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The Trouble In Shilo Springs

By Lu Spurlock

I was in Lora Anne's laundry room that afternoon last January when some of the trouble in Shilo Springs busted loose. Lora Anne had given me her back door key so's I could sort clothes for the church rummage sale while she was out of town.

When the doorbell rang, I thought I was by myself. I was goin' to see who was at the door when I saw Eugene, that sorry husband of Lora Anne's, in the front hall. 'Stead of goin' to the door, I walked into the kitchen.

"Old Buddy, come in this house. It's good to see you," I heard Eugene say.

I peeped out and saw Eugene shakin' hands with a spindly gray-haired man named Johnson who looked mighty impatient.

"You said it was important," Johnson said.

"It is. Very." Eugene shoved the door shut. "Come on back. We'll talk over a can of beer. Or maybe you'd rather have Scotch?"

"Beer would be fine, but I don't want anything to drink."

I could hear Johnson and Eugene comin' toward the kitchen so I stepped back to the laundry room, but I left the door to the kitchen open.

"Throw that overcoat on a chair and sit down, Old Buddy."

Frowning, Johnson sat on a straight chair by the table. "I'll keep my coat on. I told you on the phone I have another appointment. I don't have much time."

Eugene took two cans of beer from the refrigerator and handed one to Johnson. "This won't take much time. All you have to do is agree."

"Agree to what?"

"I've decided to run for City Council. I want you to be my campaign manager."

Johnson set his can of beer on the table and shoved it away from him. "Can't. Too busy with the new branch office. And you know I hate politics."

"You shouldn't. You're a citizen of Shilo Springs, too."

"I think the present City Council is doing a good job."

"That's because you don't know what's going on."

If I was a bettin' woman, I'd'a bet Eugene was thinkin' about Johnson's blonde wife when he said that, but I stayed quiet watchin' and listenin'.

"They aren't enforcing half the city ordinances and I believe they're misusing the hotel tax fund," Eugene said.

Johnson shifted in his chair, and I could tell he was wantin' to get away. I stood not fifteen feet from him with a washed-out purple blouse in my hand waitin' to see what was goin' to happen next.

Johnson squirmed a little. "I don't like to see tax money wasted, but I don't want to get involved. I have a big investment in the new branch and a sales organization to run."

"That's why I want you." Eugene flashed that toothy smile he seems to think's so winnin'. "Running a political campaign is selling. You just sell a person instead of merchandise."

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Johnson shook his head so's his hair kinda bushed out. "No, you'll have to get someone else." He stood up.

Eugene got all red in the face. "Think about the business I've thrown you. I gave it. I can take it away." Eugene stood at least a head higher'n Johnson, and his voice sounded smart-alecky. "I don't want to, Buddy. But you do owe me a favor."

"I know." Johnson slumped in a chair and hunkered his shoulders. Then he looked at Eugene real straight. "I hear city politics are dirty. Are you afraid of dirt?"

"No way. I have a good record on the Zoning and Planning Commission."

There's nothing in your personal life they can use against you?"

I didn't sort no more clothes because I was afeared they'd hear me, but I come close to snortin' when Eugene said, "No, not a thing." Everybody in town must'a heard about Eugene and Johnson's wife

meetin' at the Mayflower Motel.

With one of those resigned expressions that made his face look gray as his hair, Johnson stood up. "All right," he said, "I'll be your campaign manager."

"Thanks." Eugene pumped Johnson's hand. "You won't be sorry."

"I doubt it." He turned away, took a couple of steps, then stopped and stared at Eugene. "You do have at least one qualification of a politician. You lie well."

Eugene's face got beet red. "I resent that. What do you mean?"

Johnson didn't say anything, just backed up a little and his right hand moved down near his overcoat pocket. For the first time I noticed the bulge. Slowly, he pulled out a blue pistol and pointed it toward Eugene.

face. He wasn't the only one scared. I gripped that purple blouse like it was all in the world I had to hold on to.

"You're crazy," Eugene said.

"No." Johnson's voice was so quiet I had to strain to hear. "I'm not crazy." He cocked the gun. "Not crazy at all. I do hate politics, but I do appreciate your inviting me to your house. I've waited for this opportunity for a long time."

"I don't understand."

"By now you should."

I could see Eugene cowerin'. "Don't do anything foolish, man. Please."

"I'm not." A twisted smile touched Johnson's lips. "I planned this well."

Eugene was lookin' at that pistol like it was a

"I'm not crazy." He cocked the gun. "Not crazy at all."

Suckin' in my breath, I wished I was any place else. Eugene yelled one of those words I don't mind readin' but I don't say out loud.

I knew I couldn't get out the back door without Johnson hearin' me, so I ducked behind the ironin' board. Come close to knockin' it over. They didn't seem to notice. I eased the laundry room door shut most of the way, but I left a crack to peep through. Johnson's finger was curled around the trigger, and he pointed that gun right at Eugene's chest.

Eugene gulped a whole heap of air. "What're you doing with that?"

"You called in an IOU. Now, I'm calling one in."

"I don't know what you mean. I don't owe you anything."

Johnson seemed to grow tall. "You're sure about that?"

"You bet!" Eugene made a flyin' leap at Johnson, but he stepped sideways and Eugene fell flat.

"Get up." Johnson's voice sounded mean.

Eugene stumbled to his feet, sweat rainin' down his

rattlesnake coiled ready to strike.

Johnson took a slow, careful aim. When he squeezed the trigger, that gun popped big as a giant firecracker.

Eugene grabbed his foot and whirled around like a turkey buzzard with its head chopped off 'til he fell backward onto a chair.

Johnson aimed higher and I craned my neck to see what else he was goin' to do. When I saw where he was pointin' the gun, if I hadn't been scared I'da laughed out loud.

"No!" Eugene's squeak coulda' passed for one of those wild hyenas. "You wouldn't!"

"You're right, I wouldn't. Not this time."

"What — what're you going to do?"

"Nothing, but you are. You're going to call the hospital. Tell them to send an ambulance. You had an accident while cleaning your pistol."

I could see Eugene wasn't payin' no attention to the blood drippin' on Lora's good kichen carpet.

Johnson tossed a card on the table. "That's the hospital's number."

Eugene clutched the card and looked like he was tryin' to focus his eyes on it.

Johnson walked toward the door. "That scratch won't keep you from running for office. But, Old Buddy, it better keep you from running after my wife."

Eugene didn't say nothin' at all.

When I heard the front door close behind Johnson, I walked out into the kitchen. Eugene's face was whiter'n fireplace ashes.

"What're you doing here?"

"Just helpin' out," I said. You want me to get the ambulance?"

"No!" Eugene looked worse'n he did when Johnson pointed the pistol at him. "Get out of here! Now!"

"I'm not in no rush."

He glared at me like he wanted to wring my neck, but I went ahead and called for the ambulance. Then I told him if he'd stop tomcattin' around I wouldn't say nothin' to nobody.

He didn't make no promises, and he didn't thank me for stayin' and openin' the front door when the ambulance got there, but ever since that January it appears Eugene has been a good husband to my sister and a fine, upstandin' politician. 'Course, from time to time, he limps a little. ■

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enjoys writing both poetry and prose.
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