

PATENT LEATHER GENE
(working title)

2020 Lenten Season Novella
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*dedicated to the abused and slandered
and written in spite of those who abuse and lie about them*

CHAPTER 4

Sometimes It Snows In April

On the front passenger seat next to him, Robin kept an eye on the bag of egg rolls, shrimp fried rice and Chinese broccoli as he slowed at intersections and took turns. A bottle of Grey Goose rolled back and forth in a bag on the floor in front of the seat. Wei's was the best Chinese place in town. Even the guys that periodically came over on business from China liked going there. Wei's grandma lived with him and made strange looking dishes with mystery ingredients and strong aromas that were evidently very authentically Chinese, more so than the broccoli beef or sweet and sour pork. Wei had a three bedroom apartment above the restaurant and his grandma kept a greenhouse garden in a small backyard area. The first time Robin and Gene had dinner at Wei's a table of Chinese speaking guests who appeared to be celebrating something were seated next to them. Robin had made a face when Wei brought out a steaming platter of something smelly and placed it in the center of the rowdy table. The Chinese guests dug into the platter with gusto. Wei had caught Robin's grimace and laughed then came over to take their order.

Taking out a pen and tablet, Wei had asked immediately with a totally straight face nodding toward the now almost empty plate, "You want one of that?" Robin had been embarrassed and blushed to his ears. Gene stifled a laugh and Wei laughed loudly grabbing his belly until Robin laughed too. Then he introduced himself as the owner and politely explained how the dish was a regional delicacy that his grandmother made for guests visiting from China. He told Robin not to order it. He promised he wouldn't like it. "I don't know." Gene had retorted. "Looks like it was delicious." But she wasn't serious and they stuck to their Chinese restaurant stand-by favorites: egg rolls, shrimp fried rice, and Chinese broccoli with black mushrooms in oyster sauce. Other than them and the rowdy Chinese party, the restaurant had been empty that night. When Wei brought out the meal he sat down with Robin and Gene and opened a beer while they enjoyed their meal. The three got to be fast friends. Before they left Wei showed them his grandma's garden of exotic Chinese vegetables and herbs and told Robin to bring any of his business associates from China for an unexpected treat any time. He just needed to call in the morning and let him know what Province they were visiting from so his grandma could customize their meal. The first time he hosted guys from China he took Wei up on his very generous offer. It had made the difference in the week of meetings and helped Robin sign a very lucrative production

contract for exhaust systems for a group of smelting plants in Guizhou. Robin and Gene had been regulars ever since and Wei's grandma was always sending Gene home with some strange smelling tea or salve. Gene swore the stuff always worked. Robin was skeptical but gracious.

Now, the car filled with the aroma of a good dinner, Robin was acutely aware of how hungry he was. Korean food wasn't his favorite and on this trip almost everything had been super spicy. Plus, as a joke, for the first five days his business associates had only taken him to places where insects were the main course. The plant had been in a more rural area and it wasn't until they made it back to Seoul that he had been able to find something he found more palatable. There was a McDonald's next to his hotel. A Big Mac and fries had never tasted so good. He was happy to be back State-side where he could have a *regular* meal. As he turned the corner onto Larkspur he had to stop short to keep from hitting Connor, the kid from up the street. He looked like he was in a hurry and wasn't paying attention to where he was going, riding his bike down the wrong side of the road. Robin thought of Connor as a kid, but he really wasn't a "kid" anymore. He must have been at least 24 or 25 now and was still living with his widowed father five houses up the street from Robin and Gene's place. When Robin and Gene bought the house ten years earlier Connor had been the local high school's star pitcher. He had hoped to get a ride to MSU for ball, but his grades weren't even good enough to get into State's English department, and his senior year's season stats hadn't been great. It was the year his mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer and she didn't make it. Connor had almost flunked out entirely and even spent a couple months in J Building at Children's Village. Gene had taken meals over a couple times a week while Gloria was going through chemo and Robin had helped Pat get a good deal on a new handicap accessible van. Connor had just slipped through the cracks. No one had been able to really reach him after his Mom passed and Pat wouldn't make eye contact with anyone on the street anymore.

Something was up with Connor lately. Even Robin could see that. Over the past six months the once strong looking kid had become gaunt and frail looking and always had big circles under his eyes. His clothes hung on him like sagging skin, and he always seemed to have a different bike. Connor muttered something under his breath as the tires of Robin's Grand Cherokee screeched a little against the pavement. Robin threw his arm at the Chinese food to keep it from tumbling off the seat and onto the floor.

Pulling into his driveway Robin felt relieved to be home and a little apprehensive about the state in which he was going to find Gene. He had thought she sounded defeated and small on the phone earlier, but reflecting on it he wasn't so sure. Was she still angry with him? He felt bad about giving her such a hard time over the camera, but it wasn't like Gene to hold a grudge. Something else was going on and it sure as hell had something to do with his mother. That didn't take a genius to figure out. He couldn't understand why his mother was so mean to Gene, nor could he understand why Gene couldn't just let things slide off her back anymore. Things had gotten markedly worse since his 40th birthday. Gene's reaction had confused him. She wasn't a bitter woman by any stretch of the imagination, but she wasn't nearly as sweet as she had once been either. Women made no sense to him at all.

Robin put the vehicle in park, turned off the engine and got out. He opened the trunk and dug out his carry on and brief case. He slung the brief case over his shoulder then opened the passenger door of the car and scooped up the take-out and vodka. Circling back around the trunk, he slammed it shut and pulled the wheeled carry-on along behind him with his free hand. As he mounted the stairs up to the porch he saw the pile of dog shit waiting there for him and his heart sunk. Pushing the extended handle back into the suitcase he sighed and picked it up as he lumbered to the front door taking care to step around the poop. The door was unlocked.

Gene was seated on the couch in the front sitting room with her face in her hands rubbing eyes pink and puffy from crying. Sitting the take-out and vodka on the coffee table in front of her, Robin sat his briefcase and suitcase to the side and knelt down in front of her wrapping his arms around her shoulders. She let him hold her for a moment then pushed his arms away and stood up. Robin stood up as well.

"So did you see it?" Gene asked.

"What? The poop?" Robin asked ridiculously.

"Yes. The poop. Did you see it?" she asked again.

"Well, yeah. It was kind of hard to miss. What's with the poop?" Robin asked and Gene began to cry again, but they were hot angry tears and her face became red as a beet as she shook her fists and began to spit out her words between tears at a helpless looking Robin.

"What's with the poop? What's with the POOP?!" Gene screamed then became calmer as she attempted to gather herself to continue, "Well, dear Robin, I certainly didn't take a dump on the

porch and we don't have a dog. So, it must have been left there by my mystery door knocking friend. You know, the one that everyone seems to think is a figment of my imagination or just some silly neighborhood kid. Whoever it is, they're pretty sophisticated. They've figured out how to hack into the camera and turn it off in the morning. Almost every morning while you were gone, at the same time, they turn off the camera then knock at the door then run away. And you know what?!" Gene stopped to catch her breath.

"What, Babe?" Robin looked at her apologetically. Saying anything wasn't the right thing to do because now Gene erupted.

"WHAT BABE?! I'll tell you what! I think that crazy old bat down the street and your mother are somehow behind it! I think they are trying to drive me crazy and get me locked up." Gene said forcefully. Robin was taken aback.

"Now, come on, Gene. My mother is nutty and annoying but she'd never do anything to hurt you and Gertrude is just a lonely old widow. She doesn't even drive or have a cellphone. What could they possibly do to hurt you? And why?"

Gene wanted to hit Robin but instead she grabbed the vodka off the table and turned to the kitchen to pour herself a drink. Robin picked up the take-out and followed her into the kitchen. Gene had a tall water glass out on the counter filled with three large ice cubes. She was pouring a double shot of vodka over the cubes. A can of flavored carbonated water was next to the glass already open. Gene finished pouring the soda over the vodka and took a drink before turning to meet Robin's gaze. She raised the glass from her lips toward him. "You want one?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"No. I'll grab a beer." Robin sat the food on the kitchen island between he and his wife, opened the fridge and pulled out a Goose Island Honker Ale. When he turned around Gene was leaning against the counter with half her drink gone. Her head was tipped to one side and she was considering Robin with an expression he wasn't familiar with seeing on his wife's face. It looked like contempt. He smiled nervously at her and took a swig of his beer holding it up in the air first in a ceremonial gesture of cheers. Gene took a deep breath then sat her drink on the island and began to open the bag of take-out. She looked into the bag as she spoke to Robin.

"You *really* think your mother would never do anything to hurt me?" She placed the containers on the granite and started to open them. "Are you serious? She keeps calling the lunatic police on me. She keeps telling them I'm a danger to myself and those around me." Gene took an egg roll out of one of the containers and stuffed the end in her mouth as she looked at Robin. Robin grabbed an egg roll too and pointed at his wife with it as he spoke.

"She's just worried about you is all. No one was hurt." He stuffed the egg roll in his mouth. Gene finished chewing the bite in her mouth and stared directly into Robin's eyes with a flat calm glare.

"*That* is one of the most cruel and ignorant and horrible things you have ever said to me. I most certainly was hurt. Do you realize they sent a mental health goon out here today when I called the police about the pile of vandalism on the porch? Do you realize the cops don't take me seriously. And you know why? Because *you* don't, AND your cunt of a mother and her side kick down there calls them and tells them I'm out in the front yard in my robe talking to myself. You're an asshole. Your mother most certainly is trying to hurt me." Gene aggressively took another bite of her egg roll and washed it down. Robin looked at his beer.

"Don't call my mother a cunt."

"Okay, I'll call her a Satanic witch then. Or demonically possessed."

"Gene, don't do that."

"Don't do what? No one else is standing up for me. Certainly not you. You're not even here most of the time."

"You knew when we started dating that I travelled for work."

"Shut up. I don't give a shit about the travel. I like when you travel. I can get things done. I'm not upset about the travel. It's the disrespect and total denial about what a horrible person your mother is and how she abuses me and how you do nothing about it but make excuses for her. And now there's this. I hope who ever is doing this shit kills me so all you jerks feel bad about treating me like I'm crazy instead of someone on the receiving end of criminal abuse." Gene grabbed her glass, poured in more vodka, brushed angrily past Robin and grabbed another can of carbonated water from the fridge. Before storming out of the room and up the stairs she turned to him saying, "You go clean up the shit. I've had all the shit I can handle for a while. Welcome home." Robin watched helplessly as she walked away from him. He heard a door slam upstairs.

In her studio Gene approached the piece in progress currently on her easel. The under painting was now almost all covered with background and middleground. Holding her glass to her heart she stood back and stared at the composition. This was the most dangerous time in the process, laying in the foreground. There were a couple hazy areas where figures were going to be placed. She looked over her shoulder as she heard Robin lumber up the stairs with his bag and into the bedroom down the hall. She heard the toilet flush and the shower start to run.

Turning back to the painting she sat her drink on a side table and picked up a graphite stick. With a few quick strokes she lightly outlined a simple armature of two figures, one reclining and the other standing, leaning over the reclining figure. The muted tones of the background had been the right choice. This series was a totally different choice of pallet from any of the work she had been doing for the past few years and it was a welcome break visually. Still though, looking at the piece was strange. She sometimes felt like she was working on someone else's painting in progress. There was a gentle knock on the door. Gene didn't turn around. The door opened softly and Robin entered silently waiting for his wife to turn to him. She didn't.

"Wow. That's really nice. Different, but really nice." Robin offered softly.

"Thanks." Gene didn't turn to look at him, instead she fixed her stare on the outline where the figures were emerging.

"This new series is really something. Has Morton said he'll show them?" Robin asked hopefully.

"Not exactly. He's supposed to come over Monday afternoon to look at what I've completed so far." Gene motioned to her drying rack on the far wall where four other paintings were standing separated from a stack of older work.

"Well, he's crazy if he doesn't take them. These are all some of the best work I've seen you do yet."

"Don't try to butter me up. I'm mad for good reason. Mort is no crazier than I am whether he shows the paintings or not. I'm really sick of people throwing that word around like it doesn't mean anything. Your mother is crazy. Like, for real, crazy. I think she has a serious personality disorder. Me...I'm having hot flashes and night sweats. I'm just middle-aged." Gene still hadn't turned to look at Robin. He now approached his wife and gently placed his hands on her shoulders. Her arms were wrapped around her waist. She brought her right hand to touch his left hand resting on her left shoulder. Robin took her hand and guided her around to face him.

"I'm sorry. You're right. You're not crazy. And I'm happy to be home with you." Robin kissed Gene on the forehead and turned leaving her in the room alone with her work. Gene followed, closing the door behind him before turning back to the easel and picking up her pallet and pallet knife to start mixing pigments. Two hours later the figures were done and Gene went back downstairs to find her husband in his sweats, hair still damp, nodding off to sleep on the couch with the Tigers game on the TV and a plate with the remnants of fried rice and broccoli on the coffee table in front of him.

"I finished the figures." Gene said in a bored tone.

“Wha....?” Robin shook his head slightly looking up at her smiling.

“I finished the figures. I’m not sure if the piece is done yet or not, though. I need to sleep on it.”

Robin patted the seat cushion next to him.

“Come sit with me and tell me about the cops.”

Gene let out a big breath and asked, “Is there any left?” nodding at the almost empty plate on the table.

“Yeah. Lots. It’s on the island. I got a plate out for you. It’s right in there.” Robin nodded with his chin toward the kitchen and Robin turned in that direction. “Bring me another beer when you come out.”

“OK.” Gene called over her shoulder. She re-emerged with chopsticks and a plate full of rice, broccoli and another egg roll in one hand, and two beers nestled between the fingers of her other hand. She offered the beers toward Robin who took them both and sat Gene’s on the table as she situated herself on the couch with her plate.

“So, are we winning?” She asked as she stuffed some broccoli in her mouth.

“Do the Tigers ever win?” Robin replied.

“Sometimes.” Gene laughed.

“Yeah and sometimes it snows in April...but not often. Even Connor might have a chance with the Tigers this year.” Robin laughed in return. “Now, tell me about these cops and the poop.”

Gene spoke while still chewing her broccoli and covering her mouth with her hand.

“I haven’t thought about Connor playing ball in years. That poor boy. What a shame. His mother was such a nice woman. I saw poor Pat the other day at the market buying frozen dinners. I came home and baked a cake and took it over and left it on the front step like I did dinner when Gloria was doing chemo. I wrapped it in a brand new tea towel. He stuffed the tea towel in the mailbox today. He could have kept it.”

Robin rubbed his wife’s knee. This was just one of the million and a half reasons he loved Gene.

“Yeah. I almost ran Connor over turning down the street. That boy doesn’t look well.”

“Really? I haven’t seen him in months. I thought maybe he had finally moved out.” Gene said between bites.

“Naw. I see him almost every evening when I’m coming home. He always seems to have a different bike and man, he’s gotten real skinny. He doesn’t look good at all. Cancer can be genetic, right?”

Gene looked at her husband quizzically.

"Yeah. That's why I wanted you to get that BRCA test after your Dad passed....but I haven't seen Connor. I didn't realize he wasn't well."

"Well, you might not recognize him if you did see him. He's real skinny and the circles under his eyes are HUGE. He looks older than you or I. Older than his Dad for that matter!" Robin exclaimed.

"Huh. That's terrible. I wonder if Gertrude knows anything about it."

"Oh, I'm sure she does. She knows everyone's business, and if she doesn't somehow she finds out." Robin laughed.

"That's exactly right! And that's why I think she and your mother have something to do with this dog shit business." Between bites of dinner Gene told Robin everything that had happened down to and including Gert's Crystal Light and Robin told Gene about the flight and the old woman and girl with the crooked teeth. Then Robin played the messages from his mother for Gene. Gene grit her teeth and her face started to turn red again. Robin brushed the hair from her eye and apologized once more.

"You're right. Something isn't right. And my mother *is* crazy." Robin admitted somberly.

"She's not just crazy. She's dangerous. For crying out loud, I went to that therapist for a year to deal with that mugging. Shit, everyone who works down in Greektown would benefit from having someone to talk to that way." Gene stated matter-of-factly.

"You're right. You're right. I'll talk to her."

"What the fuck are you going to say that you haven't said already? Rob, we need to get some real distance from her. I'm starting to think we need to sell the house and move. She's down there at Gertrude's every other day and even when she's not down there, Gert watches and calls her with every little detail. I've seen her peeping through the drapes. It's like Gladys in Bewitched, only Abner's dead."

"Now that's funny. You know I'm pretty sure Gertrude doesn't like Jews." Robin laughed.

"Was Gladys' character Jewish?"

"Um, yeah. Pretty sure. Wasn't their last name Kravitz?"

"OK. Whatever. Either way, Gert is a toady turd for your Mom and I'm sick of being in her line of sight. If you die and leave *me* a widow I'm moving to the UP. With so much militia up there I'm sure people keep to themselves and don't spy around on each other." Gene was only half joking.

"If you become a UP-er you better learn how to gut a fish and dig a ditch!" Robin was still joking. Gene put her now empty plate down and slapped his upper arm.

"I'm serious Rob! I'm sick of that nosey old bitch down there. I like this house, but we could get something with more character and more land out closer to the airport. Plus it would be that much farther from your mother." Gene slapped her thigh. "Better yet! We could go buy a block or two in Detroit and build a fortress! You're mother would never come near. She hates black people, especially Detroit black people!" Gene was starting to like this idea. Robin frowned.

"Gene, that's taking it a bit far. We could never afford all the renovations and demolition we'd need to do if we bought that much property in Detroit. Besides, remember what happened to Stew? He's black and they still stole everything from him, including the fixtures he had installed in the walls *and* killed his dog, just because he was born over 8 Mile. Do you wanna need a gun just to get your mail?" There was more to the story, but Robin wasn't exaggerating about the fixtures and the dog. Guys had ripped out all the fixtures Stew had installed and shot his dog, but Stew had also moved in all flashy with the Camero and Miata in the driveway and that giant diamond stud earring. Cops said it was like rubbing the neighbors' faces in the fact they were living on mayo sandwiches during the week and Church's Chicken on Sundays. Gene turned down her bottom lip in a fake-pout. "Come on. You scared of The D?"

"The real question is are you scared of this D?" Robin laughed using both index fingers to point at his crotch. Gene giggled.

"Shut up. You were half asleep when I came down here. You and I both know you'll be sawing logs before you get your pants off. That D can wait until your brain has had at least one night's rest on Detroit time."

Robin chuckled and finished his beer. Getting up to get another he spoke over his shoulder, "Yeah, you're right. True that! You need anything in here while I'm up?"

"Just bring the bottle of vodka, a can of bubbly water and a fresh glass with cubes in it, please." Gene shouted after him.

"OK!" Robin yelled from the kitchen. Gene tucked her feet up under herself on the couch and turned towards the Tigers game. It was the bottom of the ninth. Detroit was up to bat. Bases were loaded and the score was tied. Gene squealed with D-light. Robin came back in with a beer bottle in his mouth and Gene's items in his hands. He sat the vodka, glass and can on the table and pulled the bottle from his lips.

"What's up squealer?" He asked Gene.

"Tigers might actually win one!" Gene nodded toward the screen just as there was a knock at the door.

"Are you expecting someone?" Robin asked Gene.

“Fuck off. Of course not.” Gene replied. “Go look out the peep hole first.”

Robin approached the door and squinted through the peep hole. He turned abruptly toward Gene and mouthed the words: ‘My Mom’, at Gene. Gene’s face froze then she threw her arms up in the air in mock surrender. Robin raced to her side and whispered in her ear, “I’m not going to let her in. Just let me take care of this.” Gene whispered back, “OK, but I’m going to listen and if she does anything stupid I’m getting a knife.” She was joking...but only a little. If Joan pulled anything crazy she just might dig her eyes out. “Did you get the poop?” Gene asked him. Robin turned to her and smiled a wicked looking smile. “No.” He mouthed.

Then he turned and cracked the door only enough to stuff his face through the opening. Gene could hear Joan scuffling on the porch. She turned the TV down again. Joan’s shrill voice cut through the living room.

“Robby! Sweetie! I’ve been so worried. Oh! What is this filth at your door? Did Genie have an accident?”

Gene watched the door ready to pounce on the beast just beyond.

“Mom, that is uncalled for. I’m not even going to answer that question. I’ve told you countless times, please call before coming over. I just got home from Korea and I’m tired.” Robin said flatly.

“Oh, Robby! I’m so glad you’re safe. No wonder Genie has been having so much trouble. You’ve been out of town and she can’t take care of herself! Is she OK? Did you get my message? Have you called Dr. Shelton?” Joan’s voice sounded forced and fake.

“Mother, there is nothing wrong with Gene. Yes. I’ve been out of town, and I can smell that you’ve been drinking. Are you planning on driving home? Where’s your car?” Robin was starting to get angry. Gene was pleased.

“Wait. Me, drink? You know I don’t even know what alcohol tastes like.” Joan lied. Robin knew it was a lie. “My car’s at Mrs. Donovan’s. I will drive home when I please. But first I wish you’d let me in to see everything is OK, and what is this pile of filth on your porch?” Joan insisted. Robin pushed Joan away from the door.

“Some neighborhood brat thought it would be funny I guess. Now, go back to Gertrude’s before you really step in it. I’ve told you. You must call before you visit.” Robin said sternly.

“Robby! That’s just silly. Why can’t a mother visit her son whenever she wants?” Joan cried.

“Because this mother is rude and pushy and I just got home after a long trip and want to be with my wife!” Robin bellowed, pointing at his mother in the face. Joan gasped grabbing at her heart.

“Don’t play those overly dramatic games with me, Mom. Go back to Gertrude’s and finish your vodka, or whatever you two are drinking, and leave us be for the night. I’ll call you tomorrow. I’m tired and I want to be with my wife.” Robin stepped back into the house and closed the door in Joan’s face. Joan was not happy. She continued to shout, “Robby! I’m just a worried mother! Come now! Open the door! Let me in!”

Joan stomped and huffed and pounded on the door one more time before stepping back and storming back up the street to Gertrude’s. Robin and Gene watched her slip in Gertrude’s front door then sat back down on the couch without a word just in time to see the Tigers actually win a game.