Catch Me If You Can

The True Story Of A Real Fake

Frank Abagnale with Stan Redding

Mainstream Publishing eBooks

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

The Amazing True Story of the Most Extraordinary Liar in the History of Fun and Profit

Frank W. Abagnale with Stan Redding

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

This book is based on the true-life exploits of Frank Abagnale. To protect the right of those whose paths have crossed the author’s, all of the characters and some of the events have been altered, and all names, dates and places have been changed.

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TO MY DAD

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THE FLEDGLING

A MAN’S ALTER EGO is nothing more than his favourite image of himself. The mirror in my room in the Windsor Hotel in Paris reflected my favourite image of me – a darkly handsome young airline pilot, smooth-skinned, bull-shouldered and immaculately groomed. Modesty is not one of my virtues. At the time, virtue was not one of my virtues.

Satisfied with my appearance, I picked up my bag, left the room and two minutes later was standing in front of the cashier’s cage.

‘Good morning, Captain,’ said the cashier in warm tones. The markings on my uniform identified me as a first officer, a co-pilot, but the French are like that. They tend to overestimate everything save their women, wine and art.

I signed the hotel bill she slid across the counter, started to turn away, then wheeled back, taking a payroll cheque from the inside pocket of my jacket. ‘Oh, can you cash this for me? Your Paris nightlife nearly wiped me out and it’ll be another week before I’m home.’ I smiled ruefully.

She picked up the Pan American World Airways cheque and looked at the amount. ‘I’m sure we can, Captain, but I must get the manager to approve a cheque this large,’ she said. She stepped into an office behind her and was back in a moment, displaying a pleased smile. She handed me the cheque to endorse.

‘I assume you want American dollars?’ she asked, and without waiting for my reply counted out $786.73 in Yankee currency and coin. I pushed back two $50 bills. ‘I would appreciate it if you would take care of the necessary people, since I was so careless,’ I said, smiling.

She beamed. ‘Of course, Captain. You are very kind,’ she said. ‘Have a safe flight and please come back to see us.’

I took a cab to Orly, instructing the driver to let me off at the TWA entrance. I by-passed the TWA ticket counter in the lobby and presented my FAA licence and Pan Am ID card to the TWA operations officer. He checked his manifest. ‘Okay, First Officer Frank Williams, deadheading to Rome. Gotcha. Fill this out, please.’ He handed me the familiar pink form for non-revenue passengers and I penned in the pertinent data. I picked up my bag and walked to the customs gate marked ‘crew members only’. I started to heft my bag to the counter top but the inspector, a wizened old man with a wispy moustache, recognised me and waved me through.

A young boy fell in beside me as I walked to the plane, gazing with unabashed admiration at my uniform with its burnished gold stripes and other adornments.

‘You the pilot?’ he asked. He was English from his accent.

‘Nah, just a passenger like you,’ I replied. ‘I fly for Pan Am.’

‘You fly 707s?’

I shook my head. ‘Used to,’ I said. ‘Right now I’m on DC-8s.’ I like kids. This one reminded me of myself a few years past.

An attractive blonde stewardess met me as I stepped aboard and helped me to stow my gear in the crew’s luggage bin. ‘We’ve got a full load this trip, Mr Williams,’ she said. ‘You beat out two other guys for the jump seat. I’ll be serving the cabin.’

‘Just milk for me,’ I said. ‘And don’t worry about that if you get busy. Hitchhikers aren’t entitled to anything more than the ride.’

I ducked into the cabin. The pilot, co-pilot and flight engineer were making their pre-takeoff equipment and instrument check but they paused courteously at my entrance. ‘Hi, Frank Williams, Pan Am, and don’t let me interrupt you,’ I said.

‘Gary Giles,’ said the pilot, sticking out his hand. He nodded toward the other two men. ‘Bill Austin, number two,

and Jim Wright. Good to have you with us.' I shook hands with the other two airmen and dropped into the jump seat, leaving them to their work.

We were airborne within twenty minutes. Giles took the 707 up to 30,000 feet, checked his instruments, cleared with the Orly tower and then uncoiled himself from his seat. He appraised me with casual thoroughness and then indicated his chair. 'Why don't you fly this bird for a while, Frank,' he said. 'I'll go back and mingle with the paying passengers.'

His offer was a courtesy gesture sometimes accorded a deadheading pilot from a competing airline. I dropped my cap on the cabin floor and slid into the command seat, very much aware that I had been handed custody of 140 lives, my own included. Austin, who had taken the controls when Giles vacated his seat, surrendered them to me. 'You got it, Captain,' he said, grinning.

I promptly put the giant jet on automatic pilot and hoped to hell the gadget worked, because I couldn't fly a kite.

I wasn't a Pan Am pilot or any other kind of pilot. I was an impostor, one of the most wanted criminals on four continents, and at the moment I was doing my thing, putting a super hype on some nice people.

I WAS A MILLIONAIRE twice over and half again before I was twenty-one. I stole every nickel of it and blew the bulk of the bundle on fine threads, gourmet foods, luxurious lodgings, fantastic foxes, fine wheels and other sensual goodies. I partied in every capital in Europe, basked on all the famous beaches and good-timed it in South America, the South Seas, the Orient and the more palatable portions of Africa.

It wasn't altogether a relaxing life. I didn't exactly keep my finger on the panic button, but I put a lot of mileage on my running shoes. I made a lot of exits through side doors, down fire escapes or over rooftops. I abandoned more wardrobes in the course of five years than most men

acquire in a lifetime. I was slipperier than a buttered escargot.

Oddly enough, I never felt like a criminal. I was one, of course, and I was aware of the fact. I've been described by authorities and news reporters as one of this century's cleverest bum-cheque passers, flimflam artists and crooks, a con man of Academy Award calibre. I was a swindler and poseur of astonishing ability. I sometimes astonished myself with some of my impersonations and shenanigans, but I never at any time deluded myself. I was always aware that I was Frank Abagnale, Jr, that I was a cheque swindler and a faker, and if and when I were caught I wasn't going to win any Oscars. I was going to jail.

I was right, too. I did time in a French poky, served a stint in a Swedish slammer and cleansed myself of all my American sins in the Petersburg, Virginia, federal jug. While in the last prison, I voluntarily subjected myself to a psychological evaluation by a University of Virginia criminologist-psychiatrist. He spent two years giving me various written and oral tests, using truth-serum injections and polygraph examinations on various occasions.

The shrink concluded that I had a very low criminal threshold. In other words, I had no business being a crook in the first place.

One of the New York cops who'd worked hardest to catch me read the report and snorted. 'This head doctor's gotta be kiddin' us,' he scoffed. 'This phoney rips off several hundred banks, hustles half the hotels in the world for everything but the sheets, screws every airline in the skies, including most of their stewardesses, passes enough bad cheques to paper the walls of the Pentagon, runs his own goddamned colleges and universities, makes half the cops in twenty countries look like dumb-asses while he's stealing over $2 million, and he has a *low* criminal threshold? What the hell would he have done if he'd had a *high* criminal threshold – looted Fort Knox?'

The detective confronted me with the paper. We had become amiable adversaries. ‘You conned this shrink, didn’t you, Frank?’

I told him I’d answered every question asked me as truthfully as possible, that I’d completed every test given me as honestly as I could. I didn’t convince him. ‘Nah,’ he said. ‘You can fool these feds, but you can’t fool me. You conned this couch turkey.’ He shook his head. ‘You’d con your own father, Frank.’

I already had. My father was the mark for the first score I ever made. Dad possessed the one trait necessary in the perfect pigeon, blind trust, and I plucked him for $3,400. I was only fifteen at the time.

I was born and spent my first sixteen years in New York’s Bronxville. I was the third of four children and my dad’s namesake. If I wanted to lay down a baby con, I could say I was the product of a broken home, for Mom and Dad separated when I was twelve. But I’d only be bum-rapping my parents.

The person most hurt by the separation and subsequent divorce was Dad. He was really hung up on Mom. My mother, Paulette Abagnale, is a French-Algerian beauty whom Dad met and married during his Second World War army service in Oran. Mom was only fifteen at the time, and Dad was twenty-eight, and while the difference in ages didn’t seem to matter at the time, I’ve always felt it had an influence on the breakup of their marriage.

Dad opened his own business in New York City after his discharge from the army, a stationery store at Fortieth and Madison Avenue called Gramercy’s. He was very successful. We lived in a big, luxurious home and if we weren’t fabulously wealthy, we were certainly affluent. My brothers, my sister and I never wanted for anything during our early years.

A kid is often the last to know when there’s serious trouble between his parents. I know that’s true in my case and I

don’t think my siblings were any more aware than I. We thought Mom was content to be a housewife and mother and she was, up to a point. But Dad was more than just a successful businessman. He was also very active in politics, one of the Republican wheels in the Bronx precincts. He was a member and past president of the New York Athletic Club, and he spent a lot of his time at the club with both business and political cronies.

Dad was also an avid salt-water fisherman. He was always flying off to Puerto Rico, Kingston, Belize or some other Caribbean spa on deep-sea fishing expeditions. He never took Mom along, and he should have. My mother was a women’s libber before Gloria Steinem learned her Maidenform was flammable. And one day Dad came back from a marlin-chasing jaunt to find his home creel empty. Mom had packed up and moved herself, us three boys and Sis into a large apartment. We kids were somewhat mystified, but Mom quietly explained that she and Dad were no longer compatible and had elected to live apart.

Well, she had elected to live apart, anyway. Dad was shocked, surprised and hurt at Mom’s action. He pleaded with her to come back home, promising he’d be a better husband and father and that he’d curtail his deep-sea outings. He even offered to forgo politics.

Mom listened, but she made no promises. And it soon became apparent to me, if not Dad, that she had no intention of reconciling. She enrolled in a Bronx dental college and started training to be a dental technician.

Dad didn’t give up. He was over at our apartment at every opportunity, pleading, cajoling, entreating and flattering her. Sometimes he’d lose his temper. ‘Damn it, woman – can’t you see I love you!’ he’d roar.

The situation did have its effect on us boys, of course. Me in particular. I loved my dad. I was the closest to him, and he commenced to use me in his campaign to win back Mom. ‘Talk to her, son,’ he’d ask of me. ‘Tell her I love her. Tell her

we’d be happier if we all lived together. Tell her you’d be happier if she came home, that all you kids would be happier.’

He’d give me gifts to deliver to Mom, and coach me in speeches designed to break down my mother’s resistance.

As a juvenile John Alden to my father’s Myles Standish and my mother’s Priscilla Mullins, I was a flop. My mother couldn’t be conned. And Dad probably hurt his own case because Mom resented his using me as a pawn in their game of marital chess. She divorced Dad when I was fourteen.

Dad was crushed. I was disappointed, for I had really wanted them to get back together. I’ll say this for Dad: when he loved a woman, he loved her forever. He was still trying to win Mom back when he died in 1974.

When Mom finally divorced my father, I elected to live with Dad. Mom wasn’t too keen on my decision, but I felt Dad needed one of us, that he shouldn’t have to live alone, and I persuaded her. Dad was grateful and pleased. I have never regretted the decision, although Dad probably did.

Life with Father was a whole different ball game. I spent a lot of time in some of New York’s finest saloons. Businessmen, I learned, not only enjoy three-martini lunches, but they belt out a lot of boilermaker brunches and whack out scores of scotch and soda dinners. Politicians, I also noted quickly, had a better grasp of world affairs and a looser lid on their pork barrels when they were attached to a bourbon on the rocks. Dad did a lot of his business dealing and a goodly amount of his political manoeuvreing close to a bar, with me waiting nearby. My father’s drinking habits alarmed me at first. I didn’t think he was an alcoholic, but he was a two-fisted drinker and I worried that he had a drinking problem. Still, I never saw him drunk although he drank constantly and after a while I assumed he was immune to the juice.

I was fascinated by my dad’s associates, friends and acquaintances. They ranged the gamut of the Bronx’s social stratum: ward heelers, cops, union bosses, business executives, truckers, contractors, stock brokers, clerks, cabbies and promoters. The whole smear. Some were right out of the pages of Damon Runyon.

After hanging out with Dad for six months, I was street-wise and about five-eighths smart, which is not exactly the kind of education Dad had in mind for me, but it’s the kind you get in sauce parlours.

Dad had a lot of political clout. I learned this when I started playing hookey from school and running with some loose-end kids from my neighbourhood. They weren’t gang members or anything like that. They weren’t into anything really heavy. They were just guys with a screwed-up family situation, trying to get attention from someone, if only the truant officer. Maybe that’s why I started hanging out with them. Perhaps I was seeking attention myself. I did want my parents together again, and I had vague notions at the time that if I acted like a juvenile delinquent it might provide a common ground for a reconciliation.

I wasn’t too good as a juvenile delinquent. Most of the time I felt plain foolish, swiping candy and slipping into movies. I was much more mature than my companions, and much bigger. At fifteen I was physically grown, six feet and 170 pounds, and I guess we got away with a lot of minor mischief because people who saw us abroad thought I was a teacher shepherding some students, or a big brother looking out for the younger crowd. I sometimes felt that way myself, and I was often irritated at their childishness.

What bothered me most was their lack of style. I learned early that class is universally admired. Almost any fault, sin or crime is considered more leniently if there’s a touch of class involved.

These kids couldn’t even boost a car with any finesse. The first set of wheels they lifted, they came by to pick me up,

and we weren’t a mile from my house when a squad car pulled us over. The jerks had taken the car from a driveway while the owner was watering his lawn. We all ended up in the Juvenile Hilton.

Dad not only got me out, but he had all mention of my part in the incident erased from the records. It was a bit of ward-heeling wizardry that was to cost a lot of cops a lot of sleep in future years. Even an elephant is easier to find if you can pick up his trail at the start of the hunt.

Dad didn’t chew me out. ‘We all make mistakes, son,’ he said. ‘I know what you were trying to do, but that’s not the way to do it. Under the law, you’re still a child, but you’re man-sized. Maybe you ought to try thinking like a man.’

I dropped my erstwhile chums, started going to school regularly again and got a part-time job as a shipping clerk in a Bronxville warehouse. Dad was pleased – so pleased he bought me an old Ford, which I proceeded to fix up into a real fox trap.

If I had to place any blame for my future nefarious actions, I’d put it on the Ford.

When Henry Ford invented the Model-T, women shed their bloomers and put sex on the road; and that Ford fractured every moral fibre in my body. It introduced me to girls. I didn’t come to my senses for six years. They were wonderful years.

There are undoubtedly other ages in a man’s life when his reasoning power is eclipsed by his libido, but none presses on the prefrontal lobes like the post-puberty years when the thoughts are running and every luscious chick who passes increases the flow. At fifteen I knew about girls, of course. They were built differently to boys. But I didn’t know why until I stopped at a red light one day, after renovating the Ford, and saw this girl looking at me and my car. When she saw she had my attention, she did something with her eyes, jiggled her front and twitched her behind, and suddenly I was drowning in my thoughts. She had ruptured the dam. I

don’t remember how she got into the car, or where we went after she got in, but I do remember she was all silk, softness, nuzzly, warm, sweet-smelling and absolutely delightful, and I knew I’d found a contact sport that I could really enjoy. She did things to me that would lure a hummingbird from a hibiscus and make a bulldog break his chain.

Women became my only vice. I revelled in them. I couldn’t get enough of them. I woke up thinking of girls. I went to bed thinking of girls. All lovely, leggy, breathtaking, fantastic and enchanting. I went on girl-scouting forays at sunrise. I went out at night and looked for them with a flashlight. Don Juan had only a mild case of the hots compared to me. I was obsessed with foxy women.

Now, girls are not necessarily expensive, but even the most frolicsome Fräulein expects a hamburger and a Coke now and then, just for energy purposes. I simply wasn’t making enough bread to pay for my cake. I needed a way to juggle my finances.

I sought out Dad, who was not totally unaware of my discovery of girls and their attendant joys. ‘Dad, it was really neat of you to give me a car, and I feel like a jerk asking for more, but I’ve got problems with that car,’ I pleaded. ‘I need a gas credit card. I only get paid once a month, and what with buying my school lunches, going to the games, dating and stuff, I don’t have the dough to buy gas sometimes. I’ll try and pay the bill myself, but I promise I won’t abuse your generosity if you’ll let me have a gas card.’

I was as glib as an Irish horse trader at the time, and at the time I was sincere. Dad mulled the request for a few moments, then nodded. ‘All right, Frank, I trust you,’ he said, taking his Mobil card from his wallet. ‘You take this card and use it. I won’t charge anything to Mobil from now on. It’ll be your card, and within reason, it’ll be your

responsibility to pay this bill each month when it comes in. I won’t worry about your taking advantage of me.’

He should have. The arrangement worked fine the first month. The Mobil bill came in and I bought a money order for the amount and sent it to the oil firm. But the payment left me strapped and once again I found myself hampered in my constant quest for girls. I began to feel frustrated. After all, the pursuit of happiness was an inalienable American privilege, wasn’t it? I felt I was being deprived of a constitutional right.

Someone once said there’s no such thing as an honest man. He was probably a con man. It’s the favourite rationale of the pigeon dropper. I think a lot of people do fantasize about being a supercriminal, an international diamond thief or something like that, but they confine their larceny to daydreams. I also think a lot of other people are actually tempted now and then to commit a crime, especially if there’s a nice bundle to be had and they think they won’t be connected with the caper. Such people usually reject the temptation. They have an innate perception of right and wrong, and common sense prevails.

But there’s also a type of person whose competitive instincts override reason. They are challenged by a given situation in much the same manner a climber is challenged by a tall peak: because it’s there. Right or wrong are not factors, nor are consequences. These people look on crime as a game, and the goal is not just the loot; it’s the success of the venture that counts. Of course, if the booty is bountiful, that’s nice, too.

These people are the chess players of the criminal world. They generally have a genius-level IQ and their mental knights and bishops are always on the attack. They never anticipate being checkmated. They are always astonished when a cop with average intelligence rooks them, and the cop is always astonished at their motives. Crime as a challenge? Jesus.

But it was the challenge that led me to put down my first scam. I needed money, all right. Anyone with a chronic case of girl crazies needs all the financial assistance that's available. However, I really wasn't dwelling on my lack of funds when I stopped at a Mobil station one afternoon and spotted a large sign in front of the station's tyre display racks. 'PUT A SET ON YOUR MOBIL CARD – WE'LL PUT THE SET ON YOUR CAR,' the sign read. It was the first inkling I'd had that the Mobil card was good for more than gas or oil. I didn't need any tyres – the ones on the Ford were practically new – but as I studied the sign I was suddenly possessed by a four-ply scheme. Hell, it might even work, I thought.

I got out and approached the attendant, who was also the owner of the station. We were casual acquaintances from the many pit stops I'd made at the station. It was not a busy gas stop. 'I'd make more money holding up filling stations than running one,' he'd once complained.

'How much would it cost me for a set of whitewalls?' I asked.

'For this car, $160, but you got a good set of treads,' the man said.

He looked at me and I knew he sensed he was about to be propositioned. 'Yeah, I don't really need any tyres,' I agreed. 'But I got a bad case of the shorts. Tell you what I'll do. I'll buy a set of those tyres and charge them on this card. Only I don't take the tyres. You give me $100 instead. You've still got the tyres, and when my dad pays Mobil for them, you get your cut. You're ahead to start with, and when you do sell the tyres, the whole $160 goes into your pocket. What do you say? You'll make out like a dragon, man.'

He studied me, and I could see the speculative greed in his eyes. 'What about your old man?' he asked cautiously.

I shrugged. 'He never looks at my car. I told him I needed some new tyres and he told me to charge them.'

He was still doubtful. 'Lemme see your driver's licence. This could be a stolen card,' he said. I handed him my junior

driver’s licence, which bore the same name as the card. ‘You’re only fifteen? You look ten years older,’ the station owner said as he handed it back.

I smiled. ‘I got a lot of miles on me,’ I said.

He nodded. ‘I’ll have to call into Mobil and get an approval – we have to do that on any big purchase,’ he said. ‘If I get an okay, we got a deal.’

I rolled out of the station with five twenties in my wallet.

I was heady with happiness. Since I hadn’t yet had my first taste of alcohol, I couldn’t compare the feeling to a champagne high, say, but it was the most delightful sensation I’d ever experienced in the *front* seat of a car.

In fact, my cleverness overwhelmed me. If it worked once, why wouldn’t it work twice? It did. It worked so many times in the next several weeks, I lost count. I can’t remember how many sets of tyres, how many batteries, how many other automobile accessories I bought with that charge card and then sold back for a fraction of the value. I hit every Mobil station in the Bronx. Sometimes I’d just con the guy on the pumps into giving me $10 and sign a ticket for $20 worth of gas and oil. I wore that Mobil card thin with the scam.

I blew it all on the broads, naturally. At first I operated on the premise that Mobil was underwriting my pleasures, so what the hell? Then the first month’s bill landed in the mailbox. The envelope was stuffed fuller than a Christmas goose with charge receipts. I looked at the total due and briefly contemplated entering the priesthood, for I realised Mobil expected Dad to pay the bill. It hadn’t occurred to me that Dad would be the patsy in the game.

I threw the bill into the wastebasket. A second notice mailed two weeks later also went into the trash. I thought about facing up to Dad and confessing, but I didn’t have the courage. I knew he’d find out, sooner or later, but I decided someone other than me would have to tell him.

Amazingly, I didn’t pull up while awaiting a summit session between my father and Mobil. I continued to work the credit-card con and spend the loot on lovely women, even though I was aware I was also diddling my dad. An inflamed sex drive has no conscience.

Eventually, a Mobil investigator sought Dad out in his store. The man was apologetic.

‘Mr Abagnale, you’ve had a card with us for fifteen years and we prize your account. You’ve got a top credit rating, you’ve never been late with a payment and I’m not here to harass you about your bill,’ said the agent as Dad listened with a puzzled expression. ‘We are curious, sir, and would like to know one thing. Just how in the hell can you run up a $3,400 bill for gas, oil, batteries and tyres for one 1952 Ford in the space of three months? You’ve put fourteen sets of tyres on that car in the past sixty days, bought twenty-two batteries in the past ninety days and you can’t be getting over two miles to the gallon on gas. We figure you don’t even have an oil pan on the damned thing. Have you given any thought to trading that car in on a new one, Mr Abagnale?’

Dad was stunned. ‘Why, I don’t even use my Mobil card – my son does,’ he said when he recovered. ‘There must be some mistake.’

The Mobil investigator placed several hundred Mobil charge receipts in front of Dad. Each bore his signature in my handwriting. ‘How did he do this? And why?’ Dad exclaimed.

‘I don’t know,’ replied the Mobil agent. ‘Why don’t we ask him?’

They did. I said I didn’t know a thing about the swindle. I didn’t convince either of them. I had expected Dad to be furious. But he was more confused than angry. ‘Look, son, if you’ll tell us how you did this, and why, we’ll forget it. There’ll be no punishment and I’ll pay the bills,’ he offered.

My dad was a great guy in my book. He never lied to me in his life. I promptly copped out. ‘It’s the girls, Dad,’ I sighed. ‘They do funny things to me. I can’t explain it.’

Dad and the Mobil investigator nodded understandingly. Dad laid a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. ‘Don’t worry about it, boy. Einstein couldn’t explain it, either,’ he said.

If Dad forgave me, Mom didn’t. She was really upset over the incident and blamed my father for my delinquencies. My mother still had legal custody of me and she decided to remove me from Dad’s influences. Worse still, on the advice of one of the fathers who worked with Catholic Charities, with which my mother has always been affiliated, she popped me into a CC private school for problem boys in Port Chester, New York.

As a reformatory, the school wasn’t much. It was more of a posh camp than a remedial institution. I lived in a neat cottage with six other boys, and except for the fact that I was restricted to campus and constantly supervised, I was subjected to no hardships.

The brothers who ran the school were a benevolent lot. They lived in much the same manner as their wards. We all ate in a common dining hall, and the food was good and plentiful. There was a movie theatre, a television room, a recreation hall, a swimming pool and a gymnasium. I never did catalogue all the recreational and sports facilities that were available. We attended classes from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday to Friday, but otherwise our time was our own to do with as we liked. The brothers didn’t harangue us about our misdeeds or bore us with pontifical lectures, and you really had to mess up to be punished, which usually meant being confined to your cottage for a couple of days. I never encountered anything like the school until I landed in a US prison. I have often wondered since if the federal penal system isn’t secretly operated by Catholic Charities.

The monastic lifestyle galled me, however. I endured it, but I looked on my stint in the school as punishment and

undeserved punishment at that. After all, Dad had forgiven me and he had been the sole victim of my crimes. So what was I doing in the place? I'd ask myself. What I disliked most about the school, however, was its lack of girls. It was strictly an all-male atmosphere. Even the sight of a nun would have thrilled me.

I would have been even more depressed had I known what was happening to Dad during my stay. He never went into details, but while I was in the school he ran into some severe financial difficulties and lost his business.

He was really wiped out. He was forced to sell the house and his two big Cadillacs and everything else he had of material value. In the space of a few months, Dad went from living like a millionaire to living like a postal clerk.

That's what he was when he came to get me after I'd spent a year in the school. A postal clerk. Mom had relented and had agreed to my living with Dad again. I was shocked at the reversal of his fortunes, and more than a little guilt-ridden. But Dad would not allow me to blame myself. The $3,400 I'd ripped him off for was not a factor in his business downfall, he assured me. 'Don't even think of it, kid. That was a drop in the bucket,' he said cheerfully.

He did not seem to be bothered by his sudden drop in status and finances, but it bothered me. Not for myself, but for Dad. He'd been so high, a real wheeler-dealer, and now he was working for wages. I tried to pump him for the causes. 'What about your friends, Dad?' I asked. 'I remember you were always pulling them out of tight spots. Didn't any of them offer to help you?'

Dad just smiled wryly. 'You'll learn, Frank, that when you're up there're hundreds of people who'll claim you as a friend. When you're down, you're lucky if one of them will buy you a cup of coffee. If I had it to do over again, I'd select my friends more carefully. I do have a couple of good friends. They're not wealthy, but one of them got me my job in the post office.'

He refused to dwell on his misfortunes or to discuss them at length, but it bugged me, especially when I was with him in his car. It wasn't as good as my Ford, which he'd sold for me and placed the money in an account in my name. His car was a battered old Chevy. 'Doesn't it bother you at all to drive this old car, Dad?' I asked him one day. 'I mean, this is really a comedown from a Cadillac. Right?'

Dad laughed. 'That's the wrong way to look at it, Frank. It's not what a man has but what a man is that's important. This car is fine for me. It gets me around. I know who I am and what I am, and that's what counts, not what other people might think of me. I'm an honest man, I feel, and that's more important to me than having a big car . . . As long as a man knows what he is and who he is, he'll do all right.'

Trouble was, at the time I didn't know what I was or who I was.

Within three short years I had the answer. 'Who are you?' asked a lush brunette when I plopped down on Miami Beach beside her.

'Anyone I want to be,' I said. I was, too.

THE PILOT

I LEFT HOME at sixteen, looking for me.

There was no pressure on me to leave, although I wasn't happy. The situation on my dual home front hadn't changed. Dad still wanted to win Mom back and Mom didn't want to be won. Dad was still using me as a mediator in his second courtship of Mom, and she continued to resent his casting me in the role of Cupid. I disliked it myself. Mom had graduated from dental technician's school and was working for a Larchmont dentist. She seemed satisfied with her new, independent life.

I had no plans to run away. But every time Dad put on his postal clerk's uniform and drove off to work in his old car, I'd feel depressed. I couldn't forget how he used to wear Louis Roth suits and drive big expensive cars.

One June morning of 1964, I woke up and knew it was time to go. Some remote corner of the world seemed to be whispering, 'Come.' So I went.

I didn't say good-bye to anyone. I didn't leave any notes behind. I had $200 in an account at the Westchester branch of the Chase Manhattan Bank which Dad had set up for me a year before and which I'd never used. I dug out my chequebook, packed my best clothes in a single suitcase and caught a train for New York City. It wasn't exactly a remote corner of the globe, but I thought it would make a good jumping-off place.

If I'd been some runaway from Kansas or Nebraska, New York, with its subway bedlam, awesome skyscrapers, chaotic streams of noisy traffic and endless treadmills of people, might have sent me scurrying back to the prairies. But the Big Apple was my turf. Or so I thought.

I wasn’t off the train an hour when I met a boy my own age and conned him into taking me home with him. I told his parents that I was from upstate New York, that both my mother and father were dead, that I was trying to make it on my own and that I needed a place to stay until I got a job. They told me I could stay in their home as long as I wanted.

I had no intentions of abusing their hospitality. I was eager to make a stake and leave New York, although I had no ideas at the moment as to where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do.

I did have a definite goal. I was going to be a success in some field. I was going to make it to the top of some mountain. And once there, no one or nothing was going to dislodge me from the peak. I wasn’t going to make the mistakes my dad had made. I was determined on that point.

The Big Apple quickly proved less than juicy, even for a native son. I had no problem finding a job. I’d worked for my father as a stock clerk and delivery boy and was experienced in the operation of a stationery store. I started calling on large stationery firms, presenting myself in a truthful light. I was only sixteen, I said, and I was a high school dropout, but I was well versed in the stationery business. The manager of the third firm I visited hired me at $1.50 an hour. I was naïve enough to think it an adequate salary.

I was disillusioned within the week. I realised I wasn’t going to be able to live in New York on $60 a week, even if I stayed in the shabbiest hotel and ate at the Automats. Even more disheartening, I was reduced to the role of spectator in the dating game. To the girls I’d met so far, a stroll in Central Park and a hot dog from a street vendor’s cart would not qualify as an enchanted evening. I wasn’t too enchanted with such a dalliance myself. Hot dogs make me belch.

I analyzed the situation and arrived at this conclusion: I wasn’t being paid lowly wages because I was a high school