

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 6

Dehydrated Crocodile Tears

Robin's eyes fluttered open and he found himself still on the couch with a blanket neatly tucked around him and his pillow from the bed under his head. There were three empty beer bottles on the coffee table next to a tall glass of water. He could hear Gene in the kitchen bumping around. The morning sunlight danced across the dining table just beyond the sitting room. He sat up rubbing his face, neck and head. Gene entered the room balancing a plate of scrambled eggs and toast and a cup of coffee and sat it on the table in front of him.

"Well, good morning, lumberjack." Gene smiled at her husband as he rubbed the sleep from his face with the palms of his hands.

"Why am I on the couch?" Robin looked at the empty beers. He remembered drinking them. He didn't think he was that drunk.

"After the game we watched the news and had a couple more beers and you fell asleep. I tried to wake you to get you to come up the stairs but you were dead to the World." Gene informed him pushing the plate of eggs toward him and heading back towards the kitchen to get her plate and cup to join him. Robin picked up his coffee and took a sip then picked up his plate and headed to the dining table.

"Let's eat at the table." He said to Gene through the breeze through window between the dining room and kitchen.

"OK." Gene replied sitting her plate at her seat. "You want some ketchup for your eggs?" She asked him as she turned back toward the refrigerator.

"Yeah. And do we have any OJ?" He got up to get juice glasses.

"No. But we have some cran-apple. You want that?" Gene grabbed the ketchup and the juice and made her way to the table. Robin grabbed two glasses from the cupboard and sat down next to his wife.

"Eh. Yeah. But pick up some OJ later if you go out." Robin poured himself some juice and took a sip before digging into his eggs. Gene pushed her eggs around on her plate before taking a bite.

"If I go out later I hope you'll come with me. I was thinking we could go out for dinner tonight." Gene looked at her husband hopefully.

"OK. Man, I was tired."

“You must’ve been. I couldn’t even get you to move and you were snoring like a chainsaw. So I just brought your pillow down and covered you up.” Gene took a bite of her toast watching Robin switch his fork and knife in his hands.

“I’m still tired. And, ugh. I’m gonna have to call Joan today.” Robin sighed.

“Joan? Since when are you and your mother on a first name basis.” Gene raised her eyebrows as she spoke.

“I’ve been calling her Joan to myself for a couple years now. But after that last message and the bullshit she pulled at our door last night I think I’m gonna start calling her Joan to her face.”

Robin turned the corners of his mouth down in disapproval.

“She left a message on the landline here yesterday too. I just remembered. I haven’t listened to it yet. Shall we?” Gene offered.

“Ugh. Can I finish my breakfast first? I was enjoying it.” Robin smiled at Gene and patted her hand resting on the table between them. Gene got up and grabbed the tea towel hanging on the oven door to wipe off the dining table where she had dribbled some juice. She sat the red towel in the center of the table as she finished her eggs and Robin touched the corner of the towel.

“You said Pat brought a tea towel back yesterday?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“How do you know it was him? Did Connor bring it back?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s Pat on the camera yesterday morning. He walked by not long before the camera went out at 9AM.

“Hmm. Can I see it? Was there a knock this morning?” Robin had a look on his face like he was thinking really hard about something.

“Yeah, you can see it. I wish you’d install the app on your phone so you can see it anytime like me. And no, magically there was no knock this morning. It would have woken you up if there had been. Whoever it is probably saw you’re home.” Gene got up and grabbed her cell phone from the kitchen counter where it had been charging and brought it over to the table. She opened the camera company’s app and brought up the video from the morning before. At 8:56 AM she paused the footage and offered the phone to Robin pointing at the screen.

“See. Right there. There’s Pat stuffing the towel in the mailbox.” Gene told Robin. Robin took the phone and zoomed in on the image.

“That’s not Pat, Gene. That’s Connor.” Robin rewound and re-watched the footage three times to be sure.

“What? No. That can’t be Connor!” Gene was amazed. Robin handed the phone back to her.

“Yeah. It sure as hell is Connor. I told you. He looks real bad. He’s wearing the same thing I saw him wearing last night when I almost hit him on his bike.” Robin told Gene. Gene re-watched the footage again.

“Oh my gawd!” Gene cried. “That IS Connor. Holy mackerel. He could be his father’s twin!” Gene squinted her eyes and zoomed in on the image. “Robin! Oh my God!” Gene’s mouth hung open as she noticed something else about the image. “Robin. He’s wearing boots! The foot I saw slipping behind the Clarke’s place was wearing boots. And look!” Robin was now perched looking over Gene’s shoulder. Gene paused the footage just moments before the footage cut out at 9AM. “Look, he’s doing something on his phone just before the footage cuts out. Could he be hacking the camera from his phone? Do you think Connor could be the one that’s been doing this to me?” Gene was confused and Robin was just shaking his head.

“If he had gotten access to the program some how and had the app on his phone, who knows? I don’t know enough about it, but it’s probably possible. I don’t know. Connor never bothered us before, but who knows what’s going on with him these days. Drugs maybe? Look at him.” Robin was irritated and Gene looked scared.

“Why would Connor do something like this? What happened to that kid?” Gene was on the verge of tears. Robin kissed her cheek and took the phone from her hands sitting it on the table.

“Babe, I don’t know. But I’ll go down and see if Pat’s around later.”

“I don’t know Rob. I think I just want to wait and see if it’s gonna stop now and if it doesn’t just let the cops take care of it.” Gene picked her phone back up off the table and saved the clip of Connor at the mailbox. “I’ll email this to that cop. I think there’s an email address on the business card she gave me.” Gene got up and went to find the business card secured to the refrigerator with a magnet. “Yeah. Right here. I’ll email her. Can you please take care of the poop at the door?” Gene asked Robin as she emailed the clip to Officer Stone directly from her phone.

“Yeah.” Robin fished around in a cabinet for a plastic bag to use to pick up the poop and headed for the front door. “Maybe Gertrude will see me out in my sweats and call the cops to let them know.” Robin joked. Gene headed for the stairs.

“I’m gonna jump in the shower and get dressed then look at that painting again.” She told Robin as she passed him at the front door. As he opened the door Joan was just walking up the front steps. She was wearing the same thing she had been the night before. Gene caught a glimpse of Joan and ran up the stairs and stood just around the corner at the top listening. Robin left the door open behind him so she could hear.

“Joan. I told you to call first.” Robin said flatly.

“What’s this Joan garbage, Robby? Call me Mom or nothing at all.”

“Nothing at all, you have five minutes to leave before I call the police.” Robin slipped the plastic bag over his hand and bent over to pick up the now solid pile of feces. Gene almost squealed with delight at the sound of Robin calling his mother by her first name.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Robby.” Joan protested.

“Ridiculous?” Robin began. “Ridiculous is coming home after a three week trip over seas and having to fight with my mother just to be able to spend time with my wife. I told you. There’s nothing wrong with Gene. Everything here is fine. I’ve just been traveling and I’m tired and I want to rest and spend some time with my wife and I will call you later. What are you doing here this early on a Saturday anyway? Did you stay over at Gertrude’s? You’re wearing the same thing you were wearing last night.” Robin took a deep breath and stared at his mother who’s face was crumpling before him.

“It’s none of your business where I slept and you’re wearing the same thing you were wearing last night too!” Joan said stupidly.

“That’s because it’s 10:30 in the morning and I’m in MY home and these are my pajamas.”

Robin tied a knot in the top of the bag of poop and let it dangle at his side while he considered the woman standing in front of him.

“Robby, honey, I just have been so worried about you is all.” Joan tried to will herself to cry but the tears wouldn’t come. She settled for furrowing her brow and pouting her lips as hard as she could.

“Is an old crocodile too dehydrated from a night of drinking to even force one tear?” Robin’s words cut sharply. Even Gene winced at the top of the stairs. She could only imagine the face Joan must be making. Then she remembered she could watch from the camera’s app on her phone. She tip-toed down to the bedroom and tucked her feet under her as she sat on an unmade bed and watched her husband deal with his mother. Joan looked pretty rough, like she hadn’t slept at all, and her eye makeup was smeared under her eyes. Though not a regular occurrence, it wasn’t unusual for Joan to spend the night at Gertrude’s. The way the two women were with each other Gene sometimes wondered if maybe they were a little more than friends. It *would* explain some things. But then Gene always told herself that sounded too crazy to be true and reasoned with herself that Joan just really liked being able to harass them from close proximity. Through the lens of the security camera, Gene thought Joan’s make-up looked like it was smeared from kissing. It wasn’t just her eye make-up that was smudgy. There was lipstick

smeared a bit on her cheek as well. Joan stepped a little closer to Robin and poked her son in the chest with her middle and index fingers.

“Now you listen to me, mister. I endured nineteen and a half hours of labor bringing you into this World. I’m allowed to worry about you.”

“Joan, no one is telling you you’re not allowed to worry about me. It’s just that your worry is unreasonable. There is nothing wrong in my home other than you being a pain in my ass. Other than that, Gene and I are both healthy and happy. Now take your damn drama and go home, or back over to Gertrude’s or anywhere but here right now.” Robin extended the bag of poop towards his huffing mother who looked like she was ready to explode. “And drop this in the trash can at the end of the driveway on your way out. Joan didn’t take the bag so Robin dropped it on her foot and turned in the house locking the door behind him. Gene watched on the camera as Joan kicked the bag into the front yard and stomped to her car that was parked in front of the house. Gene looked up to see Robin coming in the door. He walked past her and into the bathroom where he washed his hands and brushed his teeth. Gene put her phone on the nightstand beside her and watched him from her seat on the bed. Robin dried his hands and face with the hand towel and flopped on the bed next to Gene burying his face in her lap. Gene ran her fingers through the hair on the back of his head and trailed down the nape of his neck. He turned his face to look up at her and surprised Gene. Robin was crying.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with her. I don’t know why she can’t respect any boundary.” Robin almost whispered. Gene brushed a towel fuzz away from his eye and caressed his cheek.

“I don’t know either, but I’m glad we can finally agree that something is wrong with her.” Gene said with earnestness to Robin.

“I guess I just don’t like to think about it. I mean if there’s something wrong with her, like she’s actually sick in the head, there might be something wrong with me too.” Robin confided. Gene shook her head at him and continued to gently brush her hands over his cheeks.

“No. You’re much more like your father. You look like him and everything. You’re Mom just has a horrible personality.” Gene assured him.

“Great. So I’m like my Dad. Maybe I’ll die by the time I’m 60 and be out of everyone’s hair.” Robin turned his face and rested his cheek on Gene’s thigh. Gene bent forward and kissed her husband on the exposed cheek. She could taste his tears.

“No. I’m sure your Dad died because of something he was exposed to at work. You and I are going to get old and gray together.” But Robin didn’t look convinced. He sat up and leaned toward Gene who leaned into him as well. Her head settled on Robin’s shoulder.

“So, what are you going to say to her later?” she asked him.

“I don’t think I’m going to call her. Not after that.” Robin replied.

“It’s up to you, but you know she’s gonna just keep trying if you don’t. Hey, I wanna ask you something.” Gene said hesitantly.

“What’s that?”

“It’s about your Mom.”

“What?”

Well...your Mom and Gertrude spend a whole lot of time together and...”

“And what?” Robin was now facing his wife. Gene turned to look at him.

“And sometimes, the way they are with each other and I don’t know...sometimes the way your Mom is about Gertrude...do you ever wonder?”

“Wonder what?” Robin looked confused. Gene finally spit it out.

“Do you ever wonder if they’re more than friends?”

“What, like Lovers?” Robin asked.

“Yeah, I mean no. I mean sort of. I mean they act like they’re an old married couple. Your Mom is like the husband and Gertrude is like the wife.”

Robin looked up thinking about what Gene had just said to him.

“Hm. I don’t know. I guess I never thought of my Mom that way.”

“What way? Gay?”

“No. Well, yeah...but not just gay. I’ve never really thought of my Mom as someone who would need anyone else after my Dad died. I guess I never considered she might need romance in her life.”

“Well, as un-human as she seems most of the time, your Mom is still a human being, Rob. Human beings need Love. But you’re probably right. I can’t imagine Gertrude and your Mom kissing. But who knows? Stranger things have happened.” Robin made a face like he had just smelled a bad fart.

“Yuck. I’d rather not imagine my Mom kissing anyone. It’s just too weird.” Robin laid back on Gene’s pillow. Gene got up and walked to her side of the closet and opened the door.

“Yeah. It is kinda strange thinking of your Mom being affectionate with anyone.” Gene pulled a plush tracksuit out of the closet and tossed it on the bed then went to the dresser and dug out a tank top, panties and socks and tossed them on the bed too. Just as she was about to turn on the shower the land line rang. Robin answered it.

“Yes. This is Robin Randall.” Robin paused. Gene listened.

“Yes. I was at LAX yesterday.” he paused again. “Wait. What? No. I didn’t lose my wallet. I have it right here.” Robin picked up his wallet from the dresser and started to thumb through it looking to see if anything was missing. Everything seemed to be in its place.

“Oh, no. Someone must have picked that up. I did drop a ticket somewhere between terminals. What would someone want with my used ticket? That’s strange.” Robin returned his wallet to the dresser as he listened to the person on the other end. Gene turned on the water to heat up then stood in the doorway to hear the end of the conversation. Robin looked amused as he spoke.

“Well, I hope you find who that wallet belongs to. Mine’s here and I have no idea why anyone would have hung on to my ticket. Thanks anyway.” Robin hung up the phone and looked up at Gene who was now naked except for her slippers.

“Well, hey there naked lady. That was a strange call.”

Gene smiled and shook her boobs at Robin.

“Yeah. What was it all about? Someone had your plane ticket?”

Robin got up and gave Gene’s boobs a squeeze and her bum a light spank.

“Yeah. I dropped a used ticket somewhere between terminals at LAX and someone evidently picked it up and stuffed it in their wallet then lost their wallet. That was someone from the airport calling to see if I had my wallet. I guess there was no other ID. I should have said it was mine. Maybe there was some money in it.”

“Money but no ID and *your* plane ticket? That *is* strange.” Gene said as she stepped into the hot shower. “They were calling from the airport?” She asked over the sound of the water. Robin was peeing, seat down, next to the shower. “If you have the seat down be sure to wipe off any tinkle sprinkle you leave.” Gene instructed.

“How do you know that?” He asked her.

“Because we’ve known each other a very long time now.” Gene reminded him.

“Yeah. I just assume they were calling from the airport. I don’t know. Maybe it was just some schmuck who found the lost wallet and was trying to find who it belonged to. I’ll look at the caller ID.”

“You answered without looking at the caller ID?! What if it had been your mother?” Gene ridiculed.

“Yeah, well it wasn’t. Hold on.” Robin looked at the caller ID and saw the number had come up as unknown. “It came up unknown.” He told Gene over the sound of the water.

“Well, that could have been anyone. How’d they find you?” Gene wondered.

“The ticket had my name on it. We’re listed. I’m sure all they had to do was do a Google search.” Robin reasoned. Gene turned off the water.

“Leave the water running. I’m gonna shower again. It feels good to shower in my own shower with my own soap. Besides I need to wash my mother off of me.” Robin called to Gene in the bathroom. Gene turned the shower back on and started to pat herself dry with a towel.

“Did she touch you or something?” She asked. She’d want to shower too if Joan had touched her.

“Nah.” Robin replied. “Just being in her presence was enough to make me feel soiled.”

“Soiled? That’s a good word for how she makes a person feel. Soiled.” Gene repeated the word back to herself and wrapped up in the towel just as Robin squeezed past her and stepped, naked, into the shower behind her. Gene pinched his left bum cheek and giggled.

“You’re Mom’s a piece of work, but she made a nice piece of ass.” Gene joked. Robin pretended to be offended.

“Hey! I feel violated!” he laughed as he soaped himself up into a lather.

Gene pulled on her clothes and dried her hair then stuffed her feet into her slippers and disappeared into her painting studio before Robin was done in the shower.

In the mid day sunlight the painting looked a lot different. The figures were going to need a little more work. What had seemed like enough contrast in the late evening before while the paint was still fresh, now seemed much too flat to Gene. She extended her right index finger to test the texture of the paint. It was still tacky. She’d have to be careful working back into it with fresh paint. She squeezed a few colors onto her pallet then added some additional dry pigments and linseed oil. Once the dry material was totally mixed in with the wet ones she added a touch of solvent to help it dry a bit faster. Robin lightly knocked then opened the door just as Gene was finishing the last couple brush strokes.

“Ah. Not done, I see.”

“No. Things always look different in the morning.”

“What about the afternoon? It’s almost 2PM.” Robin stood at his wife’s side and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “When you’re done here how about we go out and pick up a couple groceries?” he asked. It would be nice to be out and about with her. Robin enjoyed traveling, meeting new people, and experiencing other cultures, but coming home was always his favorite part. Gene looked up at her husband as he considered her painting.

“Yeah. I’m done for now. I just need to clean out the brush and cover the paint.”

“OK. Meet you downstairs when you’re ready.” Robin gave Gene’s shoulders a little squeeze and kissed her above her ear before leaving the room and heading down the stairs. Gene cleaned her brush in solvent and set it aside to dry, then covered the unused paint with plastic wrap and dumped the used solvent in the sealed solvent and paint disposal can. Then she washed her hands, stuffed her feet into a pair of flip-flops and grabbed her purse. Peeking out the window in the bathroom she saw Robin drop the bag of poop in the empty trash can at the foot of the driveway then drag the otherwise empty cans back up to the house. When Gene came down the stairs Robin was headed to the kitchen to wash his hands.

“Gertrude is down there in her yard talking to old Pat.” Robin informed Gene.

“What? I haven’t seen Pat talk to anyone in at least three years. The last time I saw him talking to anyone on the street it was when we had that power outage when that tornado took out the junction box down on John R. Did she see you?” Gene went to the front window to look down the street. “Are you sure that’s Pat and not Connor?” She said to Robin who was looking over her shoulder out the window and drying his hands on his thighs.

“Yeah. That’s Pat alright. He’s actually a little beefier than Connor is these days.”

Gertrude was standing in her roses in one of her horrid muumuus while Pat was shaking his finger at her angrily from the sidewalk.

“Shit! I wish I were a beetle on those roses right now.” Gene said to Robin.

“Don’t cha know it! Thank God my mother seems to have gone home. Whatever is going on down there she’d only make worse, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, well, let’s get going. I don’t want to waste any more energy on this today. Let’s go.” Gene slung her purse over her shoulder and motioned to Robin to follow her to the door. Robin dropped the curtain and produced his keys from his pocket. When they got out to the car they could hear Gertrude yelling at Pat.

“I told you, I don’t know where that idiot boy of yours is. Last I saw him was two days ago when I paid him for taking my trash out and mowing the lawn.” It was obvious that Pat didn’t believe her.

“I don’t know what all he does down here for you, but just do this for me. Leave my boy alone. Something isn’t right and you’re not his mother. You aren’t even a fraction of the woman my Gloria was.” Pat’s voice was shaking with anger. Robin turned to Gene.

“Think I should go see what’s going on down there?” He asked her. Gene didn’t take her eyes off the scene in the roses.

“No. She’ll just tell your mother and then who knows what fresh hell that will unleash.” Gene reasoned then turned and got in the passenger side of the Grand Cherokee. It still faintly smelled of the take out from last night. Robin hopped in the drivers seat. “Yeah. You’re probably right. Now, why don’t you make a quick list while we’re on our way.” Robin suggested as he backed out of the driveway and down the street away from Gertrude and Pat and the roses.

A couple blocks away Connor was on the corner with yet a different bike talking to a couple boys five or six years younger than him. Robin pulled up next to them and rolled down Gene’s window. Connor looked startled as he looked over at Gene. Gene was astonished. Robin was right. Connor looked just awful. The other two boys took off running. Robin spoke to Connor from behind Gene.

“Connor, dude, you better go home. You’re dad’s looking for you down at Gertrude’s and it looked like they were ready to duke it out down there.”

“Whatever man.” was all Connor said, but he did hop on the bike and head in the direction of his house.

“You’re right. He looks like he could drop dead at any minute. It’s gotta be drugs.” Gene said watching Connor disappear behind them in the car’s mirror.

“Who knows? Probably.” Was all Robin replied.

Gene opened her grocery list app on her phone and started to check items off. The kitchen was pretty empty. She had only gone to the market once while Robin was gone. She had mostly gone out to eat or finished odds and ends of stuff in the pantry and freezer for the past three weeks. When she wasn’t freaking out about the mystery door knocker, her new paintings had been consuming her. She really hoped Mort was going to show the new series this fall. It was what they had discussed after the last exhibition. This was the first time in years that she was including figures in her compositions. Morton had been pretty successful selling the abstracts in the bright pallet that she has been doing for the past decade. It might be hard convincing him to show the new work. It was so very different from the other works she made. Sure, there were thematic and compositional continuities, but the new work just looked so different. She liked it, she wasn’t sure Morton and her collectors were going to feel the same way. Collectors could be so fickle.