

Josey's Got a Gun
By
James Gregory Maynard
Rev. March 2020

The sharp edge of the northeaster blowing down Mulberry Street caused Josey to pull the collar of her bathrobe tight around her neck as she said. "Have fun at school, honey. Don't forget to give your teacher the note that your father is picking you up after school."

The tiny boy, swinging his Batman lunch box, walking up the sidewalk to the bus stop, waved over his shoulder. Josey heard his feint reply. "Ok, mom."

As she stood watching him climb aboard the bus, she wrapped her arms around her waist.

"Your son?" She turned to see a stocky, middle-aged, man leaning on a snow shovel.

She pursed her lips and nodded.

He smiled and nodded back. "You must have just moved in. I just got back from Vegas. Was out there three weeks. The police department sent a two of us officers out there for training. I thought what the heck, as long as they have paid for the flights I might as well stay a couple of extra weeks. Leverage it you know. Helluva lot warmer than here in Philly. Right?"

Josey hunched her shoulder. "Yeah. I better get in before I catch pneumonia." She forced a smile and turned up the walk.

"Yeah, yeah, don't let me keep ya." The man picked up his shovel.

Before she got to the porch steps, Josey heard the man say, "Eugene."

She stepped up on to the porch, turned back and saw him staring at her, and asked. "What?"

"My name is Eugene, Eugene Martin."

Josey raised her chin then pivoted to open the front door, but stopped when he asked. "What's yours? Being neighbors and all, you know."

"Josey." She said without looking back. Josey closed the door behind her. With a finger, she peeled back the curtain enough to see the man pitching foot deep snow to each side of his walk. The warmth of the house pulling the chill out of her petite body made her shudder. She pushed a lock of blond hair off her forehead, let the curtain fall back into place and flicked the bar on the dead bolt lock.

It was as if mother nature had decided to skip spring, Josey thought as she walked her son to the end of the sidewalk, sending him off to the last day of school before the Easter break. The early morning was balmy, almost. Grass was beginning to grow, and buds were sprouting on the bushes in front of her porch. As she watched him scoot toward the bus stop, her thoughts turned to buying a lawn mower.

“Brady must get his good looks from his mother.” Josey caught her breath and spun on her heels. Eugene was standing on his porch, barefoot, wearing cute off jean shorts and a sleeveless tee-shirt. Cute kid.” She stood her ground at the end of the sidewalk until she heard the bus begin to pull away. Josey glanced back momentarily to make sure Brady had climbed on board, then began walking back to the house. She caught Eugene's motion from the corner of her eye, but didn't turn to see where he was going.

“Hey, isn't that a waitress uniform from Belle's?” This stopped her in stride and she looked over to see Eugene leaning on the fence dividing their property.

“Yeah.” She said then started up her steps.

“You sore at me or somethin?”

When she got to the top of the steps, she turned and said. “How do you know my son's name?”

Eugene pooched his lower lip out and shrugged. “He was outside playing when I came out to the back yard to check on my mower. Just bein neighborly, you know. We chatted a minute is all. Seems like a swell kid.”

Josey hitched her chin up. “Oh.” She stared at him for a couple of seconds, then said. “I have to finish getting ready for work.”

As she turned to go in the house, she heard him say. “I'll have to stop in sometime. Haven't been in Belle's in a while.” She didn't reply and went into the house.

After the lunch rush, Josey sat at the counter, sipping an ice tea when she heard from behind her. Mind if I join ya?”

“Sure, Lacey. Boy this place gets busy at lunch time.”

Lacey plopped down beside her and took a sip of her coke. “Ya it does, but you did real good. Waited tables before?”

Josey nodded. “In high school I worked for an Elias Brothers.”

“Just move into town? I don't remember seein you before.”

“I lived in Westchester, just north of here. Rented a house just a ways from here.” Josey explained, pinky finger pointing to the west.

“That's a pretty nice neighborhood.”

“Seems nice, but I am not too sure of one of my neighbors. You know. Sometimes you just get a feelin about some people. He's a cop, though. I suppose he's ok.”

Lacey silently sipped her drink for a bit, then said. "Do you know his name?"

"Eugene Martin."

"Ummmmh." Lacey smirked and took another drink of her Coke."

"Ummh what? Is there something I should know about this guy?" Josey stared at Lacey.

"Maybe there is and maybe there isn't. Hard to say. You see, awhile back there was a young girl waiting here who claimed he was stalking her. He did come in a lot back then, but, I don't know. Anyway, she quit after a while, after the owner called the Chief of Police about Martin and what the girl said, you know. Anyway, we haven't seen him or her around here since. Someone said he got suspended for it, but who know what's rumor or what's real."

Josey sat mulling this information over, until she heard the door charm signal a customer coming in. It was her client to seat and serve.

It was four-thirty by the time Josey turned the corner of her block from the walk home after her shift ended. She thought her feet were going numb after bussing and waiting tables during the busy lunch crowd. The walk home seemed the finishing blow that would require a good soak in a hot tub before bed time. The other girls told her she would get in condition in a week or two. *Good lord, I hope so.*

The toot of a horn behind her shook her mind off from her immediate discomfort. She smiled when the dull black pickup rolled by and stopped in front of her house. She watched her ex-husband clamor out of the cab and around to the passenger door that swung open, pushed by a tiny leg. He hitched the boy up under the armpits and swung him a big half circle, bringing him to his feet in the middle of the sidewalk. Josey smiled when Brady squealed.

When he saw her, Brady dropped his lunch box and ran to her. Josey bent over and kissed his blond hair. Then she looked up with a stare that she wished could burn holes through such assholes. "Dammit, Billy, I told you I didn't want you smoking around Brady." She stomped toward him, dragging Brady by the arm. "You'd better not been drinking, or swear to god you won't be allowed within a hundred yards of him for the rest of your life."

She saw him throw up his hands. "Ain't been drinkin, swear to god, I ain't."

"Billy, I just got this job. You know I can't afford a sitter right now. Hardly makin it as it is. But if you're ever drinkin when you have him, that's it."

"Come on, Josey, don't get your undies in a knot." He leaned back against the truck. He hiked his hat up and sat it back on head with the bill tipped higher, eyebrows arched and *that grin* pasted on his face.

Josey's clinched fist were now planted on her hip bones. "Don't give me that smart ass look, Billy. I mean it and you know what the Judge told you." She snapped her fingers an inch from his nose. "Like that, and your visitation rights are gone, for good."

Her head snapped forward as she recoiled from Billy, shoving her away from him. His smoky hot breath bending down into her face. “Screw you, bitch. I am tired of this shit you’re always handing out.” He started snapping his fingers in her face, and when she stepped back, he followed her snap, snap, snapping.

“Hey cowboy, calm down.”

Josey followed Billy's look to the fence and saw Eugene leaning on it. She shook her head no. “I can handle this Eugene.”

When she saw Billy bristle and turn toward Eugene, Josey stepped in front of him and said. “Go home, Billy.” Then she whispered. “He's a cop.”

Like a pin pricking a balloon, she saw the huff drain from Billy's face. All he needed was another brush with the law to put him in jail for a few months, maybe even a year. Right now she needed him to help with Brady, at least until she got her feet under her.

Josey pulled his arm, turning him toward the truck. She saw the look on his face as he glared at Eugene when he walked around the front of the truck. He slammed the door after he climbed in. She shook her head at him when he started the engine with a roar, put it in gear, and then, slowly pulling away from the curb, flipping Eugene the bird.

Glancing over at Eugene, she saw him raise the Budweiser he was drinking. He said, “So that’s Billy Hatch.”

Josey looked down at Brady, who was watching his dad drive away, goosing the truck around the corner at the end of the block, tires screeching. “Let’s go fix some dinner. You hungry?”

He looked up at her and nodded. “Yeah.”

Brady took her hand and they turned up the walkway to the house. Josey could see Eugene sliding along the fence between their properties. He explained. “On my mid-week weekend. Say, if you’re not doin anything later, come on over for a beer. You know a neighborly thing.”

She stopped at the porch steps, while Brady hopped to the top. “I’ve seen all the beer drinking a person needs to see in a whole lifetime.”

“Hell, one or two won’t hurt ya.” He argued.

“Ain’t gonna happen, Eugene.” Josey turned and followed Brady into the house. After shutting the door, she heard a muffled, “Fuck you bitch.”

She saw Brady flinch and his wide blue eyes stared up at her. “Go on in the kitchen. I have a surprise for you.” When he turned and began walking up the hallway to the back of the house, Josey turned and flipped the deadbolt lock.

In the kitchen she went directly to the refrigerator, pulled the gallon jug of milk out and sat it on the

table. "Get a couple of glasses, honey."

When Brady set them on the table, Josey reached into her uniform pocket and pulled out a huge oatmeal raisin cookie, his favorite. "Dessert before dinner?" She wiggled her eyebrows.

"Oh yeah." Brady plopped into a chair.

After pouring milk, she broke the cookie into shares, which was actually more one-third to two-thirds. Josey handed Brady the larger piece. "I understand you got to talk to Eugene the other day."

"Uh-huh." Brady mumbled as he bit into the cookie.

"What did you two talk about?"

She saw his tiny shoulders shrug.

"Did he ask you about your daddy?"

"Yeah."

"What else?"

"I don't know. Something bout you havin a boyfriend." When Brady wiped away the white mustache with his sleeve, she reached across the table, snagged a napkin out of the holder and handed it to him. He smiled back at her when she gave him *that look*.

Unable to maintain the mock scorn, she smiled back at him. "What did you tell him, honey?" Josey bit of a small corner of her cookie.

"Told him you don't have one."

"Thanks, baby. Just be careful about what you tell people. Ok, honey." She turned and lit the front burner under the large cast-iron skillet. "Grilled cheese and tomato soup ok?"

"Oh yeah." His cookie was paused at his lips. "He's kinda creepy, mom."

"He's a policeman, Brady. He protects people. I don't think you have to worry about Mr. Martin." Josey wasn't so certain of her own words.

She turned to go to the fridge for the Velveeta and saw the seriousness of his stare at her. She flipped her hands up to her shoulders in a "*What?*" pose.

"Don't worry, mom. I won't let anyone hurt you like daddy did."

Josey forced a smile and turned back to the skillet to hide the welling tears.

After dinner Josey changed into shorts and a t-shirt and joined Brady on the couch to watch TV. At eight, she told him to take a bath and prepare for bed. When he was shined up, he brought a book back to the couch and they read for a half-hour before she took him upstairs and tucked him into bed. “Good night, honey. Love you.”

“Yuv you too.” He said through a yawn.

Josey bundled her nighty and bathrobe under her arm and skipped down the stairs to the first floor bathroom, anxious to soak her aching feet. When she bent over the tube to turn on the spigot, she heard a dull thump on the side of the house. She paused... listening... but heard nothing more. Satisfied with the water temperature, she plugged the drain and stood up to disrobe, but hesitated. A nagging sense of caution overwhelmed her. She looked into the mirror on the door and saw the window behind her. Josey went to the window and raised a louvre of the blind and looked directly into Eugene’s eyes. She gasped and raised the blind, yelling. “I’m calling the police you pervert.”

She heard his muffled plea. “Oh, don’t do that. Don’t do that. I’m sorry. I can explain.”

“You can explain it to the police, asshole.” Josey let the blind drop and stalked to the kitchen for her cellphone. As she picked up the phone and unplugged it from the charger, she heard the back door knob rattle.”

She punched in 911. After the third ring, she heard, “Clark County 911. How can I help you?”

“I just caught my neighbor looking in the bathroom window.”

“Is he still there?”

“I think he is at my back... Ah!” Josey gasped when she saw Eugene peering over the curtain on the door.

She heard him clearly. “Don’t do this, Josey. I told you don’t do this. We can talk this out, Josey.” She shook her head no.

“Are you still there, ma’am?”

“Yeah. He’s at my back door.” She stepped back when the window broke and she saw his hand reaching for the door knob. “He’s trying to get in, he’s trying to get. Help me... help me.”

Phone still at her ear, she heard, “What is your location, ma’am?” Frozen, she stared as the hand grabbed the door knob, turned it and pushed the door open.

“Dammit, Josey, give me that phone.”

Josey pulled the phone to her chest unable remember her new address. “Get out, Eugene, now.” Then she shouted into the phone. “He’s a cop, Eugene Martin. Eugene Martin.”

She yelped when Eugene grabbed her wrist, swiped the phone from her hand, threw it on the floor and stomped on it. He screamed at her. “You don’t know what you have done, you bitch. This will ruin me.”

“Let go of me and get out of my house.” Josey screamed and she tried to pry her wrist loose but couldn’t pull away from his vise like grip.

When he jerked her toward him, she could smell his beer laden breath as he growled, “You have ruined my life, little lady. Now I am going to make you pay for it.”

Josey reached up behind Eugene’s neck and drove her head forward, head-butting him in the nose. He jerked his head back but did not release his grip. Shaking his head, he wiped his nose with his free hand and saw the blood. “Look what you did, bitch.”

Josey flailed violently to break his grip, but he was too strong. His bloody hand grabbed her by the throat and threw her to the kitchen floor. Pinned under his straddle over her she continued to fight until he punched her in the nose. Then she felt both hands close over her throat and begin squeezing. Through watery eyes, she saw the steady stream of blood dripping from his nose onto her chest.

As the lights in the room began to dim, she heard a dull thud and Eugene loosened his strangle hold. He squawked. “You little prick.”

Then she heard a tiny voice bark. “Get off my mom.” It was followed by a second thud, toppling Eugene onto his side. Little hands grabbed her arm. “Come on, Mom, get up. Get up.”

She blinked away the tears and saw Brady pulling on her arm. Josey kicked and pushed her way out from under Eugene, clamored to her feet and grabbed Brady’s hand. She saw the cast-iron skillet laying on the floor. “Get upstairs and lock your door. The police should be here soon.”

As he ran up the stairs, she opened the front door and turned on the porch light. When she turned back to see if Eugene was still there, she could not see his feet in the doorway where they should have been if he was still out. Then Eugene stepped into the kitchen doorway. She saw a large gash over his right eye, bleeding profusely. The blood still flowing from his nose, and the cut over his eye created a crimson mask over most of his face that made her shutter. After a quick glance to see if the police had arrived, she looked back at Eugene and saw that he was waving one of her large kitchen knives at her. Without hesitation, she sprinted up the stairway to her room.

In her room Josey dug through the top dresser door and pulled out a snub nosed 38 Special her father had given her. She flipped the cylinder open and saw that it was loaded. At her door she peered out toward the stairway but saw no one. A retching groan came from the hallway alongside the stairway. Moving to the top of the stairs, Josey bent over the rail, looking back toward the kitchen and saw Eugene doubled over with both hands on his knees. In the distance she heard the feint howl of sirens—*you better hurry.*

“You brought this on to yourself, Josey. Couldn’t be neighborly, could ya? Had to be a bitch, didn’t ya. Well now you’re going to pay for this, then I’m going to cut that little boy of yours throat.” She heard him stagger up the hallway, banging into the small hall stand, knocking it over. She stood at the top of the steps, holding the pistol at her side.

She watched him turn the corner at the newel post and stop. He smiled through blooded lips and said, “Well, well, little Josey Hatch has got a gun.”

“Taggart, asshole. The name is Taggart, not Hatch. You better leave, the cops are coming.”

He took one step up. “My life is over, bitch. But I am not going down alone.” He took another step up. Josey raised the gun and pointed it at him. “You think you can shoot someone?” He asked.

“You’re about to find out if you go much farther.”

“You know most people think they can shoot another human, but when it comes right down to taking another person’s life, they can’t do it.” He took another step, steadying himself with the hand rail.

Josey wrapped her finger over the trigger.

“So, Josey Taggart, what kind of person are you?” Then he stepped up one more step and stopped.

“That’s it, Eugene. You make one more move to come up these steps and I’ll shoot you.”

Still smiling, he started to make another step, and she pulled the trigger. The bullet hit him in the upper right shoulder, knocking back a step. She watched him touch the hole where it went in. “You shot me, you bitch.”

“Get out of my house, Eugene.”

Without a word, he started up the steps, with his teeth bared, growling. Josey shot him again, this time hitting him in the breast bone, standing him straight up. Then she shot him again, toppling him backwards, tumbling down the stairs. She stood looking at the crumpled heap at the bottom. He did not move.

The sirens were now close, so she tucked the gun into her waist band and walked down the steps, watching for any movement. At the bottom she stepped over Eugene, walked out onto the porch and watched two police cruisers come roaring to a stop in front of Eugene’s house. When the first cop jumped out of his car she yelled. “Over here. He’s over here.” Waving her arms. Josey glanced behind her, checking to see if he had moved. He hadn’t.

By three in the morning the ambulance had removed Eugene’s corpse and the police had assured her that they had gathered all the evidence they needed, giving her assurance that they did not expect her to be charged. That it was a clear cut case of self-defense. Josey sat at the kitchen table holding the icepack, the ambulance technician gave her, across her nose. Brady sat to her left, drinking a glass of milk. “You ok?” She asked him.

“Yeah.”

“You’re my hero, baby. You saved my life.”

He nodded and put his hand on hers. She tried to blink back the tears but couldn't. A whisper was all she could muster. "Thank you, baby."