

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 9

It's Gonna Sell Out!

Meijer's was a zoo and Robin and Gene almost had a fender bender in the parking lot leaving the store. Two older women, one in a late 90's Cadillac and the other in a recent model Prius, were both trying to pull into the same handicap space and nearly collided. Then, when the Cadillac backed up to avoid hitting the Prius, she almost backed into the Grand Cherokee before Robin had even turned the key in the ignition. Robin vowed to never shop at the store again, but Gene reminded him he said that almost every time they made a trip to the store together. Robin sighed as he looked at the two older women yelling at each other in his rearview mirror and was reminded of his mother. Everything seemed to make him think of his mother these days. It was starting to get on his nerves and make him avoidant of older women in general. When they were checking out he had made Gene wait in a long line just to avoid an older woman cashier at a register that opened just as they approached the check-out area. When Gene protested he pretended to not hear her.

Now back at the house, Robin brought the last bag of groceries in from the car and sat it on the kitchen counter while Gene was busy putting things away.

"Did you not want to use that check out lane because of the cashier?" Gene asked Robin without looking up, trying to fit things in the pantry. Robin was startled by her observation.

"Yeah. I'm sorry. It's just all this shit with my Mom has me seeing her everywhere I look. I can't stand old women right now." he explained. It never ceased to amaze him how Gene always seemed to know these things about him, often before he had even figured it out himself. But this time, he knew what was going on.

"Well, I can understand where you're coming from, but you do realize not all old women are like your Mom or Gertrude, right? I mean, it's not fair to write off all old women just because your Mom's nuts." Gene pressed. After all, one day she would be an old woman. Was he going to avoid her once he decided she was an 'old woman' too?

"I know. Don't get on me about it right now, OK? I just want to go lie down. I'm tired." Robin walked over to Gene and kissed her brow. Gene touched Robin's face and watched him lumber to the living room to lie down on the couch. She heard the TV flick on and an announcer say something about the Tiger's line up and stats. Gene backed up against the counter spreading her weight to either hand outstretched on either side of her against the edge of the granite

countertop and looked over the center island into the dining room. The light was cutting through the room at an obtuse angle illuminating the four chairs at the dining room table that remained empty unless they had company. She looked to her left and saw the photo from Robin's 40th birthday hanging on the fridge. Joan was seated next to Gene at the table glaring an expression of disapproval at her. The waiter had taken it just moments before the incident that caused Robin to demand his mother and Gertrude to leave. Gene's eyes welled up with tears. She cried silently as she finished putting the last few things away: a block of cheese, some mayo, orange juice, pickles, beer. Then she grabbed a tumbler from the cabinet and poured herself a finger of vodka over a couple ice cubes and topped it off with some peach flavored seltzer they had just brought home that wasn't cold yet. She took a sip and sat the drink on the center island then splashed her face with cold water and pat it dry with a fresh paper towel.

"You wanna beer?" she called to Robin in the other room.

"Yeah. Sure. That'd be great. One of those new IPA's we just got would hit the spot."

Gene opened the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle with what looked like an artichoke flying through space on the label and popped it open. She dug in a cupboard under the island and produced a large aluminum bowl and filled it with half a bag of salt and vinegar potato chips. Then she balanced the bowl on her left forearm with her drink in her left hand, and grabbed Robin's beer with her right hand and headed into the living room to join her husband.

In the living room Robin was stretched out on his side with his head propped up with both a pillow and his arm. There was a hole in the toe of his sock. Gene was always telling him to throw away such socks and let her know so she could pick up some new ones. Hell, they were just at Meijer. They could have grabbed a couple pair then if she had known. Gene sat the open beer and the bowl of chips on the table in front of her husband and settled herself with her drink in the chair next to the sofa where guests usually sat. Robin propped himself up to sitting and snatched his beer and a handful of chips from the table.

"Whatcha' drinkin'?" he asked her stuffing the chips in his mouth and taking a swig of beer.

"Vodka and seltzer." she answered flatly. Robin frowned a little. He could tell she had been crying. Her eyelashes were stuck together a little and her eyes looked pinkish.

"What's wrong, Babe?" he inquired. Gene's eyes welled up again but she held the tears back.

"Nothing. Well, nothing that has any answer or quick fix. I guess I'm just tired too." she answered as she wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist and took a sip of her drink.

"Aw come on." Robin pressed.

“Aw come on nothing. You told me not to get on you about it, so I’m not. Look, I know she’s your mother, but it’s real hard on me too, you know. Just watch the game. It’s OK. It’s not like we can solve anything by talking about it anyway. Nothing can solve your mother.” Gene tossed back her almost full drink and got up abruptly to go to the kitchen and refill her glass.

“You still interested in going out for dinner?” Robin called after her.

“Yeah. I was thinking Ram’s Horn or something like that.” Gene called back. Robin could hear the cork of the vodka pop out of the bottle.

“Well, then, you better not plan on getting ripped.” he teased.

Gene reappeared with a fresh drink and another beer for Robin as well. She sat it on the table next to his still half full bottle and grabbed a few chips. They made a satisfying crunch in her mouth.

“Yeah, you know me. Drunk and disorderly at the Ram’s Horn every Sunday night!” Gene joked back at him.

“Well, you’d probably fit right in at The Horn.” Robin laughed.

“What? Not on a Sunday evening. Maybe a Friday or Saturday night, but not Sunday. It’s church day.” Gene smiled. Gene’s chair was facing the front window and the drapes were open.

Through the smudged looking glass she saw Connor walking, hands stuffed in his pockets looking at the ground, towards his house. He stopped for a moment in front of the Randall’s house and seemed to look straight at Gene, but she knew he probably couldn’t see her because of the way the light hit the glass from outside. She thought he looked kind of sad.

“I hope it’s not Connor who has been playing the knocking game on our door.” she said to Robin just as the Tigers got a third out and the crowd cheered. It was an away game against the Cardinals.

“Me too.” Robin said. “Speaking of games, I don’t think we’re gonna pull this one off today. Two more innings but they’re up by like ten. We need a new short stop. Geez!” Robin chugged the remaining beer and picked up the fresh bottle, holding it on his knee. He pat the seat next to him on the couch. “Hey. Why don’t you come over here next to me?” he offered coyly as Gene’s cell phone rang in her purse hanging on the back of one of the dining room chairs.

“In a second.” she said as she got up to answer the phone. It was Mort. Normally she didn’t bother doing business on Sundays, but Mort was Jewish and never remembered that. Gene answered the phone. Robin muted the game and listened to her end of the conversation.

“Hey Mort....No. I’m not busy. Just having a drink and watching the game with Robin...Yeah. He got home on Friday...Yes. I’m glad he’s home too...Sure. That works just fine. We were gonna

go down to the Ram's Horn later. You wanna join us? We can discuss the details over dinner... Great. See you in a bit then." and she hung up the phone. As she walked back into the living room Robin was looking at her expectantly.

"Well? What was that about? Is he coming over here now?"

"Yeah. Well, in about an hour, to look at the paintings. Then he's gonna go to dinner with us."

Gene explained.

"Well, thank God we're only going to The Horn. You know the way he eats and since we invited, you know he's gonna expect me to pay." Robin said half joking half not. Mort was a portly man and the only thing he enjoyed more than a free meal was selling Art. Gene laughed.

"I'm gonna go up to the studio and arrange the paintings for him." Drink in one hand she swiped a handful of chips from the bowl before kissing Robin on the tip of his nose and disappearing up the stairs.

"OK." he said as he turned the volume back up on the game. The Cards had just scored three more runs off a missed throw from the outfield.

"Aw. Come on fellas! You got holes in your gloves or what?!" he yelled at the screen.

Upstairs Gene let out a short quiet laugh at her husband as she closed herself in her studio.

She sat her drink on a table and considered the most recent painting, complete and drying on the easel, as she crunched on the chips one by one. It was finally finished and she was pleased with it. She thought this series might be complete but wasn't 100% sure just yet. She wanted to get Mort's feedback and sleep on it for a couple nights before she made a final decision. If Mort didn't like the paintings it would kind of be a moot point. If he wasn't going to show them she would need to start a new series ASAP. But even if she needed to start a new series, if she decided *this* series wasn't finished she would continue to work on it for her own satisfaction. She was more excited about this work than she had been about any of her other work in quite a few years. The excitement and newness of it all was refreshing.

Gene finished her chips and wiped her hands on her backside before pulling the other completed paintings from the rack and placing them on the chair rail ledge Robin had installed for her last summer for just this purpose. She arranged them in chronological order of completion knowing that Mort would most likely move them around to see different compositions next to each other. The first time they had reviewed a finished series together she had been appalled when he started moving things around. But after the first exhibition nearly sold out hung in the order of Mort's choosing, Gene never challenged him again. Occasionally she

questioned his choices, and sometimes he used her suggested groupings, but Mort knew Art and he knew his clients, and Gene liked selling her work. Mort had been representing Gene exclusively in Michigan now for nearly eight years. She had representation at a gallery in Boca Raton and one in Chicago as well, but neither of them sold the volume that Mort sold out of his Birmingham gallery and last year he had even helped her get a piece placed at the DIA. It was her first piece in a museum and after that The Boston Museum of Fine Art had purchased two pieces and a small public museum in Northern California did an exhibition of one of her biggest collectors collection of her work. It had given her work a push which was part of what had made her decide to shift her composition recently. After talking with the curators in Boston and California she decided to allow her work to 'evolve in a new direction' as both curators had mentioned about other artists to which they had compared her work. They had both made comments about how it was gratifying for many collectors to watch and support their favorite artists' growth. She was ready to do something a little different anyway. Mort had been more skeptical. So, she was a little nervous about him finally coming over to see the new work. He had refused to come over and look at anything in progress like he normally did. He said something about not wanting to bias her process with his input.

Once Gene had all the paintings placed she stood finishing her drink looking at them. Glass now empty she headed back down the stairs for a refill. Robin was dozing on the couch, feet up on the worn arm and his mouth open. The bowl of chips was empty. Gene picked up the empty bowl and the one empty beer, his other beer was still about a quarter full, and headed to the kitchen. Just as she opened the vodka there was a loud knock at the front door. She heard Robin stir.

"I'll get it." he said sleepily.

"OK. Thanks." Gene called from the kitchen. She pulled another tumbler from the cabinet and mixed a vodka and seltzer for Mort too and headed to meet the two men in the living room. As Robin predicted, the Tigers had lost, but only by one run. They had a rally in the last inning and the Cards actually had to come back to win. When Gene entered the room Robin had turned the TV on mute and was standing in the middle of the room laughing with Mort who had a giant bandaid hanging loosely on his right cheek. Gene outstretched her arm handing him a drink as she gasped at the spectacle. Mort took the drink without question and took a sip.

"Well, what the hell happened to your face? Did Leah finally smack you one?" Gene joked. Mort's wife, Leah, was always threatening to smack the smile off his face when he made off

color jokes in her presence. Everyone knew she didn't mean it and Mort only made the jokes to get his wife's goat.

"What this?" Mort made a grand gesture with his right arm and hand pointing to the bandage.

"No. The crack in your ass. Yes. THAT." Gene laughed and held her glass up to cheers with Mort who obliged her gesture.

"No. I'd be missing half my face if Leah ever actually decided to give it to me. *This* is because I was at the doctor last week to look at the mole that was here and had to have it removed." Mort explained.

"Ah. I see." Gene replied shaking her head in understanding. Mort had a fair number of moles and had a few others removed from various spots over the years. "Was it serious this time?" Gene asked.

"Well, let's just say I'm glad it's gone. They said they got it all and I shouldn't have any more problems."

"Well, good." Gene said. "Are you ready to see these paintings or what? The one on the easel is still drying so don't touch it."

"Most definitely, my Dear. Let's go have a looky-loo." Mort began to follow Gene who was already headed for the stairs. Robin smiled.

"OK, you two. Have fun. I'm gonna finish my beer and then when you're done we can head to The Horn." he called after them as they disappeared up the stairs.

"Sounds like a plan." Mort laughed. "I'm famished!"

Robin chuckled to himself and sat back down on the couch to finish his beer and watch post game commentary.

Gene opened the door to the studio and ushered Mort in before her, then closed the door behind them. The routine went like this: Neither spoke. Mort would spend five or ten minutes looking over the work and rubbing his chin and holding his elbow. Then he would look Gene up and down with scrutiny before rearranging the order of the work. Then he would look at it again for five to thirty minutes and they would leave the room and discuss the work.

Mort stood in the middle of the room with his drink in one hand and his other hand over his mouth for a moment. Then he left the room closing the door and leaving Gene by herself, confused. Then he opened the door abruptly and burst into the studio once more stopping once again in the center of the room. Then he walked from piece to piece and inspected the images

with his face only a mere foot from the surface. When he had done this to each painting he slammed what remained of his drink and set the glass down with a thud on the table next to her pallet exclaiming, “Mozel tov!”, grabbed both of Gene’s hands and kissed the tops of her knuckles. Gene was in a state of shock. Mort had never had such a reaction to her work. He pat her on the shoulder and said, “Come. Let’s go have dinner and talk about this wonderful new work of yours, my Dear!”

Gene let out a laugh and Mort did the same as they headed back down the stairs.

Robin popped up off the couch and pulled his keys from his pocket. “I’ll drive.” he announced. “That’s OK. I’m going to follow you there because I need to get straight home after dinner. Leah made a pie and is insistent I have a piece or three before I go to bed.”

Gene was relieved. She wanted to tell Robin about Mort’s reaction before they sat down. Mort probably knew this and wanted to give them their privacy. Gene knew Leah never baked. Last time she had a party at the house she had asked Gene to bake a cake because she said the closest she got to baking was a potato pancake, and Mort always accepted when Robin offered to drive. Plus, he’d have to come back this way to go home anyway. Gene grabbed her purse from the dining room chair while Robin ushered Mort out the door. Gene was almost giddy getting in the Grand Cherokee. Robin knew something was up.

Once they were out of the driveway and Mort was in line behind them Robin couldn’t take the suspense any more.

“So! Tell me! What’s this all about!?” Robin was as excited as Gene and didn’t know why.

“Well. He looked at them for just a couple minutes with his mouth open as wide as a bagel then darted out of the room...then burst back in, then spun around and kissed both my hands after slamming his glass down and declaring ‘mozel tov!’ Then he pat me on the shoulder and wanted to go to dinner to talk about it!” Gene sounded like a teenager telling her best friend the star baseball player had asked her to prom.

“Well, that funny man!” Robin exclaimed with a chuckle. “He really is something. His wife hardly cooks let alone bake if I remember correctly. Right?”

“Yeah. I think he just knew I’d be excited to tell you.” Gene laughed with her husband.

“Well, that’s good news.” Robin let out a heavy breath.

“You’re tellin’ me!” Gene replied in a high pitch voice. “I was prepared to start a new series but still work on this one in my spare time, you know for my own gratification.”

“Oh yeah. All that spare time of yours. Were you planning on not talking to me anymore?” Robin joked. Gene smacked him on the thigh as they turned onto Hamlin and pulled into the Ram’s Horn parking lot.

“Hey, a girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.” She laughed as he pulled into a space near the door. Mort pulled in next to them in the handicap spot and hung a blue placard on the rearview mirror.

“Where’d you get that?” Gene asked Mort pointing to the placard as they got out of their cars.

“Oh, it happens when you get older, my Dear. The doctor said I need to be careful how much I walk out in the sun. He really wants me to wear a wide brim hat, but hats have never been my style. The only time I put anything on my head is for weddings, funerals, and bar mitzvahs. I refuse to go to any more bris’. Last one I went to, the Mohel had a cold sore!” Mort laughed and rushed to the door to open it for Gene and Robin. Robin looked at Gene quizzically. He had no idea what a Mohel was. Gene mouthed the words ‘I’ll tell you later’ as they entered the diner.

The hostess at the register just inside the door looked bored even though the restaurant was busy. They were lucky, though. There was no line and one booth was open in the far corner.

“How many?” The girl of about sixteen in an old-school style waitress uniform asked.

“Uh, three.” Robin responded looking from Gene to Mort.

The girl pulled three menus from a wall mounted basket and turned away from them saying, “Follow me.” which they did.

Before she smacked the menus down on the table the girl turned to the party of three and asked, “Coffee?”

Gene looked from Robin to Mort who both shook their head in a ‘Yes’ gesture before turning to the girl shaking her head yes and saying, “Yes. Three, please.”

The girl nodded in the same bored fashion as the rest of her communication and turned to the table. She slapped the menus at the end of the booth and reached across the table turning three coffee cups at three place settings upright and removing a fourth unneeded place setting with coffee cup. Then she turned back to Gene. “Someone will be right over.”

“OK. Thank you, young lady.” Mort offered.

The three piled into the booth. Robin sat next to Gene and Mort across from her. Robin handed the laminated tri-fold menus, damp with bleachy smelling water, to Gene and Mort before opening one for himself.

“Well, I know what I’m having!” Robin announced.

“What’s that?” Mort asked placing narrow reading glasses on his nose and peering down his nose at his menu.

“The chicken sub with fries. It’s a classic. And after, maybe a slice of banana cream pie.” Robin said decisively, smacking the menu shut and placing it on the table in front of him.

“Well, I’m gonna have the taco salad. That pie is all you, Rob. Anyone interested in splitting some cheese sticks with me?” Gene smiled folding her menu shut and lowering it to watch Mort agonize over all the options.

“Yeah. I’ll help you with that.” Robin told her enthusiastically.

“Me too.” Mort chimed in. “Now what do I feel like?” he said tapping the fingers of his right hand on the table. “Hmmm. I think I’ll start with a bowl of that cabbage soup. Then have the chicken fried steak with mashed potatoes and gravy. And Robin, if you’re really going to have that pie I think I will too!” Mort smiled as he folded his menu and placed it in front of him as a waitress not much older than the hostess approached the table with three glasses of water in one hand and a coffee pot in the other. Her short auburn hair was combed just so and her acrylic manicure was decorated with airbrushed dolphins and palm trees, a funny choice for Rochester Hills, Michigan, even in the summer. She sat the coffee pot on the edge of the table while she distributed the glasses of water. Then she picked up the steaming pot by the brown handle and filled the three upright mugs. Then with a placid smile she nodded at Robin and said, “I’ll be right back to take your order.”

“OK. Thank you,” Gene answered.

“Did you get a look at those nails?!” Robin excitedly whispered to Mort and Gene as the girl walked away.

“Yes. Maybe I’ll ask her who does them so I can offer them a show.” Mort goaded.

“Oh stop it you two. Leave her alone. I thought they were fun.” Gene reprimanded as the waitress approached again. She was smirking. When she reached the table she stopped and shifted her weight to her right hip and pulled a pad of order tickets and a pen out of her left pocket. Still smirking she looked at the men.

“Yeah. I know my nails are ridiculous, but it got you talking and that means a high probability of a higher tip. This is my job and I aim to please. Now what can I get for you?” she seemed pleased with herself and Gene covered her mouth to stifle a laugh as Robin and Mort both blushed with embarrassment.

"I'll have the taco salad with extra sour cream and salsa on the side, oh, and can I have an order of cheese sticks with marinara to start?" Gene ordered.

"Sure. Anything besides coffee and water?" the waitress asked.

"No."

"And for you, Sir?" the waitress looked at Mort.

"I'll start with a bowl of that delicious cabbage soup. Then the chicken fried steak with mashed potatoes and extra gravy..."

The waitress interrupted Mort. "Extra gravy is a dollar fifty. Is that OK?" she asked.

"Yes. Yes. I'm not paying tonight." Mort looked at Robin and laughed.

"On the side?" the waitress inquired.

"No. No. Put it all on there. Oh and, don't forget to come and ask about dessert later." Mort instructed.

"Not a problem." the waitress smiled and turned to Robin who was waiting his turn patiently.

"And for you, Sir?" she asked.

"I will have the chicken sub with fries." Robin replied.

"Anything else?" The waitress asked the table.

"We're probably going to want dessert." Robin told her.

"OK. The cheese sticks will be up shortly." the waitress said and turned back toward the kitchen.

Robin couldn't take the suspense any longer. He took a sip of his coffee looking at Mort who was stirring some cream into his and tapped the spoon on the rim of the thick stone wear mug.

"So! Whatcha think of Gene's new stuff, you old goat?!" he asked affectionately.

Mort looked at Robin intently as he took a calculated sip of his coffee. Then he slowly sat the mug down in front of him and arranged his place setting just so, smoothing the napkin on his lap before he looked at Gene and back to Robin.

"I fucking LOVE IT! It's gonna sell out!" Mort said a little too loud. A proper-church-looking family at an adjacent table turned abruptly to glare at them disapprovingly over their shoulders. Mort stuck his tongue out at them and laughed. Robin and Gene smiled.