

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 11

All These Years

Gene tapped her brush on the inside rim of the jar of solvent next to her easel then pressed the bristles between the folds of a rag and placed it next to her pallet on the table. She then stepped back from the easel holding her arms across her chest and biting her bottom lip. After they had gotten home from dinner with Mort the night before, she thought the series was complete, but she had woken up that morning after having had a very vivid and somewhat upsetting dream and had gone directly into the studio without even brushing her teeth. That had been around 5 AM and it was now a little after 1 PM. The canvas before her contained a muted background with what looked to be a window in the middle ground. The window had a smaller window centered near the top with a woman's face that appeared to be melting. The woman resembled Joan. Gene actually liked the composition of the piece so far, but the resemblance of the woman in the image to her mother in law was what was bothering her.

Gene closed her eyes and focused trying to recall as much of the dream as she could. Her mind's eye became soft then it sharpened. In the dream it was as if Gene had been driving a car. She focused on the inside of the car and found that it looked like Joan's car, except that it was actually clean for once. Then she looked out the side window of the car and saw an old olive green Jaguar plow into the side of the car. That was when she woke up with her heart pounding in her throat and ears. Robin had already showered and was pulling a polo shirt over his head in the bathroom when she sat up clutching her chest panting. "Bad dream?" he had asked her as he entered the room looking for his socks, shoes, and belt. They were sitting on the chair next to the closet door. Gene had just looked at him as he sat down and pulled on his socks and loafers and then stood to put on and adjust the belt around his waist. He had then picked up his briefcase and approached her, smoothing the hair from her face before he kissed her on the tip of her nose and turned to leave the room. "Be home around 6 tonight." he had tossed over his shoulder as he walked out to leave for work. Gene had thrown her legs over the side of the bed and her feet almost hurt as they touched the cold floor. Robin had turned on the air conditioning when they had gotten home from dinner the night before more because of the humidity than the heat. Gene pulled her robe from a hook on the wall and had charged directly into the studio and started painting.

Now, she opened her eyes to look at the fresh image once more and rolled her tongue around in her mouth noticing it tasted metallic and still felt kind of furry. She stepped back from the painting intending to head to the bathroom to brush her teeth and pee but the phone rang, the land line not her cell. Normally she would have left it go to voicemail, but instead she entered the bedroom, sat down on the edge of the bed she shared with her husband and answered the phone.

"Hello?" Gene asked feeling like her breath was so bad that the person on the other end might be able to smell it.

"Hello. Is Robin Randall available?" a stern sounding woman asked.

"He's not available at the moment. May I ask who's calling?" Gene replied in a stern voice to match.

"Is this Mrs. Randall?" the woman softened some.

"Yes. This is. But you still haven't told me who I'm speaking to." Gene replied a little annoyed.

"Mrs. Randall, we tried to reach Mr. Randall at work but were unable to reach him. Is he by chance working from home today?" there was some urgency in the woman's voice and something else Gene couldn't quite place.

"I'm not answering any questions until you tell me who you are and what you want." Gene said flatly. She was starting to hope the woman on the other end of the line could smell her breath now.

"Mrs. Randall, I'm sorry. This is a difficult conversation. My name is officer Donna Cordona..."

Gene interrupted the woman before she could say more. "Look, whatever my mother in law has told you is a lie. She has a real problem. If this harassment continues I'm going to consult my attorney." Gene said with defiance. Mort had given her his brother's card at dinner the night before after she and Robin had told him about the recent door knocking issues and the way the police had been treating Gene.

"Mrs. Randall, I don't know what you are talking about. I'm calling because there has been an accident." Officer Cordona sounded apologetic. Gene's anger was mounting.

"I'll say there's been an accident. The accident was anyone from the police department ever taking that woman seriously. I'm considering getting a restraining order and filing an official complaint with the department." Gene continued. Mort's brother specialized in cases of stalking, harassment and family law.

"No, Mrs. Randall. I don't think you understand. That is not going to be necessary. Joan Randall is dead. A little over an hour ago she had a heart attack at the wheel of her car and was in a

multiple car accident. Two others are in critical condition at Beaumont. Your mother in law's body is there as well. Is your husband home?"

Gene was stunned and stammered in response. "Uh, um, uh. Uh. Joan is dead?"

"Yes, Mrs. Randall. I'm very sorry to tell you this way. I was hoping to speak with your husband first. He was listed as next of kin in her GP's files."

Gene had a strange mix of emotions washing over her. Part of her thought this might be some prank being pulled by Joan and Gertrude.

"Are you serious? Is this a prank?" Gene wasn't sure which was worse, this being real or a prank. Part of her had been looking forward to calling Mort's brother.

"Mrs. Randall, I assure you this is no prank. Joan Randall suffered a major heart attack. She may have even been dead before the other car hit her. We're still looking into what happened to figure it out for sure. Is your husband home?"

"No. I'm sorry. He's not. He's at work. He's probably in meetings. He just returned home from some extended business travel and he usually has meetings when he comes back from being overseas." Gene offered somewhat apologetically.

"I see, well, let me give you my number and we would like both you and Mr. Randall to please come to the hospital as soon as possible to confirm her identification and answer a few minor questions."

Gene fumbled on her night stand for a pen and paper and wrote down the phone number Officer Cordona gave her then assured her that one or both of them would be at the hospital as soon as possible before she thanked the Officer for her time and hung up the phone. She immediately dialed Robin's direct office line. It rang twice before he picked up.

"Babe, I can't talk right now. I'm just about to head to a meeting with the VP." Robin said without saying hello. The number on the caller ID told him it was Gene calling.

"I think you better excuse yourself and come home right now." Gene said with as little emotion as she could.

"Babe, I can't. If it's another knock on the door call the Clarke's and see if Steve is home and can come over to check it out. I have to get going." Robin said impatiently.

"Robin, your mother died." Gene blurted. Robin dropped the receiver on the other end. Gene could hear him fumbling trying to pick it back up. Finally he lifted the receiver back to the side of his face.

"What did you say?" Robin asked.

"I said, your mother died. I just got a call from the Troy PD. She had a heart attack and was in a car accident. She's at Beaumont along with two other people in critical condition. They want us to come down as soon as possible." Gene explained in a soft and gentle voice. For a moment Robin was silent on the other end. When he finally spoke his voice was totally changed. He sounded defeated.

"OK. I'll meet you there. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Love, I've been in the studio painting all morning. I'm not even showered yet. It will probably take me thirty minutes or so to shower and throw some thing on before I can even leave. I haven't even brushed my teeth yet."

"That's fine. It's going to take me a few minutes to let everyone know and ask to reschedule my meetings. I'll see you at the hospital."

"OK, Love. And Robin..."

"What's that, Babe?" Robin asked.

"I'm so sorry. I love you." Gene said.

"It's OK. She's probably much happier now. I love you too." and Robin hung up the phone without waiting to hear Gene's reply.

Gene cradled the receiver and sat still for a moment with her palms pressed on her knees and stared at the wall. Joan was dead. Just a short while ago she was ready to call an attorney and get a restraining order against the woman. Now that same woman's body was laying cold somewhere in a hospital room and two other people. Gene didn't know how to feel. She tipped her head to one side looking up the ceiling trying to give a name to what her emotion was. It felt a lot like relief, like a huge weight had been lifted from her chest. Then a pang of shame pierced her heart as she thought of her poor husband. She got up, brushed her teeth, showered and dressed quickly.

Robin was standing in the lobby of the hospital when Gene arrived. He looked lost. Gene approached him with her hands extended toward him like he were a child. He fell into her arms and let her hug him hard for a long moment before pressing away from the embrace.

"Hey there." Gene said to him. "Are you OK? Have you spoken with anyone yet?"

"No. I just got here a couple minutes ago. I was waiting for you."

"OK. Let's do this."

Gene looped her arm through Robin's and lead him to the information desk where an elderly man with leg braces and very thick glasses was seated.

"How can I help you." He offered in a frail but kindly voice.

"My husband's mother has passed away and we were asked to meet the doctor and police here." Gene explained matter-of-factly.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." the elderly man said to Robin then continued to address Gene. "She probably came in through the ER. Let me call and find out for you. What's the name?" he asked Gene

"Randall. Joan Randall."

The elderly man's face registered surprise as he recognized the name. "You mean Frank's widow?" he inquired.

"Yes." Gene replied surprised. "Did you know her?"

"Not really. I used to work with Frank. We were in the Union together."

"I see." was all Gene replied.

The man picked up a phone and dialed some numbers and asked a few questions of some unknown person on the other end. When he was done he hung up and looked at Robin and Gene sympathetically.

"She's still in the ER. The police are there waiting to speak with you and the doctor will be in when he can. One of the other people involved in the accident just passed also. I'm not really supposed to tell you, but since I knew Frank, I'm giving you a heads up."

"Oh. OK. Thank you." Gene nodded apprehensively as she spoke. "How do we get there from here?"

The man leaned forward as far as he could in his seat and craned his neck to the right pointing down a long hallway. "All the way down that hall there until the end then take a right. Then follow the signs. If you pass radiology you've gone too far." Then he turned again to Robin who had been silent the entire time. "And again, young man, I'm very sorry for your loss."

Robin looked the man directly in his eye and with no emotion said, "Thank you. But there's no need to be sorry." The elderly man sat back in his chair and nodded his head knowingly in understanding. Robin pulled his arm from Gene's and stuffed his hands in his pockets as he turned and started down the hall. Gene looked from the elderly man to Robin and watched her husband walk away from her for a moment before hurrying to catch up to him.

Coming from the direction they had they entered the ER from, a kind of back way already past check in but in sight of the triage area, a woman at a portable standing station just before the door to ER took their names and gave them visitor passes. Gene peeled the sticker from it's backing and pressed the tag over her heart with the palm of her right hand. Robin had done the same but had accidentally put his on upside down. It didn't matter. It was just a formality. The woman pointed toward an empty room with a very bright light on inside. Gene nodded a polite thank you and followed Robin who was already half way to the room. A uniformed female police officer about the same age as Gene and Robin followed them in from a spot where she had been waiting for them to arrive. She addressed the couple who were standing next to each other silently. Gene was leaning her head on Robin's shoulder and Robin was standing with his hands still in his pockets and not blinking.

"Mr. and Mrs. Randall." the officer said extending her hand toward Robin. Robin wasn't even looking at the officer and Gene intercepted the handshake with an awkward motion.

"Yes. We are the Randalls."

"Mrs. Randall. I'm officer Cordona. We spoke on the phone earlier. I'm sorry for your loss." she smiled a small brief smile at Gene as she shook her hand. The two women exchanged a moment of understanding that Gene was grateful for.

"We don't know where your mother was headed, but we do know she had just pulled out of a gas station car wash onto Dequinder and had a heart attack and caused a multiple car pile up where your mother's car was hit on the driver side door by..."

Gene interrupted her. "Was it by an olive green vintage Jag?" she asked. Officer looked at her with a questioning expression.

"No. It was a brand new white Mercedes from out of State. Why did you ask that?" the officer prodded Gene, who now felt exposed and silly. She blushed as the officer and Robin both looked at her expectantly.

"No, I just had a strange dream last night about being in a car accident like that but I was hit by an olive green vintage Jag. It's nothing. A stupid coincidence. I shouldn't have asked." Gene waved her hand in dismissal of her own words in front of her face. The officer and Robin seemed satisfied with her answer.

"I don't know if she had the heart attack and caused the accident or if she had the accident and had the heart attack. Your mother had been drinking, Mr. Randall. In a strange way she's lucky to have passed. Another man involved in the accident passed away just before you arrived. If

your mother were still living she might be looking at charges of manslaughter and driving under the influence. There are witnesses. She'd most likely have gotten time."

"And she would have deserved it." Robin replied with an amount of anger on his face and in his voice that surprised Gene. "How old was the man who passed?" he asked.

"In his fifties I think. He and his family had literally just moved to the State yesterday. He and his mother were on their way to Target to pick up some things for their new apartment. His mother was also injured, but she is going to be fine the doctors told me. The doctor will be in to see you soon and take you to see the body to officially confirm her identity. Mr. Randall, I'm very sorry." Officer Cordona nodded slightly toward Robin and Gene holding her right hand to her chest then turned and left Gene and Robin alone once more.

Gene reached over to touch Robin on the arm but he evaded her touch and moved to the other side of the room pretending to look at the supplies on the wall over a hand wash station. Gene started to say something but caught herself and thought better just in time for Robin to spin around abruptly and say, "I hate her. I'm glad she's dead." His pupils were narrowed and he seemed to be looking past Gene who felt like a dart had just passed through her mind's eye. She softened and pressed her lips together and she nodded her head in agreement.

"I know, Love. I understand." she chose to say.

Robin turned his head slightly and looked at his wife with anger still on his face.

"I don't want you to go with me to confirm her identity. I want to do it by myself." the words stung Gene, but she didn't feel like she had any right to protest his wishes. Joan was, after all, his mother.

"OK." was all she replied to him then approached him slowly and stood silently next to him until a female Indian doctor with long dark uncut hair pulled back in a simple low pony tail and no make up came in to speak with them.

"My name is Dr. Deepa Ahuja. You are Mrs. Randall's family?" she asked in a professional tone of voice.

"Yes." Robin answered. "I'm her son."

"Mr. Randall, your mother was a very ill woman. Her liver was barely functioning and she appears to have had Bell's Palsy. How long had she had the Palsy? I didn't see anything about it in her medical records."

"Bell's Palsy? I don't know. I wasn't aware." Robin didn't even know what Bell's Palsy was, let alone how long his mother had had it.

“Sir, when was the last time you saw your mother?”

“Just this past Saturday. Why?”

“Was there anything strange to you about her appearance?”

“She was drunk and her make up was smeared all over her face, but other than that she looked like she always looked. Why? What’s wrong with the way she looks?”

“Well, there are a couple lacerations from the accident and her left arm was broken, but the left side of her face is drooping, from Bell’s Palsy. Was her face drooping on Saturday?”

“Drooping? Her face? What? No. Her face was fine. She was just sloppy drunk.”

“I see.” Dr. Ahuja replied. “Well, it must have come on some time between then and now, because she had it when she passed. Are you ready to see the body? This is hard for most people, sir.”

“I’ll be fine. Can my wife stay here?”

“Sure. Please come with me. Ma’am, you can wait in the waiting room just outside the door where you entered the ER. A nurse will come and get you when we are through.” Gene nodded and gathered her purse in front of herself and headed toward the waiting area while Robin and the doctor walked away in the opposite direction.

Gene looked at noone as she made her way to the waiting area. She thought she remembered seeing it just before they got their visitor passes. She also needed to find a restroom. Luckily she didn’t need to go far. There was a single occupancy restroom across from the waiting area. When she came out of the restroom there was one older gentleman sitting by himself with his legs crossed and a hand on either armrest beside him. He was kind of sucking on the inside of his cheek and staring at the wall in front of him. He made no indication of even seeing Gene as she sat in a chair on the other side of the room. She noticed he had a very unusual and fancy wrist watch. It was the most interesting watch she had ever seen. Under different circumstances she would have made a comment of appreciation for the obvious work of Art and Craftsmanship, but she didn’t feel like having conversations with any strangers at the moment.

Gene sat down and looked at her white patent leather tennis shoes. They were Italian and they really were comfortable. Robin had briefly questioned the price but stopped when Gene reminded him how much his new briefcase had cost when there was nothing wrong with the old one. Gaze lost on her feet, Gene’s cell phone began to ring. The man now glanced slightly in Gene’s direction as she answered the ringing device. It was Gertrude.

"Gene, it's Mrs. Donovan from down the street."

"Hi Gert. I knew it was you."

"Gene, have you heard from or seen Joan. She was supposed to be here a couple hours ago but never showed up. I tried calling her phone, but she doesn't answer and it's just not like her to be so late and not call me." Gert sounded genuinely concerned.

"Gert, I don't know what to tell you so I'll just say it. Joan is dead. We're at the hospital now."

There was a total silence on the other side then a shrieking wail like some animal was having it's throat cut. Gene held the phone away from her ear then brought it back as she heard Gert on the other end breaking down into thudding sounding sobs.

"Gert, Gert. Take a deep breath. I'm sorry."

"She's she's she's dead? You're serious?" It sounded like Gert was on the verge of hyperventilating. Gene was kind of surprised.

"Gene. I loved her. We were more than friends. She didn't want anyone to know!"

Gene was stunned. She sat stock still letting the confession sink in. So she had been right all along! An ironic smile crossed Gene's lips as she spoke softly to Gertrude.

"It's OK, Gert. I already knew."

"You did?" Gert asked in a high pitch whine.

"Yeah. Well, I suspected. Robin was oblivious."

Gertrude was now almost panting to catch her breath and her nose sounded stuffed up.

"Gene, can I see her?"

"I'll ask Robin, but I don't see why not. You are certainly welcome to attend the funeral. But Gert, right now I need to go. I will call you later today or tomorrow morning."

"OK, Dear. Thank you."

Gene hung up and breathed out hard as Robin came in to the waiting room by himself peeling his visitor's badge off and handing it to Gene.

"Here. Take this for me." he said as Gene took it from him.

"Is that all? Are we done? What's going on next?" Gene asked her husband.

"She's going to be cremated. It's in her and Dad's will. She's gonna be cremated and put in the vault with Dad's ashes at the mausoleum. The body will be picked up tonight and taken to Pixley's out in Rochester. Then they'll cook her and we'll be done. I already called Tim. He's not coming over for it. It's too expensive right now and he's just glad to not have to worry about it anymore."

Gene looked at Robin for a moment like she had never met him before.

"Gert just called." she told him.

"Oh yeah? What'd she want?"

"She was looking for your mom. I guess she was on her way to Gert's when it happened.

Anyway, I told her Joan was dead and guess what?"

"What?" Robin asked flatly.

"I was right. They were a couple."

"What?" Robin looked like he had just been slapped.

"Yeah. Gert was your mom's girlfriend, and not just a friend that was a girl. They were a romantic couple."

Robin furrowed his brow and looked off into some imagined distance.

"Whatever. Let's go home." he said as he turned away from his wife and back toward the main lobby where they had entered the hospital.

After they left the room, Dursik stood up and smoothed the wrinkles from his slacks and blazer before looking at the time on his watch and heading toward the ER. He showed the woman at the station and desk his visitor's pass and found his way to Sylvie's room. She was stable, not critical as they had originally told Gene on the phone, but Mohan had been driving and hadn't been so lucky. Sylvie's clavicle was broken from her seat belt and she had a bit of a concussion from hitting her head on the passenger side window. Mohan had died of internal bleeding. They just hadn't been able to stop the bleeding. He'd been on blood thinners for the past six months after getting a check-up because of Sylvie's nagging. Dursik looked at Sylvie who didn't turn to look at him as he walked in the door. There was a news paper on the tray table next to Sylvie's bed and she was leaning back staring at the ceiling. Dursik sat down in a chair on the other side of the bed silently.

"My boy's dead." Sylvie said without looking at him or away from the spot on the ceiling.

"Yes, Sylvie. He is."

"It's just you and me now, Vortaka." Sylvie whispered.

Dursik half stood up and leaned over Sylvie kissing her softly on the forehead. "Yes, Fene. It is. Sylvie and Dursik." Dursik sat back in the chair and crossed his legs. Sylvie rolled her head to look at him. "Was it really Robin Randall's mother in that car?" she asked him.

"Yes, Sylv. It was." He answered. Sylvie mushed her lips back and forth a couple times.

"All these years, Jaromir. All these years and it turns out the entire World is smaller than our Villiage was."

Dursik stood up and leaned over Sylvie picking up the paper on the tray table on her other side. She thought she could see tears in his eyes, but maybe she was mistaken. Dursik sat back down in the chair and shook the paper open. It was the real estate section of the Detroit Free Press. A couple ads were circled.

“There really are some cheap houses in the City, Jaromir. They weren’t lying about that.” Sylvie said to him. Dursik just grunted and said, “Don’t call me Jaromir.”

Sylvie laughed a small kind of huffing laugh and coughed. “I need a cigarette. I hope I can get out of here soon.”

Back at Gertrude’s Connor was out in the shop painting the latest bike. Gertrude burst in hysterical and frightened the little old young man grabbing him; hugging him and crying.

“My Joan is dead, Connor! My Joan!”

Connor hugged Gertrude awkwardly and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“It’s going to be OK, Aunt Gert. Your nephew Connor loves you.”

Gertrude pulled away from him and smiled through her tears, touching his cheek with her right hand. Then she dug her hand into the pocket of her muumuu and produced a key and offered it to Connor.

“Here. Take this. It’s the key to Cadillac. You’re gonna be driving me around from now on. The car’s still mine, but you can use it when I don’t need to go anywhere. Tomorrow I need you to take me to the store. I’m going to need to get a new dress for the funeral.”

Connor took the key and put the key on his keyring next to the key to Gertrude’s house.

“Sure thing, Aunt Gert. Whatever you need.”

THE END