

***A Lifetime of Nightmares***

by Brian Rappatta

Louis finally found the man he was looking for sitting in the shade on a park bench. It was Saturday afternoon, and most of the other benches were filled with parents gently pushing strollers back and forth while they watched their older children on the playground sliding down fireman poles and tromping across wooden bridges. But this man sat alone, watching the children, unnoticed.

“Mind if I have a seat?”

The man looked up at Louis. He studied Louis’s face for only a moment before he turned his gaze back to looking at the children. A trio of boys were storming the jungle gym like it was the Alamo, and a matching number of girls were screaming in feigned terror.

“So you found me,” the man said. “I guess I should have expected as much.”

Louis sat next to him. "Hello, Roger. It's been a long time."

Roger still didn't look at him. "You're too late, you know. It's going to happen any minute."

"I can see that." Louis looked down at Roger's lap. He had a jacket draped over his stomach even though it was ninety-five in the middle of July. He'd gone to pudgy in his middle years, but even the jacket and the extra girth could not completely hide the pulsating of his stomach. It expanded, then retracted in a fluid motion like the swell of an ocean wave, then expanded, retracted . . . .

Louis looked back up at Roger's face. "Why did you do this, Roger? You were always so . . . peaceful. You wouldn't hurt a fly."

Roger shrugged. "I wouldn't expect you to understand. You were always so naïve . . . thinking the best of people, trusting in the kindness of strangers." He pursed his lips and drew in a big sigh. "And for some reason they never disappointed you. But if you give them half a chance, people will show you their worst."

"I--" Louis paused. "I tried to call you after I heard about your wife. I wanted to--"

Roger held up a hand. "It's all right." He gave a rueful grin, much like the one Louis remembered from childhood. "I've taken matters into my own hands."

"Let's go somewhere else, Roger," Louis said. "This place is full of children."

"I'm afraid I'm in no condition to move even if I wanted to." Roger put his hands on the roiling of his belly, much like a proud pregnant mother. Then, he turned his head to look Louis in the eye. "Besides," he said, and his grin returned, "he'll like children. They'll make him nice and strong."

Louis looked down at Roger's belly. The rolling was increasing in intensity, and now, just above his navel, a bulbous

protrusion was pressing up against the skin. It made a tent in the fabric of Roger's white dress shirt.

Roger put a hand on Louis's shoulder, just like he'd used to do so many years ago when they were in school together. "I'm glad you're here, old pal," he said. "You'll get to see him be born."

Louis forced himself to look at Roger's face, not at the burbling mass in his stomach. "You know I can't let this happen, Roger."

Roger chuckled. "Always the hero still, eh, Lou? Even as a kid you always did the right thing."

Louis reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his revolver. His hands shook, and his palms were sweaty. He aimed the barrel right between Roger's eyes. This would have to be quick, before anybody noticed.

Roger didn't flinch. Instead, he turned his head back to look at the children on the playground. At some point, the girls and boys had switched parts, and the girls were now storming the jungle gym controlled by the boys. The boys abandoned ship like lemmings before the girls' onslaught.

Roger sneered. "You can't do it, Lou. *You* were always the peaceful one. You couldn't hurt a fly."

"I do what I have to," Louis said. He tightened his finger on the trigger.

Roger chuckled softly. "What . . . in front of all these *children*, Lou? What kind of monster are you?"

Louis straightened his arm, touched the barrel of the revolver to the side of Roger's head right above the ear. He tightened his finger on the trigger yet again . . . one squeeze was all it would take. So far no one in the park had taken any notice of them.

"Ahh." Roger closed his eyes and heaved a contented sigh. "He's coming. I can feel him."

“Damn you, Roger,” Louis said. “Damn you for making me be the monster.”

He closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger.

When he could open his eyes again, he saw Roger’s body lying at an odd angle on the bench, now spattered with red. Children were screaming in terror, all thoughts of tag and cooties forgotten.

The rolling of Roger’s stomach was slowing now. Louis fired three shots into it for good measure. Then, he stood up and walked slowly away from the body and the bench and the slowly widening pool of red in the grass. Children’s cries of terror echoed after him.

Now, whenever they went to sleep they would see his face, the face of a cold-blooded murderer. But at least they could look forward to a lifetime of nightmares.