

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 8

It's Kind Of A Little Business

Pat turned away from Gertrude while she was in mid sentence. He couldn't look at the woman one second longer without striking her and Pat wasn't one to hit a woman. He knew she had something to do with what was wrong with his boy. Connor still did whatever Pat asked of him, but when he was home these days he took his frozen dinners and hid in his bedroom. It had been years since Pat had tried making a home cooked meal, but until Connor had started working for Gertrude he at least used to sit at the table with his father. Pat was beside himself. Dinner with his son had been the last remnant of the normal family life he had shared with his wife and he missed it more than he realized.

"Maybe if you came out of your house now and then and interacted with the World like a normal human being your son wouldn't be so fucked up..." The sound of Gertrude's crackling old-woman voice trailed off behind Pat as he trod up the street back towards his home. As Pat reached the foot of his driveway Connor pulled up on his bike, hopped off and walked to the front door with his father in silence. Old Pat dug around in his front right pocket for the key and opened the door. Connor slid in behind him with the bike and tucked it against the wall just inside the front sitting room of the disheveled house.

"Well, it's about time you came home, boy." Pat muttered at Connor. The two men headed for the kitchen instinctively.

"You hungry?" Pat asked as he opened the freezer and pulled out two Stouffer's frozen mac and cheese dinners.

"Yeah. I could eat one of those." Connor replied and sat down at the table pulling out his cell phone scrolling through something on the screen while Pat peeled up the corners of the containers and turned the oven on to pre-heat.

"I hear you were chatting with Gert, Dad. You guys dating now?" Connor joked in an ambivalent tone.

Pat opened the oven door and snorted as he placed the two frozen meals on the shelf. He closed the oven door with a snap and turned to look at his son who was still engrossed with whatever was on the screen of his phone.

"I beg your pardon?" Pat cocked his head to one side then lurched forward smacking the phone from his son's hands. Connor was shocked. His father hadn't been physical with him since he was thirteen and had complained about his new glove not being the one he really wanted. Pat

had been between jobs at the time and money had been tight. The purchase of the glove had been a hardship and Gloria had given up coffee, her *only* extravagance, for more than three weeks to make room in the budget for her son's desire to play ball. It was the only time Pat had ever struck the boy and he had beaten the crap out of him; leaving Connor with a black eye and bruised ribs. They didn't speak for a month and Connor had never complained about his gear again. Gloria had cried herself to sleep for a week after. Pat vowed to her that he would never strike the boy again. Now, in the kitchen, frozen dinners in the oven and Gloria long dead, Pat stared his startled son down reconsidering his vow.

"Boy, I don't know what you've gotten yourself into, but in case you haven't noticed you look like you could be Mrs. Donovan's boyfriend these days. Are you sick or what?" Pat coldly asked his son. Connor was scared. Pat could take him. They both knew it.

"I...I...I'm just not all that hungry most days. I guess I miss Mom." Connor stammered and picked up his phone from the floor where it had landed. The screen was cracked. He stuffed the thing in his pocket and looked away from his father.

"Bullshit. Why do you miss her any more today than you did a year ago when you still looked like a young man? Are you sick? Do you need to see a doctor?" Pat asked again, the volume of his voice raising as the tone dropped deeper. Connor looked at his hands in his lap. He knew his father was right. He could see he didn't look good. He wasn't blind.

"I don't know, Dad. I'll try to eat more." He turned his hands over in his lap considering his boney wrists.

"And just what all do you do for that psychedelic widow down there anyway? She said something about taking out her trash and mowing her lawn. What else do you do for her and what is she paying you?" Pat pressed his son for details.

"I don't know Dad. Yeah...I mow the lawn and take out her trash and sometimes I change her cat's litter boxes or fix the screen door. That kind of shit. She doesn't have a kid of her own you know. And it's none of your business what she pays me."

"I'll decide what is and what isn't my business around here and as long as you aren't paying me any rent I want to know what she pays you and just what you're spending it on. Is that a new bike out there? It looks kind of girlie don't ya think?"

"Aw, come on Dad. She pays me like \$50 or somethin'. And the bike's not new. It's used. I traded my old one with a guy at the park the other day."

“For that?! You traded your old bike for that one? What the hell was wrong with the other one? Or the one before that? Why are you trading bikes all the time with some guy at the park and who the hell is this guy at the park? Shit doesn’t add up Connor. Shit just doesn’t add up here.” Connor got up and tried to leave the table but Pat blocked him from doing so.

“You just sit your ass back down right there. We are going to have a conversation and eat this meal together and you are going to give me some answers or there’s gonna be rent to pay. Do you understand me? My pension pays for everything you see here and it doesn’t go as far as it used to these days.”

Connor sat back down as his father had instructed him.

“Geez. Okay. Sorry.”

“Yeah, you’re sorry alright. A sorry sack of shit. Now, what’s going on with the bikes?”

Connor sighed and looked at the table in front of him as he answered Pat.

“It’s kind of a little business I have. I buy beat up old bikes from this guy, Sid, down at the park and fix ‘em up and sell em to a shop out in Royal Oak for up to three times what I get em for from Sid.”

This was mostly a lie. The truth was Sid and Connor stole the bikes, then Connor fixed anything they broke in the process of stealing them and repainted them down in Gertrude’s back yard. Then he and Sid put them in the back of Sid’s van and sold them to a shop off Main near the post office in Royal Oak and another one out near the Heidelberg Project. It was a pretty good little business they had going. They pulled in anywhere from \$300 to \$1000 every week and split it fifty-fifty. The bike Connor had to work on right now was, in fact, a girls bike. The shop in Royal Oak had specifically requested a couple girls bikes. Connor was going to airbrush a unicorn on this one. Details like that bumped up the price he could get by at least forty percent. Between the bikes and selling the pills Gert gave him for the little errands he ran for her, Connor was able to support his meth habit, pay for his phone, and buy beer. Until now Pat had never shown any interest.

The timer on the stove dinged and shook both men out of their trance. Pat grabbed an oven mitt and pulled out the steaming boxes of mac and cheese sitting them on thick paper plates before bringing them to the table. He sat one at his place and one in front of Connor who got up and grabbed a couple forks from the drying rack next to the sink. He handed one to his father as they both sat down. Pat bowed his head.

“Bless us oh, Lord and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.” Pat recited without even thinking about it.

Connor waited until his father finished before carefully peeling open the boxed meal and taking a bite. Pat took a couple bites while watching his son lift the fork to his mouth. Connor's teeth were looking pretty bad.

"So, this Sid and this bike business...when did this start? Where's this Sid from?" Pat inquired skeptically.

"Oh, we've been working together for about a year now. I met him at the park one day when I was out looking for work." Connor lied. He never went to the park except when he was looking to score some meth. He met Sid a few years ago at a show at the Phoenix Center. He just happened to see Sid steal some chick's purse and for some reason decided to cover for him. When a bouncer went after him, Connor had nonchalantly extended his right foot and tripped the obese fuck as he ran past him after Sid. Connor then followed Sid out of the venue and onto the street and demanded a cut for his assistance. Sid had laughed as they slipped down an alley and dumped out the contents of the bag. Thirty dollars and some change, a card for the People Mover, a gas card and a Swiss Army knife. The two guys had marveled at how she had gotten the knife past the door check.

"Lookin' for work at the park, eh?" Pat licked some noodle from his incisor. He wasn't buying it, but wasn't going to call his son out just yet. "So, how much you buy these bike for from Sid?" Connor chewed slowly and looked at his Dad.

"It varies. Like, thirty to fifty bucks depending on what they are and how messed up they are." It was plausible given the story he told about his deal with Gert.

"Yeah? And then how much do you sell 'em to the shop for and what do they sell 'em for?" Connor was actually kind of enjoying this shop talk with his Dad. It almost felt like a normal conversation and they hadn't had one of those since before his mother died.

"Like I said before, it varies. If the bike is something special and I've done a cool paint job I've gotten as much as two hundred and fifty dollars. But usually it's seventy five to a hundred bucks. The last fancy one I did sold out of the store for almost a thousand bucks!" Connor said pleased with himself.

"A thousand bucks?! Why don't you just sell the bikes yourself. We could get your cousin Elizabeth to make you a website. You're throwing money away selling them to this shop. We could use that income around here. Maybe hire a cleaning service to get this place straightened up." Pat was flabbergasted. He had no idea his son even had these skills let alone that kind of money in his pocket. "Where you working on these bikes? Because it sure as hell ain't in my garage."

Connor felt a little nervous now at his father's unexpected support.

"Um, well, I don't really want to sell 'em myself. Then I'd have to keep inventory. The shop has clients already. Gert, I mean, Mrs. Donovan lets me use her husband's old shop in the back yard to work on 'em."

Gertrude's late husband, Felix, had liked to work on cars in his spare time. He did custom paint jobs on the side for extra cash. One day Gertrude had sent Connor out to the garage to poke around for some tools to fix a kitchen cabinet and he saw the bench and the air brush machine and asked her about it. She had told him he was welcome to use the shop after he was done doing chores and odd jobs for her. So far it had been working out well. It kept the stolen merchandise out of his house and in an unsuspected yet safe place. Gertrude hardly ever left the house except with that bitchy friend of hers, Joan. Pat and Felix had been in a bowling league together back in the day at Rochester Bowl. While they hadn't really been friends they *had* been friendly. So Pat didn't think anything of it. Connor saw the belief on his father's face and relaxed a bit, taking another bite of mac and cheese.

"Ah, well, you're probably right about that there. Having an inventory of bikes here would probably just invite thieves." Pat shoveled his last bite of mac and cheese into his face and wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist as he pushed up out of his chair. He tossed the empty container and used plate in the trash and gave his fork a quick rinse in the sink and placed it back in the drying rack. Then he turned to the fridge and opened it, bending over to look at the bottom shelf.

"So these bikes are where you been gettin' beer money then?" Pat said as he turned from the refrigerator closing the door behind him and popping the tab on a can of PBR. "Sounds like you could be buyin' something a little better than PBR, son." Pat said with some amount of approval in his voice. Connor smiled. It was the first time in a long time his father had any amount of approval for him in his voice.

"Whadya mean? You order PBR when we go to the bar." Connor laughed.

"Well yeah. I'm a cheap date. But here in the castle it would be nice to have something a little more high brow. Like maybe some Bells or something." Pat took a long swig from the can. "You want one, boy?" He asked his son holding the can up slightly.

"Yeah. Sure." Connor said.

Pat turned back around and grabbed a can from the refrigerator and tossed it across the room to Connor who simply raised his arm and grabbed it out of the air.

“See there!? You still got it my boy! Just like catching everything that Billy Swanson from Auburn Hills hit at you!”

Connor blushed. Pat belched and patted his stomach as he sat back down next to his son.

Connor cracked the beer and Pat bumped cans with him.

“To your Mother!” he announced.

“To Mom.” Connor toasted in return.

Pat finished the beer and swiped up Connor’s now finished plate and fork from the table while Connor took a drink of the beer.

“Next time you take a bike down to this shop I’d like to come along.” Pat told his son.

Connor almost snarfed the beer he had in his mouth out his nose.

“Um, I don’t think that would be a good idea, Dad.”

“What? Why not? I won’t say anything. I’d just like to see some of your work.”

“Sid doesn’t like people in his van other than me.”

“That’s fine. I’ll follow down behind you guys. What’s the shop called?”

“Seriously, Dad. It’s not a good idea. The guy who buys the bikes doesn’t even really like me. He just says he sells more of my bikes than anyone else’s. He said if my paint jobs weren’t so good he’d take me out back and knock some sense into me, or somethin’ like that.”

This was not a lie. Dirk, from the shop in Royal Oak, had told him that more than once and he believed him. Dirk didn’t have patience for tweekers like him and Sid.

“Ah well, at least show me this bike you have out there by the door when you’re done with it before you sell it.” Pat requested jovially. Connor smiled.

“Sure thing, Pop.” He said and finished his beverage. Connor got up and headed for the bike in the other room. Pat belched again and called after him.

“Hey! Where you off to now? You wanna watch the Tigers with me here in a bit? Maybe drink a couple more beers with your old man?” It was the first time since Connor’s twenty first birthday that Pat had invited his son to drink with him, or watch a game. Connor almost said yes.

“Sorry, Pop. I have a bit of a deadline. I gotta get this thing down to Gert, I mean, Mrs. Donovan’s place and get started.”

“Maybe next time then, son.” Pat said and shooed his boy with his hand as he walked out the door. Pat smiled to himself thinking maybe that old bat Gertrude was right. Maybe it was time he started to get out more.

Connor pushed the bike to the end of the driveway and hopped on heading to Gertrude's house. She had told him not to come around for a while, but this bike was a special order. He needed to get started. Plus, Sid had two more girl's bikes waiting in the wings for him to refinish. He hadn't helped lift those two, just this one. Shelby Township had been easy pickings last week, Sid told him. He said something about those farm folks out there not even locking their garages at night and that the first two houses he hit had exactly what they were looking for. Connor didn't care. He had been thinking about telling Sid he wasn't interested in helping him steal the bikes anymore. He just wanted to do the refurb work. He was also thinking he wanted to ask Gertrude for a raise. This last thing with the dog shit had been gross and besides, he didn't have anything against Gene and Robin. They had always been nice to him and his family and Gene made really good cake. He wasn't sure why Gertrude and her friend Joan hated Gene, but lesbians didn't make sense to him in general, unless they were young, cute, and willing to let him watch, which none he had ever known were. The one time he walked in on Gertrude and Joan kissing and groping each other he had thrown up in his mouth a little, but that might have just been because he hadn't had his fix yet. Joan had grabbed his arm hard enough to leave a bruise and told him if he told anyone what he saw she would cut his nuts off, and he believed her. Joan was mean. Gertrude was crotchety a lot of the time, but Joan was just plain mean. He didn't like her and she didn't like him. He kind of felt bad for Gert and if he hadn't seen her and Joan going at it, he might have suggested his Dad ask her out for lunch some time.

Connor pulled the bike around to Gertrude's back door and propped it against the siding and let himself in with the key she had given him a couple weeks before. The litter needed changed. There was a new bag on the floor behind the door. He bent down to start the dirty job and one of Gertrude's cats darted out of the box. Gertrude yelled from deep in the house.

"Joan, is that you?"

"No, Gert. It's me. I'm here to change the litter for you." Connor offered hopefully.

"Connor?! Your fuddy-duddy of an old man was down here earlier looking for you and giving me a hard time. Besides, I told you to not come around for a while."

Connor could hear Gertrude's footsteps and tell by the sound of her voice she was coming back to talk to him. He stood up with the litter scooper in one hand waiting for her. In a moment she was standing in front of him with one of her sauced up bottles of Crystal Light.

"I'm sorry Gert. I know what you said, but you need my help. You can't do this and God knows Joan ain't gonna do it for you." Connor smiled at Gertrude sympathetically. Gertrude softened at

his genuine affection. She knew he was right and she was grateful for the help. She and Felix had never been able to have any children and it had never really bothered her until he passed away and was reminded of his absence every time she couldn't bend over to pick something up or needed to go to the store or the grass needed cut around her precious roses. The doctor had told her before Felix had even gotten sick that she needed to have her hip replaced, but she wasn't interested in being cut up and pinned back together. What her methadone didn't take care of the vodka did and what those things didn't cover Joan or Connor did. In a strange way she realized she loved Connor. Gertrude sighed and pat the boy on the arm.

"Oh, Connor, you're right. But if Joan comes over you'll need to go. Does your Dad know you're OK? He was worried. If I had known where you were I would have told him." Gertrude turned back towards her kitchen. Connor resumed cleaning up the cat litter mess.

"Yeah. I just had lunch with him. I told him about the bikes. He knows I'm down here." he spoke loudly so she could hear him in the other room while he worked. There were a total of four litter boxes and Gertrude had at least eleven cats. A few years ago she had almost thirty, but Animal Services had been called by the next-door neighbor and they had taken all but four. Now she was back up to eleven or twelve. Connor couldn't be sure. He just knew it was a whole lot of cat shit.

"You told him about the bikes?! Damn it, now he'll be down here looking for you all the time."

Gertrude said from the kitchen. Connor thought he could smell cookies or something baking.

"No he won't. Hey, are you baking something in there?" Gertrude made pretty good chocolate chip cookies and Connor liked cookies.

"I have some of those cookies you like in the oven right now. They're almost done. You can have a couple when you're done in there." Gertrude told him.

"Great! Thanks! Hey, you have more than this one bag of litter here? You know each box takes one bag."

"Yeah. I have three more bags in the sitting room. Come get them."

"I will. I'm just gonna take these out back and spray them out first."

"OK. Sounds good." Gertrude said just as the buzzer went off for the stove. Even over the pungent stink of cat pee and shit Connor's mouth watered as the smell of the cookies wafted into the utility room from the kitchen. He took the litter boxes out one by one and dumped the used litter into the trash can then laid the boxes and their lids on the cracked patio so he could spray them out with the hose. Then he went back in to sweep the loose litter from the floor while the boxes dried in the sun. He entered the kitchen and saw the cookies on the counter cooling

with one of Gertrude's cats sitting next to them looking at them. The cat knew they were hot. He shooed the giant tabby from the counter and headed to the sitting room where he found Gertrude crocheting, her sauced up Crystal Light on the table and the Tigers game on the TV. The opening pitch had just been thrown. He thought about his Dad down at their house watching the game and drinking alone too and thought it was sad they couldn't all be doing what they were all doing right now, but together, like a family. He looked from Gertrude to the screen and felt a pang of jealousy for the pitcher on the mound. It was an away game. It should be him on that mound. Gertrude saw the look on his face and felt pity for the boy. With her crochet hook she pointed at the bags of litter by the front door.

"There's the litter, Connor."

"Yeah. I see it." Connor snapped out of his sad day dream and headed for the bags. As he lifted all three up in his arms awkwardly, he looked at Gertrude again. "Hey, Gert?" he started.

"What's that, Dear?" Gertrude replied sweetly.

"Gert, are you like a total lezbo or do you still like dicks too?" He asked her surprising even himself at his boldness.

"Now what the hell kinda question is that?" Gert laughed. Connor shifted his weight and balanced the bags of litter.

"Oh I didn't mean to..." he started but Gertrude interrupted him.

"Oh, it's OK. No. I'm not a *total* lezbo. I'm bi. I just happen to love Joan."

The old woman laughed again and took a drink from her bottle. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh I don't know. I just see you up here watching the game and having a drink and my Dad's down there watching the game and drinking beer and..." Gertrude interrupted him again.

"And you thought we could all be broken together." Gertrude smiled and Connor blushed.

"Well, yeah, I guess. Something like that."

"Connor, your father wouldn't touch me with a ten foot pole. He reminded me this morning that I'm not half the woman his Gloria was and he's right. I'm not. I could never fill in for your Mom. But you can consider me like an Aunt if it makes you feel better."

It did make Connor feel better.

"Yeah? Can I call you Aunt Gert then?" Connor's mother had been an only child and his father's family lived in Alberta. While they got Christmas cards from them every year, they never saw them, not even at his mother's funeral.

"Sure, Sweetie. You can call me Aunt Gert. I think I like that." And she did. Gertrude's sister died a few years before Felix, and her kids were snobby. Alice had married into Gross Point money

and Gertrude and Felix had never been invited for holidays or anything else. The only time any of Alice's family wanted anything to do with her was when her husband Steve's brother, Jack, wanted his Bel Air redone for the Dream Cruise a year before Felix got sick. It was the last car Felix had painted and he had charged Jack twice what he would have anyone else, not because he needed or wanted the money, but to, in some small way, make up for the hurt the snubbing had caused Gertrude over the years. Gertrude loved her sister and missed her company and friendship. Felix had been like that. Gertrude had told Joan once he was a man of Principle. Joan said he was just an asshole. Joan was wrong and Gertrude understood why Joan felt that way. She was jealous. Joan was jealous of the spot Felix held in Gertrude's heart and the fact that she had actually loved him and wanted to be his wife; unlike Joan who had always only been attracted to women and hid it to appease her parents. The two women argued about this from time to time. It hurt Gertrude, but sometimes Felix had hurt her feelings too. Love was love no matter what, dick or no dick.

Connor passed by Gertrude with the bags of litter. "Thanks, Aunt Gert."

"You're welcome." she said to his back as he disappeared through the kitchen to finish changing the cat litter. "Don't forget to have a couple of those cookies when you're done. And bring me one too!"

"No problem, Aunt Gert." Connor yelled back from the utility room.

Connor brought the bottoms of the four boxes back into the small room and arranged them the way the cats were accustomed and filled them each with a bag of litter. Then he retrieved the lids and swept up the loose litter that hadn't made it into any box before he went into the kitchen and washed his hands. The tabby was back on the counter looking at the cookies.

"Aunt Gert, one of your cats is in here on the counter with the cookies!" He yelled to the front room.

"Oh, that's Sheeba. She won't touch them. She just likes to look at them for some reason.

Cookies and bread both. She sits and watches them on the counter." Gertrude explained over the sounds of the game.

Connor reached out and rubbed the cat's ears. "Good Sheeba! Make sure no one steals Aunt Gert's cookies." The cat pressed her head into his hand and purred. Connor pulled a couple paper towels from a roll next to the sink and put two cookies on either one. With two cookies in either hand he walked back into the sitting room and sat on the chair next to the couch where Gertrude was seated and placed one paper towel with cookies on the table next to her drink.

Then he took a bite of one of his cookies and looked at the TV. “Mmmm. Still warm.” He mumbled with his mouth full.

Gertrude picked up a cookie and shoved half of it in her mouth all at once. “Mmmhmm.” She agreed.

Connor slowly enjoyed his cookies for fifteen minutes or so and watched the game in silence with his Aunt Gert. When he was done he stood up.

“I’m gonna go work in the shop for a bit, Aunt Gert.”

“OK, Sweetie. Be a Dear and lock the back door on your way out, and stay as long as you like, unless Joan shows up. If she comes over, don’t let her see you, Just slip away when she’s not looking.”

“OK, Aunt Gert. And...”

“And what, Dear?” Gertrude asked softly.

“And, thank you, Aunt Gert. I love you.”

“I love you too, Sweetie.”

Connor turned quickly and did as he was told. Gertrude wept quietly after she heard the back door lock.