yes he also had a heart attack, I said, but I don't know any of the details."

"Well I'm afraid it's genetic and unfortunately, you are not medically fit for the Navy. Your condition right now is not life threatening however I recommend that you seek medical attention, get in shape and have a positive attitude. This will all contribute to your long and happy life. Good luck and Gods speed."

With that, he got up and out the door he walked.

Several minutes passed before I realized that no one was coming in back for me and I was left there to fend for myself. And fend I did. But first I cried, and cried and cried some more.

Walking out of the VA Hospital in Ft Lee New Jersey my feet would barely move. I felt like I was walking in deep mud and I was sure It was the longest walk of my life.

Still so confused, the bus ride home was a blur. My mind was wandering from place to place and back again, by the time I took a reality check I was 15 stops past my house. I got off and crossed the street to wait for the bus going back in the other direction but instead of stopping and waiting I just kept walking.

Like a lost and wandering soul I slowly meandered in the direction of my house which an hour later found me standing in front of the coffee shop. Cecilia saw me standing there and she started waving me in into the coffee shop through the window.

I was sucking it up as best as I could I sat at the counter and waited for her to come over to me. She could see I was distressed from the red nose and watery eyes and naturally asked me, "Have you been crying? What's wrong?"

All of a sudden I was speechless. It's not like I wasn't expecting the question. After all I just spent hour's explaining to myself what I was going to tell her.

Then even before any words could come out of my mouth, bam the life changer. Like the boxer being hit by the haymaker right hand from out of nowhere, she put me on the canvas, flat on my back staring up at the lights and wondering what the hell just happened.

This, the second girl I had ever kissed, took my hand, looked me right in the eye and said, "ya know Frankie, if you're going to date the waitress in the local coffee shop, the girl that every guy who ever ordered Adam and Eve on a Raft and Wreck em. (Jersey for two scrambled eggs on toast) wants to kiss, you need to be a real man.

To be my man, you need to be tough, confident and successful which incidentally, is just what I see every time I look at you. So what could possibly make that guy, my guy, cry?"

With that said I looked her right in the eyes and told her the lie that would haunt me for the next 20 years.

"Cecilia, I was leaving the doctors office in Ft Lee where I just had a physical, and by the way everything was just fine, and as I got on the bus and just sat down I saw a puppy hit by a car and killed. I can't get it out of my mind. Some day we need to get a puppy and name it Lee in memory of that poor little dog."

With a tear in her eye she leaned over the counter and gave me a kiss and a promise and from that moment to this very moment, I was the textbook definition of a tough guy.

Married at 21 and working as a salesman in Manhattan, I would leave the house early every morning and take the bus to the train to the subway. Eventually coming up the stairs at the Canal Street station on Broadway, near the China Town and Little Italy sections of Manhattan, I began my daily walk. (Once you hit NY the train is called the subway, even if it's above ground)

My job was selling copy machines, fax machines and adding machines without the paper tape, I was right in the middle of the office equipment explosion, but it wasn't an easy job.

Being the consummate tough guy really helped in my career. You see, I was a door to door salesman but the doors were all locked and building entrances all guarded by uniformed Elliott Ness types, retired cops or worse, maintenance guys who barely even spoke any English.

I became a fast walking, smooth talking money making tough guy by default because I needed to get past these barriers to make a living. Getting in, getting the job done and then getting more, I soon became the number one salesman in the company.

There I was, stepping off the bus at night to walk my girl and then my wife home wearing a suit and tie, with a confident strut in my step and money in my pocket. I had everything a man could ask for like a beautiful wife, great job and new convertible in the garage of my own home. Indeed, the textbook definition of success and far surpassing any hopes my dad may have had for me.

When it came to Cecilia, she wanted to work until we had kids but the one thing I learned is that after everyone has read the menu, the young pretty waitress catches their eye. If the diamond ring doesn't change their minds the locals at the counter will certainly try to warn them off. But in any event she was my girl and make no mistake; all who sat down knew that the prettiest waitress in town was off the market.

Soon, married and pregnant, off we grew.

Twins, one boy and one girl about three minutes apart at least that's what they told me. My daughter is the first one out then the doctor said here comes the other one and that's when I lost track of time.

My mind was already racing to the grocery store for diapers, doctor office visits, soccer games, colleges, wedding chapels you name it. Amazingly both of their entire lives were flashing before my eyes and the kids were not even in my wife's arms yet.

Crazy right? Dam good thing I was a tough guy, huh?

And then not long after came Lee, a Golden Retriever puppy who just adored the kids, listened better than the kids and became an instant part of the family.

One other thing Lee always did just by being in the room was remind me that a single arrow in the heel of Achilles was all it took to befall a God. Lee was making me ask myself, what will it take to drop a tough guy?

I did most of the things the Navy doctor told me to. Stayed in pretty good shape for my age, 47 last week. Walking in Manhattan and climbing the subway steps every day put some muscle on my legs and helped a guy who loves to eat keep his weight in check.

As long as I felt ok, I kept telling myself that there was no reason to worry. After all, I was already older than my dad was so I figured the problem must have skipped a generation.

As time marched on, Cecilia was a stay at home mom, the kids soon to be high school graduates and I was being pressured to give them some fatherly advice to take out into the world.

Thinking back to the advice given to me by my Father and Grandfather I eventually came up with the most important single thing they told me that I could modernize with my life's experience and pass along to my children.

My Grandfather said:

'Never take a laxative and a sleeping pill at the same time.'

Though this made a lot of sense, my kids were not going to listen to any advice which involved a laxative, for sure.

My father eventually updated that same advice to say

"Begin with the end in mind"

Which makes sense but I decided to go in a totally new direction based on my business success and told my children;

"Don't lie to anyone and you will never have to look over your shoulder to see where you're going next"

And that's right about the time that Lee came walking up to me and with those honest eyes staring right at me, silently reminded me of my big lie.

Back in a flash was that horrible day and that long ride on the bus from Ft. Lee when I was told about my heart condition for the second and confirming time. It was then, looking into the eyes of my dog, that I saw the reflection of my life and I decided that the decision could not be put off any longer. It was way past the time to be honest with myself and go see a doctor about my heart.

Of course it wasn't yet the time to be honest with my wife so without telling Cecilia, I made an appointment with a highly rated cardiologist in another town, Ramsey New Jersey, where no one knew me.

As it turns out, medicine has come a long way since the Newark Department of Health debacle nearly 20 years earlier. Sadly, I quickly found out, the hard way I'm afraid that the old cough and bend over are still staples of medical discovery.

In any event, I went to the cardiologist with a nonchalant attitude and extremely confident expectations.

47 plus years old, outliving my father and grandfather and feeling good, the word worry was not in my vocabulary. Until of course the very next morning while I was at Wayne County Hospital being prepped for open heart surgery in the CCU wing. I was hooked up to all these monitors and machines checking everything about me that you could imagine. This is exactly what every great hospital looks like, I thought to myself.

Here I was, living the prophecy originally discovered by some guy in a basement sticking a finger up... I still don't understand it but all the Oracles were indeed correct, dam it.

Four major blockages requiring an immediate quadruple bypass operation was the result of my doctor's exam. Dam lucky to be alive is what I overheard him say to my wife.

Being the tough guy to the end, I joked with my wife and children even as they rolled me into surgery telling them that I got the "buy three get one free deal." After telling them I love them and would see them in a few hours I made a circle in the air with my finger, just like the Indy 500 starter telling the drivers to start their engines and then told the orderly pushing my bed "let's ride"

Well, by the grace of God, and some very talented people whose mothers didn't let them go out and play stickball after school. Here I am.

Does life change after heart surgery you ask?

You eventually get past the surgery and recovery pains. Most of the time, you forget to worry about the uncertainties of every new noise or twinge from that body you thought you knew so well by now. Then ten plus years later when you have all but forgotten to be afraid, during a routine cardiologist visit, you guessed it, the haymaker.

This visit turns not into a conversation about losing weight and watching your salt intake as you expected. No, you are soon to know much more than you care to about a Pacemaker and how you will be having one inserted into your heart next Tuesday morning.

Wow, I never saw this coming. It's the tough guy taking that freaking bus ride all over again.

"So officer, to answer your question, I'm sitting here because I was looking for a place where it's OK to be afraid."

For a long moment the cop stood quietly then extended his hand to shake mine and said "Your secrets safe with me sir". Walking away reaching for the microphone clipped on the epilate of his shirt he said,

"Dispatch, this is car 41, false alarm at Bakers Farm."

"OK 41, where you been Rick? It's been an hour. We were going to send backup if we didn't hear from you soon."

"Just checking the area dispatch, I'm going to take a short break and run home to kiss my wife and kids then back on the road.

41, out."

