

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 2

Korean Eye Job

Robin lumbered down the side aisle of the plane looking for his seat. He had paid extra for one of the side seats with a window. He always did this when he traveled to Asia. It was worth the extra expense to only have one person next to him and be able to lean against the side of the plane and sleep. He hadn't thought of it the first time he visited the Asian Continent and had taken the cheapest seat available; one in the middle of the middle section of the plane. The man to his left had pulled out a fifth of Jack from his coat pocket just after take off, downed it and passed out burping and breathing sour liquor stink in Robin's face the entire fourteen hours to LAX. The woman to his right had tossed and turned back and forth leaning her head on his arm and had the worst gas. Robin had looked on with envy at a early twenty something kid with giant earphones and a pillow blissfully dreaming with his head against a closed window to the far right. Then, when Robin finally got up to use the restroom, the guy on the end of his row had spilled his coffee on Robin's brand new Docksidors. After that he made sure he was either against the window, or, if his director approved it, First Class.

Robin spotted his seat ahead of him and was immediately annoyed. An old woman with what sounded like a smokers cough was in his seat with a big quilted carry-on in the seat next to her. The carry-on looked over-sized to Robin. He took a slow deep breath as he approached the woman who was pretending to be asleep already. Robin cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Um...Ma'am?" Robin started. The woman didn't open her eyes but coughed a phlegmy hack without covering her mouth. A group of Korean people situating themselves in the center section next to him looked over in what appeared to be fear and dug frantically through their bags producing medical masks and placing them over their faces. Robin pulled his ticket from the pocket on the inside of his blazer and shook it as he attempted to rouse the woman again.

"Ma'am." He said loud and firm. "Ma'am, excuse me, you are in my seat."

The woman made a show of being startled awake and confused.

"Oh my. Oh my! What's this? What's going on? What do you want?" She looked up at Robin. Robin didn't smile. His expression remained flat as he leaned slightly forward offering his ticket to her bagged eyes.

"Madame, you are in my seat. Please check your ticket and find your seat."

The woman's face turned angry.

“Oh, just take this one. I’m already situated and my hip!” She pushed her bag to the floor in front of her shoving it under the seat and grabbed at her left hip in an overly exaggerated fashion. Robin wasn’t having it. He recognized this type of behavior from his own mother. Give his mother forty years of cigarettes and tanning salon appointments and you’d have the awful woman in his seat.

“I most certainly will not. I paid extra for that seat and I’m going to sit in it.” Robin replied.

“You’d make an old woman move just because you paid extra? Shame on you. If I knew your mother...” Robin interrupted her before she could finish the inane sentence.

“I don’t care if you do know my mother. I’m getting a flight attendant.” Robin said, but he didn’t need to because a strong youngish Korean woman with a smart hair cut, perfectly painted lips and tailored uniform was already almost there.

“What is the problem here?” She addressed the old woman.

“This rude man wants my seat!” The woman lied. Robin could feel the vein over his right temple starting to throb. He presented the flight attendant with his ticket. She took it from his hand.

“Excuse me, but this seat is mine. I paid extra for this seat and she needs to move to hers.”

Robin calmly explained. The flight attendant looked at the ticket and at Robin and at the seat number on the overhead and finally at the old woman.

“Ma’am, please produce your ticket.” She said professionally in perfect English. The old woman gasped and brought her hand to her throat in an overly dramatic gesture.

“I thought you Asians were respectful of elders! I’m not even sure where I put my ticket!” She exclaimed as she began to riffle through the awful garish quilted monstrosity of a bag. She began removing items from the bag and placing them on the seat beside her. Robin was amazed. The flight attendant was beginning to look angry and passengers were backing up in the aisle muttering about the spectacle unfolding. Robin could feel sweat starting to run down his back and bead on his lip. The flight attendant spoke next.

“We...Asians respect hard work and honesty. Place your items back in your bag and come with me.” The flight attendant started to motion to two other attendants at either end of the plane who were now starting to move people to either side to make way for Robin’s attendant and the old woman to move. Panic registered on the old woman’s face as she realized her power play had failed miserably. She stammered as she stuffed used tissues, a crossword puzzle book, and a pack of Benson and Hedges back into her bag.

“Wait. I know where my ticket is!” She grabbed at her back pants pocket and produced the ticket. The flight attendant’s eyes got wide as she pressed her lips together and flared her nostrils at the old woman in silent reprimand snatching the ticket from her shaking hand.

“Ma’am! Your seat is in the center section on the other side of the plane. What made you think you could sit in this seat? If you move quickly and quietly I will not summon the authorities.” The flight attendant handed the woman her ticket and stood over her with her hands on her hips as the old woman whimpered and scrambled, gathering her things. Robin moved back, as did the attendant, as the woman moved awkwardly out of the seat and down the aisle. Some of the other passengers clapped as the flight attendant followed the woman down the aisle directing her around the back of the plane and up the other side to her seat where she sat sheepishly while surrounding passengers stared and whispered to each other. Robin placed his carry on in the over head and pushed his brief case under the seat in front of him. The other passengers that had been stuck in the aisle found their seats and settled in. After a few minutes the flight attendant reappeared.

“Sir, I apologize for the inconvenience. Can I offer you a pillow or blanket?” She inquired.

“A pillow would be wonderful.” Robin exhaled heavily in relief. The flight attendant nodded and walked a few rows back returning with a plastic wrapped pillow and a small package with ear plugs and handed them to him.

“Thank you.” Robin said bowing his head slightly in respect as he took both items gratefully. The flight attendant smiled a small kind of smile and walked away.

Robin sat the pillow and earplugs on the seat next to him and took out his phone to text Gene. ‘Hey Babe. Just got on the plane. Tell you about it when I get home. See you in about 25 hrs. Can’t wait. Love you.’

He hit send, turned the phone off and stuffed it in his blazer pocket. The sweat that had started to run down his back now felt cold and slightly sticky against the pressure of the seat. He stuffed the plugs in his ears, unwrapped the pillow and stuck the plastic in the pocket on the back of the seat in front of him. Situating the pillow between his ear and the closed window he closed his eyes and waited for take off. He didn’t even notice when a tiny waif of a person slipped into the seat next to him until the plane finally jostled back and forward taxiing for take off.

Robin opened his eyes and sat up. The pillow slid down between his shoulder and the wall of the plane. A woman in the seat next to him looked at him unembarrassed and smiled revealing

slightly crooked front teeth behind full, heart shaped lips. Robin smiled slightly and nodded noticing the young woman's eyes. He couldn't know for sure without asking rude questions, but it looked as if she had probably had her eyes done. It was a common cosmetic procedure Korean women went through that he had learned about on his first trip to the Country. The company liaison who had met him at the airport had mentioned it casually in the car ride from the airport to the hotel. He had joked about how he had gotten a package deal for his wife and two daughters. He had laughed as he explained they would be going out for dinner because his wife didn't want anyone coming to the house while they were all recovering. Jun laughed calling his "three puffy eyed girls" his "three blind mice". Robin had been taken aback by not only the procedure, whose aim was to make Asian eyes appear more Western, but also by the flippant way Jun discussed the matter. Gene would never consider such a procedure. Such things to her were a vanity not worth the expense. And even if she did, Robin would never discuss such an intimacy with a stranger. When he told Gene about it when he got home, she had been fascinated by the cultural difference as well as impressed that Jun knew enough about Western nursery rhymes to make the "three blind mice" joke. Robin had felt a little embarrassed that he hadn't noticed that. It was something he admired and sometimes envied about Gene, her ability to notice details like that about people and culture. Sometimes he wished she could go on business trips or to meetings with him to notice such nuances. On more than one occasion she had been able to sort out misunderstandings between Robin or his American colleagues and colleagues or clients from over seas because of her innate cultural sensitivity. He was looking forward to being home and running a couple interactions past her. All this was running through his mind as the plane taxied and the woman next to him was looking at him. Robin spaced out a little and continued to stare at her without seeing her. He was shaken out of it when the nose of the plane picked up off the ground and the young woman giggled softly. Robin blinked his eyes and nodded in apology as he turned back toward the window and pillow.

"It's OK." the woman said.

"What?" Robin looked back at her confused. He wasn't embarrassed.

"It's OK. Lots of men like to look at me." She explained. Robin was a little offended. He hadn't actually been looking at her but through her. He replied curtly.

"I'm sure they do, but I wasn't really looking at you. I'm just tired."

"Oh. OK. I see you have a ring. Don't worry. I won't tell her." She giggled. Robin didn't know which was going to be more annoying, the old woman or this stupid woman-child. He smiled a

sarcastic smile with half his mouth and turned back to his pillow. The young woman reached out with a thin, barely there hand and touched his shoulder.

"I'm going to America to be rich and famous. Maybe you like to know me?" She leaned forward and whispered at him. Now Robin was offended. He was pretty sure this was a sexual proposition. He had experienced this in a rough neighborhood in Seoul when he had gotten lost one time, but it surprised him to encounter it on the plane. He sat up straight and alert and looked directly at the young woman. He saw she was *very* young now. The make up, silk blouse and knock-off pumps made her appear grown-up at first glance, but take those things away and she might be one of Ricky and Jimmy's classmates. He was now both insulted by and concerned for this young person next to him. While thinking of what he wanted to say to, or ask, this girl he looked over her shoulder to see where the flight attendant was and caught sight of the old woman. She was staring directly at him attentively watching the interaction. Robin narrowed his eyes at her as he began to put together the situation. The old woman slowly shook her head back and forth in a "No" expression at him. Robin sat back but kept his face slightly turned toward the girl as he spoke softly but firmly.

"Look. I can see you are young." He began.

"I'm twenty one. More than old enough!" She said.

"I don't believe that for a minute, but even if you are, I'm not interested. If you need help we can call the flight attendant. Are you traveling alone?" Robin asked.

"I'm twenty one!" The girl repeated. "I'm more than old enough. I'm going to Hollywood. Going to be rich and famous. It's none of your business who I travel with. Never mind. Go to sleep fatty. I only like strong handsome man. Not like you."

Robin let out a small exasperated breath and furrowed his brow at her. While it was true he didn't have six pack abs, he also wasn't anything near fat; just soft and middle aged, certainly stronger than most of the guys he worked with, even the younger ones. He played racquetball once or twice a week at the club when he was home. Gene took a yoga class at the same time as his play slot. He played with Cory, the yoga instructor, Tracey's husband. They'd been playing together for five years now. He started to open his mouth to say something in reply but decided it wasn't worth the trouble this little girl could start for him. Instead he turned his face back toward the pillow and closed his eyes. He probably wasn't going to sleep though. Now he was worried about the wallet and phone in his pocket. She was probably an adept thief as well. If anything else strange happened before the plane landed he would alert the flight attendant.

The girl got up to use the bathroom three times in the duration of the flight. In between she seemed to drift in and out of consciousness. The last time she returned from the restroom she was sniffing and Robin thought he saw a faint powdery trace around her nose and cheek, but she used the back of her hand to wipe her face and it was gone. He couldn't be sure he saw anything. He did notice she became quite alert, however, and fidgety. But he reasoned with himself that she might just be excited for her trip to America. He too had been a little fidgety nearing the flight's descent his first time visiting Korea, and he was a grown man. Still... something about the whole interaction didn't seem right. He had spent most of the flight so far with his eyes closed pretending to sleep, but the whole time his senses were on edge waiting for something to happen. It was awful.

The flight attendant came around again with the beverage cart. This time Robin sat up and accepted a cup of burnt tasting coffee. The girl had one as well. As the flight attendant handed the steaming cup to Robin she asked, "Is everything alright, sir?" Robin was surprised. Did he look that uncomfortable or had the flight attendant seen something too? They locked eyes for a moment and then he gave a half smile looking at the girl who was blowing on her cup of coffee and shrugged slightly. The flight attendant's eyes widened and nodded ever so slightly, as if Robin's gesture confirmed something for her. Then she pushed the cart to the front of the aisle without serving the last few rows. She picked up the a phone receiver from the nearest attendant's station and spoke quietly in Korean to someone on the other end then returned to finish the beverage service. Robin sipped his coffee and opened the window for the first time the entire flight. He could just make out the shores of Hawai'i on the horizon. The girl lurched across Robin's lap excitedly almost spilling both her and his coffee all over him as she squealed, "Is that America?!"

Now Robin was sure that she was either high or just a child. No grown woman with her senses about her that he knew behaved that way.

"Yes." He replied matter-of-factly while pushing her out of his lap. "That's Hawai'i."

"Hawai'i!" the girl squealed with delight. Just then the pilot came over the loud speaker announcing that they were 20 minutes ahead of schedule and had approximately five and a half hours left in the flight. The girl slumped back into her seat with a pout.

"It's so long." she complained. Robin pretended he hadn't heard her and decided to finish the flight watching in-flight TV. He pulled his brief case out from under the seat and fished out his in-flight head set and plugged it in. The girl produced an emery board and filed her nails.

After an almost unwatchable Wayans brothers movie, an hour of ESPN and a couple reruns of crappy sit-coms, the TV shut off and the pilot came back on the loud speaker. The girl had been asleep and the sudden blast of the pilot's voice startled her awake. She grabbed both armrests to steady herself and inadvertently touched Robin's wedding ring. He pulled his hand away in recoil and she giggled. The pilot announced they were about to begin their descent to LAX. He made some additional announcement about connecting flights, the weather and the local time before he asked everyone to return their tray tables and seats to their original upright position and thanked everyone for flying Korean Air. The flight attendant came around one last time to pick up any trash. She nodded furtively to Robin as he handed her an empty cup and the plastic wrappers from his pillow and ear plugs.

As they taxied the runway Robin turned his phone on and texted Gene. 'Just landed at LAX. 45 min layover until the connecting flight to San Jose. See you in a few hours. Love you.' He waited for her to text back her usual, 'Can't wait. Love you too!' but it never came. He was a little worried. The girl next to him took out a phone and read a text she received, but did not reply or send a text out. Instead, she looked over her shoulder in the direction of the old woman who had her nose buried in her phone attentively. As the plane stopped and the door was opened everyone stood up in triumph. The girl pulled a smallish purse out from under the seat and pressed herself into the aisle of eager passengers. Robin slung the strap of his brief case over his shoulder and squeezed into the aisle to get his carry on. The girl was already at the door of the plane. It was as if she has squeezed between everyone with her tiny size. Robin looked back but didn't see the old woman anywhere as he filed off the plane with everyone else. His eyes were happily adjusting to all the signs in the terminal in English...and then he saw it.

Passing the duty-free and heading toward customs he saw the girl and the old woman. The old woman had made it past the customs agent already and was on the other side digging through that horrid bag. Ahead of him three police officers and two men in dress slacks and shirts carrying fire arms were approaching the girl from three different angles. An officer in uniform approached her first. The girl stopped and attempted to run to a near by ladies room but the two men in dress slacks cut her off and stopped her. She crumpled to the floor and began to sob. Robin saw the flight attendant speaking with another woman in some type of law enforcement uniform at a desk, and the old woman looking on with deer in the head light eyes. Then he saw

the old woman turn and disappear into the crowd. A group of people gathered around the girl and the officers to watch the drama unfold. Robin tucked his crumpled ticket from the flight into his back pants pocket and decided he wasn't interested and just wanted to get to his terminal and maybe grab a sandwich. He was pretty sure there was a deli counter style place in the terminal he was headed to. He was hungry since he pretended to sleep through the meal service on the flight. That stuff was usually the worst anyway.

Robin hated LAX. Once he made it through customs he had to exit the building and either run like hell, or grab a quick shuttle to another building where the terminal for his flight to San Jose was located. He was lucky this time and a shuttle was just arriving as he stepped out and onto the sidewalk. As he stepped up onto the shuttle he felt someone bump into him from behind. He turned around to see the old woman from the earlier flight. She muttered something at him that he didn't quite catch but sounded something like, 'hope you're happy with yourself'. He looked at her with disgust saying, "Excuse me?"

The woman smiled sarcastically and answered, " Pardon me. Watch your step." Robin shook his head and turned to situate himself with his bags on the shuttle. He sat near the front and the old woman sat in the back. He purposely didn't look at her though he could feel her staring a hole in his face the entire short ride across the airport campus. Somehow she got off the shuttle ahead of Robin. As he exited the vehicle he saw her getting into a shiny new white Mercedes with two very well dressed men. One was behind the wheel, the other was putting her bag in the trunk of the car. As she sat in the front passenger seat Robin could see the old woman and the driver having an animated conversation. As Robin passed the car to enter the other terminal the driver turned his head sharply and looked at him. He was wearing sunglasses so Robin couldn't see his eyes, but he knew he was looking at him. The old woman was too, while still talking to the driver. The driver's face followed Robin, nodding a "Yes" gesture" as he slipped in the door of the building out of the old woman and driver's view. Robin thought to himself, 'Crazy LA trash.' and headed for the sandwich stand. He had twenty minutes until his flight to San Jose boarded and he was starving.

A woman was announcing his boarding group as Robin approached the gate, roast beef sandwich and sparkling water in hand. As he got to the ticket attendant he shoved his hand in his back pocket mistakingly looking for his old ticket instead of the fresh new ticket in his interior blazer pocket. For a second he panicked when he found no ticket. Then he remembered the

fresh ticket was in his blazer and promptly presented it to the attendant who looked at him impatiently. Her face was pulled so tight you could almost see her teeth through the skin above her lip. She was trying to look twenty but her hands told a different story. She was at least fifty, if not older. Robin smiled plaintively at her and sauntered on his way. This flight wasn't quite full and the plane was much smaller, two seats on the left and three seats on the right, one aisle and one restroom. Robin found his seat and stowed his bags. Tucking his used ticket in his back pocket, as was his custom to keep used and unused tickets separate and unconfused, it struck him that the other ticket was missing. Did the old woman take it? What on Earth would she want his old ticket for? He shrugged the thought off as he sat down unwrapped his sandwich and stuffed the first bite in his face. The ticket probably just fell out when she bumped into him. It didn't matter anyway. He had no reason to think he'd ever see her again. It was going to be a great story to tell at the office, and he was almost home. He had an hour and a half to San Jose, then four and a half hours to Detroit. After that it was just about an hour's drive to Troy, as long as rush hour traffic wasn't too heavy. It wasn't usually heavy this time of year and he only had carry on this time so he didn't need to wait at the baggage claim. He might even beat the 4:30 rush and make it home faster than expected.

Taxiing at San Jose he pulled out his phone to check if Gene had texted him back yet. She hadn't. He considered calling, but he wasn't sure where the gate for the DET flight was and he only had 20 minutes between flights. Walking toward the flight monitors he took the last slug of the sparkling water and tossed the bottle in the recycling. He was relieved to see his gate was just a few yards away and headed in that direction just in time to board. A young Filipino man was the ticket attendant and smiled at him. Robin nodded and boarded the full flight. What appeared to be a girls water polo team was already on the plane and singing some silly team song. Travel was never a dull moment. He found his seat and shoved the ear plugs from the Korean flight in his ears and nodded off. Once the flight was in the air the girls settled down and talked quietly or watched in-flight TV. Robin didn't open his eyes until the flight touched down in Detroit. The man seated next to him was about the same age and probably in a similar business. Glancing at him he was nearly a mirror image of Robin: mid forties, blazer, no wrinkle slacks, oxford, sensible shoes, leather briefcase with shoulder strap and black carry on. He glanced back at Robin and nodded in telepathic agreement. Silently the two men slid off the plane and to their long-term parked vehicles.

Robin tossed his bag in the back of the Grand Cherokee and hopped in the drivers seat. The vehicle had been parked in the sun and he could smell the warm sweet lingering scent of Gene's perfume. Before pulling out of the lot Robin checked his phone once again to see if Gene had replied. She hadn't. He was worried. He also saw for the umpteenth time the nearly twenty calls from his mother over the past two weeks and three un-listened-to messages. He decided to listen to the messages before attempting to call Gene. He suspected Gene's non-response and his mother's plethora of communication were probably related. Robin hated his mother, but he was careful not to let on to Gene this was the case. He knew if Gene knew he hated his mother more than she did that Gene would complain to him twice as much out of interpreted camaraderie and he wasn't interested in that either. Gene gained satisfaction and felt better after a Joan-inspired rant, while such expressions just made him hate himself. He tried to explain it to her once a couple of years ago after a debacle at his fortieth birthday celebration. Joan had been in rare form. She and her toady, Gertrude Donovan, got smashed and taunted Gene that she better use her eggs before they all scrambled. Robin called a cab and made the women leave immediately. Once they were gone Telly and Sonia, Robin and Gene's best couple friends, had felt awkward and left the restaurant. Gene had cried inconsolably in public. They hadn't been back to Ernie's since and it had been their favorite date night spot until that point. Still, given all of Gene's sensitivity and empathy for everyone and everything else, he couldn't understand why he had to explain this to her about himself. To her credit, after he told her that night that talking about his mom made him feel bad about himself, Gene had cut way back on how much she complained about Joan. But it had come at a cost. She also stopped sharing a lot of other stuff he used to enjoy talking about too, like her work and what she did while he was away on travel. Their conversations over the past couple years had become increasingly one sided with him doing most of the talking. Gene rarely offered much about herself anymore and this latest thing with the camera was ridiculous to him. Why she was letting some neighborhood kids get the best of her was beyond him. So they knocked on the door? So what? Just because the phone rings doesn't mean you have to answer it. Right? Why was this any different? He punched the passcode in for his voicemail and listened to the first message.

"Robby, Honey, it's Momma. Call me back please."

Robin deleted the message. He knew his mother was up to something when she called herself "Momma". Then he listened to the second message.

“Robby, Sweetie, it’s Momma. I really need to talk to you. I’m so worried about Genie. Mrs. Donovan keeps calling me telling me she’s running around the yard in her bathrobe talking to herself. You should get her to see Dr. Shelton, you know the wonderful psychiatrist who runs that widow support group I went to? His number is 248-375-2121. I already called him. He’s accepting patients. He’s expecting your call. Now, call me. I need to know you are OK. Love you, Sweetie. Bye.”

Robin saved this one as he shook his head in disbelief. There is no way he believed that Gene was out in the yard in her robe talking to herself. Nor were they going to call any psychiatrist. Why his mother and her friend were so cruel to Gene he didn’t understand. He knew how much Gene hated being called Genie...especially by his mother. “OK Joan.” Robin said out loud. “What’s this last one.” and he heard the third message.

“Robby! It’s me! Momma! Call me immediately! Mrs. Donovan said there are police and medics at your house with Genie! I told you that poor girl wasn’t right. You never should have married her. She made your father so sick. She’s going to do the same to you, and herself! Please call me and let me know she hasn’t hurt you! Love you, Sweetie. Call me! Bye.”

Now Robin was alarmed. Was Gene hurt? Was that why she wasn’t returning his text? He found himself wishing he had installed the camera viewing app to his phone before he had left instead of poo-pooing Gene. He saved the last message from his mother and then dialed Gene’s cell phone. It rang three times before she picked up. He could tell she had been crying.

“Hello.” Gene answered flatly.

“Babe it’s me. I just got in my car and am getting ready to head to the house. What’s going on? What’s wrong? Are you OK?” He knew better than to mention his mother.

“I’m fine. I’ll tell you about it when you get here. You’ll see. Just come home.” Gene sounded defeated and small, not the Gene Robin knew and loved. He was scared, and the fact that he felt scared, scared him even more.

“OK Sweetheart. I’m on my way. Do you want me to pick anything up for dinner?” He offered.

“I don’t care. What ever you want. I’m not hungry. Maybe a bottle of wine or something harder... maybe vodka.”

Now Robin knew it was serious. Gene only drank vodka when they went out and could get fancy cocktails.

“It’s OK, Love. I’ll be there soon. Love you.” He cooed.

“I love you too. Bye.” And Gene hung up before Robin could say bye back to her.