

Leave 'em Laugh'n Louie

“So I said, ‘Doc, could you gimme some of that Viagra.’”

“‘Louie,’” he said, “‘Why would you want to put up a new flagpole on a condemned building?’”

These were the first words I ever heard Louie O’Hagan speak. It was at the neighbourhood pub in East London known as “The Thirsty Trout” or just “The Trout” to the regulars. I had stopped in for a beer at noon and, as I learned later, Louie was a frequent visitor at that time too and he provided most of the entertainment.

Louie was then about 75 years old and his wife was not well so I never met her. Louie used to dispense this wisdom, “We’ve been married more than 50 years and we’ve never had an argument. Whenever she got bitchy, I went out for a beer.”

Quite often someone would ask Louie to recite his party piece about the dogs. His version of this old favourite began:

“The Dogs had a party,

They came from near and far.

Some came by aeroplane,

Others came by car.”

And Louie ended dramatically:

“And that is why to this very day,

A dog will leave his bone

To smell the ass of another dog

To see if it’s his own.”

Louie began his recitation in a conversational tone and delivered it with so convincingly that he would always hold the bar in total silence to the end. Enthusiastic applause ensued.

Louie claimed that his brother Tom had been a singer with the Guy Lombardo band in London and could have gone off to fame and fortune in the States with Guy. “But Tom decided to stay here and become a millionaire selling glasses.”

Blessed, he felt, with his brother’s talent, and not at all shy, Louie would often break into song. For one of the bartenders he would sing, “Nothing’s quite as lovely as Mary in the morning...”

To another, less friendly, server he would sing:

“Did your mother come from Newfie?

‘Cuz there’s something ‘bout you goofy.

And where did you get those codfish eyes?”

Mary would always groan and pretend she didn't like Louie's singing. Others would join in a chorus of boos. This, of course, only encouraged the ham in him.

Among other favourite songs were Four Strong Winds, The Green, Green Grass of Home and the one most suited to Louie, Oh Lord, it's Hard to be Humble. Surprisingly, Louie knew all the words of these and many other songs, and would even occasionally improvise with his own joke words.

Sometimes he would end with a dramatic quote from Shakespeare "If music be the fruit of love, play on." Louie, if pressed, would admit that yes, it was true, he had been and indeed, still was, quite a lady's man.

Over time and with more visits with Louie, I learned that after a varied career as an electrician, part-time bartender, painter, record breaking travelling salesman of cookies and other commodities, Louie's last job, for some twenty years, was as a sort of accountant and purchasing agent and all around go to guy at Fanshawe Dam and Park in London.

"I did everything in the office out there," said Louie, "one day Maggie Jones, the lady in charge of all the cleaning staff, called me all in a flap."

" 'Louie, Louie,' she said, 'there's a couple having sex on the picnic table in Lot 15, you have to stop them.'"

“So I said, ‘what do you think I can do? I’m not a policeman, for God’s sake.’ “

““But Louie, there are kids around. It’s broad daylight. **YOU’VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING!**””

“So I said, ‘OK, come and meet me at the picnic table in Lot 14.’ “

“She just slammed down the phone... heh, heh.”

“You know, Frank,” said Louie in his slow drawl, “when I turned 65, they wanted me to keep on working, but they wouldn’t pay my benefits, so I said, ‘Piss on you.’” and I retired. They had to hire three and a half men and a computer to take my place. And when there was a problem, they still called me to find out what to do.”

“Yep, as they used to say around the park, ‘If you need to know anything, as’ ole Lou.’ “

A year or two after I met Louie his wife died of cancer. He was a little quieter for awhile and one day when one of the boys at the pub offered his sympathy, Louie broke down in tears. “More than fifty years married,” he said, “and not one argument.”

Then about a year later, Louie was down at the Victory Branch Legion playing darts and he met a German widow named Margot. She had nowhere to sit so, ever the gentleman, Lou offered her his knee. So began their romance. They spent a lot of time on the phone together and went out for dinner once a week or so. Margot's hobby was dancing and of course, Louie was a professional singer... almost.

Although the romance went on for several years, the two lovebirds maintained their separate apartments. Once when Margot had been out to Vancouver to visit her kids, Louie picked her up at the airport at 10:30 in the evening. "Frank," said Louie, "it must have been eleven o'clock when I got her back to her apartment. She thought it was too late for me to drive home so she said, 'Why not sleep here, Louie?' So I slept under her bed, but after midnight she lured me up onto the bed and took advantage of me."

After Louie and Margot had been together for about ten years, she died suddenly of a heart attack just shortly after calling Louie to complain of her pain. He tried to get her to call an ambulance but she wasn't able to do it in time.

Naturally, Lou was upset about Margot's sudden death. In the aftermath his family convinced him to move to a senior's home and then to give up his car (he used to touch up the paint job with a roller). This loss of independence was tough on Lou, so I thought a little trip might cheer him up. I asked him if he'd like to go to visit my brother Jerome and his wife Diane in Barry's Bay since Lou knew them from their visits to London.

We set out for a two-day visit in the middle of May. Lou was a congenial travelling companion and provided a good deal of entertainment to my brother's friends and grandchildren with his stories, dogs poem and singing. The perfect guest, he presented Diane with thoughtful hostess gifts, a new bar of Ivory soap, a towel and facecloth and a plastic bag full of the kind of small jam and peanut butter containers that you get in restaurants. He made no bones about the fact that he had "borrowed" all of this bounty from the nursing home where he lived... (Rumour around the Hall had it that over his years at Fanshawe Park, Louie had acquired a collection of tools that was the envy of Black and Decker.)

When we went to a restaurant in Golden Lake for supper he said that since he wasn't very hungry, he would just have "Fruit-loops and beer," to the amusement of neighbouring tables.

Each morning he would get up at 5:00 and quietly go out to the deck for a smoke.

One day I took Louie for a drive over through Pembroke and across the bridge to the town of Chapeau on an island in the Ottawa River in the province of Quebec. Our destination was the historic hotel know as Fred's Place. Its owner was even older than Louie. The hotel was famous for its great food, entertainment, and most of all for the fluently bilingual and genial host, Fred who had been in the business since the age of 18. "My father's advice to me as a lad was, 'Don't smoke or drink Fred and you'll live longer. Instead sell tobacco and booze to others. The market will never run out and you'll always make a good living at that. He was right.'" (Fred didn't say this, but I learned from a fellow from Petawawa that Fred was very careful not to let anyone drive who had too much to drink. He would insist that they sleep it off in one of the complimentary rooms upstairs.)

The walls of the pub were covered with innumerable pictures, artifacts and memorabilia, the most notable being a huge black buffalo head. There were some machines where you could purchase Nevada tickets. (OK, I admit it, I dropped a few bucks, without any luck.)

As I expected, Fred and Louie hit it off right away with a conversation that went on for hours. I've often regretted not taking notes. I think they even had a few mutual acquaintances. Fred talked about the many entertainers who had performed in the evenings at his place. One that I recall was Stompin' Tom Connors and his band before he was famous. They drifted into Fred's looking pretty scraggly, hungry and without a nickel in their jeans. So Fred fed them some of his big steaks and beer and gave them rooms in exchange for their entertaining the customers for a few weeks.

Rocket Richard's wife came from somewhere near Chapeau, so in the days when Rocket was supplementing his Canadiens' meager salary by travelling around selling fishing equipment from the trunk of his car, every summer he would be the guest of honour when Fred hosted a big dinner to raise money for local charities."One time the dinner ended with us auctioning off the tie that the Rocket was wearing," said Fred, "it went for a hundred bucks, if my memory is right. I think it was your brother Gormy from Whitby that bought it," Fred said to me, "the fellow who worked at General Motors. Later he said he would have gladly paid two hundred."

Louie felt a kinship with Fred, since for many years he had worked as a part time server in a few different pubs in London. “Once while I was working at the old Oxbox at the corner of Oxford and Adelaide, a sneaky govmint inspector showed up on a Saturday night. He saw me serving someone two draft beers at once. At the time the law was you could only serve one at a time. He went to the owner and said you got to fire that s.o.b. Louie, he’s breaking the law.”

The owner came to me and said, “Sorry, Louie, but I got to fire you.” I was feeling bad, cuz the extra cash from this part time job helped with the expenses with my three kids.”

Then the owner said, “Come back Monday night at six, Louie, and I’ll hire you back.”

“Ain’t the law a wonderful thing,” said Fred as he and Louie bent over, slapping their knees in delight. Then we headed back to Barry’s Bay, or as Louie pronounced it, “Barris Bay.”

Our last evening in the Bay, Lou said although he had worked in Fanshawe Park and had seen some parks in Northern Ontario, he had never seen Algonquin Park so we decided to return through the park and then head south on Highway 11 and 400. When we were passing the Visitors’ Centre in Algonquin he asked if we could stop in the parking lot for a smoke.

Unfortunately, Lou’s smoke was cut short by a swarm of thirsty black flies. But when we go back in the car, he said, “I need to take a leak.”

So I pulled over to the side of the parking lot farthest from the highway so that Lou could answer nature's call. When he got back in the car he said, "Well, I've heard of Spanish Fly before, but there were six blackflies on my dink and I was starting to get hard."

"Maybe you've discovered a cheaper substitute for Viagra, Lou," I said, "Is your eyesight OK? If it lasts more than four hours, let me know and I'll get you to a hospital."

When Lou turned 85, his daughter-in-law organized a birthday party for him at the Trout. Fifty or so friends and relatives dropped by and Louie was in his glory, but when someone presented him with a picture of his wedding day he suddenly got emotional and cried.

Lou remained healthy until his 89th birthday. He was supposed to come to the pub to celebrate it, but was taken to the hospital the day before. Lung cancer and various other ailments had caught up to him. After two or three weeks, he seemed almost his old self, flirting with the nurses with the "You're cute," line he usually reserved for young waitresses. (He told me that they had moved him to a different floor where the nurses were a little older than on the previous floor, and therefore, hopefully, more immune to his devastating charm.)

But then he took a bad turn and the end seemed inevitable. "That's the way it goes," was his only comment to his daughter. The last time I saw Lou I went to the hospital with Newfie Joe, a good friend of Lou's who had done some carpentry work for him. Joe had the usual Newfoundlander's respect and affection for his elders. Both Joe and I had difficulty understanding what Lou was saying that last time. Two days later we heard that he had died.

Louie was waked and buried from O'Neil Funeral Home in London. The morning of the funeral I noticed that the name of the room for Louie's final sendoff was, "The Chapel of Saint Dismas, the Good Thief."

Then it struck me. This is Louie's last laugh.

2303 words

