

# When I Met Louie

I nodded at a couple of conference acquaintances as I walked by them to exit through the revolving door, resisting insistent invitations to join them for lunch. I looked both left and right at attendees heading in both directions for the many restaurants in easy walking distance along this main drag. Instead, I jaywalked to the other corner of the street during a pause in traffic, coming ultimately to a side street heading away from the busier thoroughfare. The further I walked in that direction, the seedier the residential part of town became.

My new employer had sent me down here to this conference to learn the business. This, the third morning session had featured more uninspired speakers mostly I supposed their boring spiel was because there wasn't anything exciting in what they had to promote. Ennui characterized my current state as it seemed to have the speakers, although I had not seen that reflected in the crowd of attendees I had just left. Perhaps they were escaping even more boring lives. At any rate, my thoughts spiraled around the gnawing question that had been with me ever since hiring into this company: *Is this really a career path I want to follow? Or a life I want to lead?* I had met my military responsibilities following ROTC, realizing from the start that it was not a path I wanted to pursue. I had accepted the job offer because it was in line with my major that I had chosen at the university, had been immediately available, and they had offered a well-paying position. But these people didn't seem like my kind of people – nor did any of those back in the department to which I had been assigned. Do I really care that much about salary?

After a few blocks east, I turned south down a street lined for blocks with old cars some parked in driveways in front of opened garages filled with junk, others parked at the curb, many with hoods up and greasy men wearing wife beaters bent over them cussing. And weedy lawns. I came ultimately to a more major cross street where western blues drifted out through the gaps around a saloon door at the corner. I hesitated in front of the door, deciding which way to turn but then pushed it open instead; a craving for something different had overtaken me, I guess. Inside, the scene was like a set from an old Spaghetti Western, men in crumpled cowboy hats and dusty boots, some with holstered guns lounging around tables with many more bottles than people. But there was no camera crew, just real, however improbable, people. This was not a movie set; this was the new hand-carry southwest. As I glanced around, it was obvious that a guy like me in a business suit did not belong here. But not belonging anywhere else, I made my way to the bar.

"Pint of your draft," I said.

As the bartender slid it over, I heard a commotion at the door behind me. I turned instantly, an acquired military reaction. Carelessly wielding an AR slung over his left shoulder, a wild looking character dragged a woman into the room, his right hand gripping her wrist. She stumbled behind him, her blouse was torn exposing her shoulder, her hair hung in tangles. He pushed her roughly so that she careened toward a dark corner.

"Get over there, bitch!" he barked, tossing the rifle at her. She grabbed it instinctively, rage written across her face as she stumbled into the shadows and crashed down on a bench, the gun crashing down on the table beside her. He staggered on toward the bar; with a final lunge his forearm crashing down on the surface beside my beer; he had kicked the stool that then remained tipped against the bar.

"Gimme a shot of the Jimmy Bean," he muttered. When the shot glass was filled, he raised it and threw his head back to pour the liquid down. During this process his hat slid off his balding

head. I caught the brim before it could hit the floor and handed it to the creature with the long mostly-gray, uncombed hair hanging around the empty bald area on top.

He slammed his glass down, saying “Gimme another!” all the while sneering over at me as he grabbed his hat and repositioned it. His eyes narrowed. “Where you from, Smiley?”

“Out of town,” I replied.

“What you doin’ here then?”

“Business.”

“‘Busy ness,’ Smiley here says,” he mocked loudly for the entire room to hear, drawing out what had been my verbal response. “Well, you ain’t got no busy ness here, Mister. You ain’t even got the pur-requisites fer membership in this here respectable establishment.” His voice was like that of the chain gang boss in Cool Hand Luke. He pulled a handgun from under his filthy shirt, pressing it inches from my face.

I pushed his hand away casually with the back of my left hand, pulling a knife from my pocket with the other. “Guns are for war,” I said evenly. “This is all the protection one needs unless you’re wanting to kill a room full of people.”

He laughed, the sound harsh and drunken. “You brought a knife to a gunfight, Mister! Hear that, guys? This dude thinks he can whip us all with a knife!”

Before he could say any more, I had grabbed his wrist and twisted it with my left hand, his gun dropped to the bar with a clunk. I let his wrist go with a shove that sent him stumbling back, heading then toward for dark corner looking for the rifle.

Snatching the weapon, he looked around, searching for the woman.

“Where’s that two-bit excuse for pussy?” he yelled.

Someone snickered from the other side of the room. “I think she left ya, Billy.”

“Goddamned losers. When I find that bitch, I’m gonna kill her and then I’m comin’ back here and kill any smart ass that’s still here. You got that, Smiley?” He waved the rifle in my direction.

I grinned, though my heart pounded. “Got it, Billy. Sorry. I’d like to stay but I have busy ness to get back to, but you can follow me if you’d like.”

I had seen the woman slip into the restroom earlier. She hadn’t come back, and the clientele weren’t making any moves to aid Billy in his threats by telling him where she had gone. I paid my bill with a nod to the bar tender; he tipped his head toward the gun on the counter. I said, “consider it a tip from Billy,” and walked out and watched Billy disappear down the side street.

Barely a block away, I heard footsteps running up behind me and instantly regretted telling Billy he could follow me. Instinctively, I spun, knife ready, but it was just her—the woman Billy had dragged into the bar. She was out of breath, her blue eyes and reddened lips wide open.

“Wait,” came out as a winded whisper, as she continued running to catch up. Her red blouse was still torn but neatly pinned at the shoulder now. She’d cleaned up considerably, her reddish blond hair had been brushed, and the sun at her back formed a sort of bright golden halo around her Madonna face.

Just then, gunfire erupted from somewhere off behind her. I hit the ground; it’s what I do – I haven’t gotten over that yet. I scanned my surroundings. The shots had only continued for a moment; then there was silence. I stood up, feeling an embarrassment I was becoming used to.

“Are you alright?” she asked, concern softening her eyes.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sometimes I forget where I’m at.” Adjusting then, “that was Billy, right?”

“No.”

“No? Why wouldn’t it have been?”

She stepped the very few feet to a garbage can that was out by a rusted pickup in a driveway of one of the run-down houses. She reached into a black leather purse, taking out a handful of rifle bullets, and lifting the lid of the can, dropped them in. She did that a couple of times to my continuing interest. Then stepping back closer to where I watched, she said, "Billy ain't got no bullets."

"But...?" I was confused. "If you got them all, what was that gunfire?"

"Probably the cops," she said and continued with her matter-of-fact tone, "I called 911 when I was in the bathroom and told them that Billy had threatened to shoot up the saloon and kill everyone in it, and where he was hanging out, and that he would be returning shortly."

"You didn't tell them he was unarmed?"

"Nope." She watched as I stared at her. "Why would I? He wasn't unarmed when he killed that girl in Tuscaloosa or the one in Mobile. But they were. Or when he threatened to kill me every day since then." She was sobbing now, but through her tears she added, "and that as they say, Billy Boy, is that."

"You saw him commit those murders?"

She stood back a step. "Yeah." She sighed deeply. "I saw all that... and more."

"Are you going to tell police? You need to tell someone. It's important."

Refusing commitment, she said, "only if I had to,"

"You can tell the officials anonymously; then they'll check whatever DNA they have and solve those murders. The girls' parents deserve to know."

"Yeah. Okay. Do you think you could help me do it anonymously?"

"Probably, but I think we ought to walk in there together and tell them what you know face-to-face, don't you? You can probably omit that you knew he was unarmed."

Changing the subject abruptly, she asked, "Where are you from?"

"Up near Cincinnati."

"Ohio? What are you doing way down here in this god-awful country?"

"I'm attending a conference at the Center... over on Main."

"The big hotel?"

"Yeah. I have a final session that I should attend this afternoon."

"Is it more important than those girls and me?"

"Nowhere near," I smiled, "But I should be at that session first."

"Do you have a room in the hotel?"

"Yes, I do."

"Please let me stay there just till you're done. I won't be a bother; I'm not a bad person. Then I'll go to the police and report what I know if you will take me."

"I know you're a good person. I will take you. It's the right thing to do; I'll be with you all the way." We were approaching Main now. I reached into my pocket for the room key that was right next to the oversized knife. I fingered it as I grabbed the key to hand her. "Room seven twenty. Just be sure to be there when I'm back at four. I don't need any more surprises today."

"I promise on my mamma's grave." She was tearing up again. "I don't need any more surprises either. You were the best one I've had in a long, long time. What's your name? I just might be able to handle some more surprises like you," she smiled a heart-warming smile.

"You are an excellent surprise yourself," I said. "I'm James Brogan by the way. And you?"

"Louisa Mae Ashford from Miami, but please just call me Louie; it's a name I liked growing up."

"Well, I'm Jimmy... or anything similar that you think fits."

Just before we came to the crosswalk over to the center, she skipped ahead a few steps, stopped on the curb at Main and whirled around extending a pretty hand.

“I’m so pleased to meet you Mr. Brogan... well... Jimmy. I’ll be waiting for you at four.”

It occurred to me that we needed to stop by Target to get her some decent clothes before going to the police station.

That was how my life began again.