

The Last Fan

A Play in One Act

By Pam Munter

“THE LAST FAN”

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JOAN DAVIS	A blowsy, alcoholic, former star, in her mid-fifties
LORENA	JOAN’S loyal maid
EDDIE CANTOR	JOAN’S former co-star, in his sixties
DONNA	A letter carrier, in her twenties
JERRY	JOAN’S agent (V.O. only)

TIME

Late 1950s

PLACE

An upscale, Palm Springs home; we can see a living room and a kitchen; front door stage right; living room nicely appointed with sofa, chairs, desk and TV; JOAN is watching TV

Five Scenes, all at JOAN’S house, all within a few weeks of each other

Scene 1

LORENA

Miss Davis, you ready for another?

JOAN

You know I am.

LORENA

It’ll just be a minute.

JOAN

You ever watch Jack Benny? It’s OK, Lorena. You can tell me.

LORENA

Oh, sometimes, Miss Davis. He’s very funny. I love Rochester. He really gives Mr. Benny a lot of heat, doesn’t he? Not that I’d ever do that.

JOAN

Where’s that drink?

LORENA

Coming. Gotta remember to order another case.

(LORENA delivers the drink, returns to the kitchen)

JOAN

He's good. Knows his pacing. Went to school in vaudeville like me. Jack was always wonderful to me back in those days. I wonder why he doesn't have me on his show.

LORENA

I can't say that I know, Miss Davis.

(JOAN gets up, turns off TV moves to the phone)

JOAN

I'm going to call Eddie. He said he'd call. Yesterday, in fact.

LORENA

Let me know if you need anything.

(JOAN is on the phone with EDDIE)

JOAN

Hi, sweetie. I'm missing you. Can you come over? Jack Benny's just over and--

EDDIE *(on phone)*

Hi, Joanie. Ida's here this weekend. Can't talk right now. I'll give you a call early next week. Just found out next month she's visiting her sister in New York. Gotta go.

JOAN *(on phone)*

Sure, sure. That's great. Now I have something to look forward to. Love ya. Bye

EDDIE *(on phone)*

Goodbye, my girl.

LORENA

That Mr. Cantor is such a nice man. You've known each other a long time, huh?

JOAN

You bet. We go back a long way. About thirty years, I'd say. We were both playing the Orpheum circuit on the East Coast, mostly.

LORENA

Movies, too, I know. I've seen the posters in the hall.

JOAN

Yeah (*laughs*). The RKO comedies in the forties. I knew he was married. I was too, but you know how things can happen on movie sets. You probably don't, actually. But they do. Trust me. We've had to be extra careful. If those gossip columnists found out, our careers would be over. Hedda, Louella, all of them. We've had a couple of close calls but good so far. Sure do like looking at those movie posters. Reminds me of who I used to be.

LORENA

How're you doing?

JOAN

I could use a refill.

LORENA

Oh, by the way, the mail is on the table. I think this is the third mailman we've had in just a couple of months. They get younger all the time, too. This one is a girl.

JOAN

Thanks. Hmmm. Here's a letter from an address I don't recognize. (*opens it*) Hey, it's a fan letter! Ha! Love those

(she reads)

"Dear Joan Davis. I just had to write to tell you how much I love your work with Desi Arnaz on '*I Love Lu--*.'" What? How could this idiot possibly confuse me with Lucille Ball? That bitch stole my act. She's not funny, either. Great writers, though. No talent, good writers. Makes a big difference. My show might have gone on longer if--

(phone rings; JOAN answers; the following is all on the phone)

JOAN

Hello?

JERRY

Hi, Joan. Am I interrupting anything?

JOAN

Hi, Jerry. No, not at all. Just opening my fan mail. You wouldn't believe it but I just got--

JERRY

Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, honey, but your pilot didn't sell. The network just tanked it.

JOAN

After all I've done for NBC. Well. Damn. My last chance, I'm afraid.

JERRY

No, no. Don't say that. You're a big talent. I'll find you something. They don't call me the best agent in Hollywood for nothing.

JOAN

Un huh. Everybody's making westerns now. I don't look good on a horse. Can't always tell us apart.

JERRY

(laughs) That's my star. Making jokes when ... well, look. That was a long shot as it was. Don't worry. We'll be fine. I'll talk to you soon.

JOAN

Yeah. Soon. Bye.

(LORENA enters)

LORENA

Miss Davis, if it's all right with you, I'm going to go home for a while. Something's going on with Leroy and—

(we hear two little dogs yapping frantically and splashing water; JOAN leaps up)

Oh, no, the dogs again. Hope the pool man is still here.

(LORENA runs offstage, JOAN watches from a sliding glass door)

JOAN

Oh, no. My babies in the pool. Over there. There! Thanks, Fernando, Lorena.

LORENA

(still offstage)

I'm gonna lock 'em in the pool house until they dry off. I'm sorry, Miss Davis. I guess I accidentally let them out when I took out the trash.

JOAN

(yells)

You bad boys! Bad boys!

(LORENA enters)

You have to be more careful. They could drown. You know I can't swim. They could drown if nobody got to them. They're just little guys.

LORENA

Hooey. They're a handful. Are you sure they can't swim? I thought all dogs could swim. Is it OK if I go home now? I'm soaking wet.

JOAN

Sure. Just be careful from now on.

Scene 2

(same place, several days later; JOAN is on the phone)

JOAN

Lingerie Department, please. *(pause)* Hello. This is Joan Davis. I want to order that yellow negligee you advertised in the paper, size medium. I ordered one of those in white a while back but I'd like another for special occasions, if you know what I mean. *(pause)* Yes, I have an account with you. Have for years. Maybe decades. Joan Davis. Davis. D-A-V-I-S. *(pause)* Yes, that's the address. A couple of days will be fine. Thank you.

(as she hangs up, the doorbell rings; dogs yapping in the background; she moves to the front door, opens it to see DONNA)

Yes?

DONNA

Sorry to disturb you, Miss Davis. I have a package for you. It wouldn't fit in the box.

JOAN

Fine. Thank you, dear.

(takes it, starts to close the door)

DONNA

Hope I didn't bother you. I didn't expect to see you.

JOAN

I live here.

DONNA

(stammering) Yes, I know. I've been on this route for almost three months, um, hoping to meet you.

JOAN

Well, that's very nice.

DONNA

I loved *I Married Joan*. I was crushed when it went off the air. You were ... fantastic and hilarious. Funnier than anyone on television today.

JOAN

Thank you. What's your name, dear?

DONNA

Donna. I know that's your real name, too, Miss Davis. Well, Madonna. Like the saint. I'm Catholic, too.

JOAN

(laughs) You're absolutely right. About the name. Well, I used to be a Cath--

DONNA

I know you were born in St. Paul. My mother was, too. And you had a hugely popular radio show sponsored by Lever Brothers. I always use their soap because of you. And I know you were in lots of movies with Eddie Cantor and Abbott and Costello and Milton Berle and Alice Faye and ...

JOAN

You're quite the little scholar, aren't you? But you're way too young to remember that.

DONNA

I read all the fan magazines. I buy the old ones in second-hand stores. You can probably tell. I'm going on too long. I'm sorry. I do need to get back on my route. I know you must be very busy, being a star and all. Meeting you has meant a lot to me. You know, I see a lot of famous people here in the Movie Colony, but you ... *(chokes up)*

JOAN

Would you like an autographed photo, dear?

DONNA

Oh, could you? Would you? Please.

JOAN

(pulls one out of the drawer in the desk in the living room) Let me sign it for you ... Here you go.

DONNA

Thank you so much. Wait until I tell my friends I actually met and talked to THE Joan Davis. They'll be so envious.

JOAN

You're welcome, dear. Donna. And thanks for the package.

(JOAN closes the door as LORENA enters stage left with packages)

LORENA

Whew. These groceries seem to get heavier every week. And you don't eat that much. Was that the mail delivery?

JOAN

Yeah.

LORENA

The new girl? Boy, they come and go quickly around here. You'd think people would be grateful to have a job these days ...

JOAN

She delivered a package. And more. Something I wasn't expecting.

LORENA

Uh huh. I'd like to leave a little early again today, if that's all right. It's Leroy. Now he says he's sick. I think it's the clap. I told him I can't stay home and take care of him.

JOAN

No, you can't. I need you here. Damned husbands. Always screw things up.

LORENA

Have you had breakfast?

JOAN

Just a short one a while ago. And a little toast. I'm expecting Eddie soon. Just as soon as Ida goes out with the girls. You can make yourself scarce. Go see Leroy if you must. *(pause)* Where are the dogs? Please make sure they don't get out. I don't know if Eddie can swim.

(looks out the front window)

Oh, good. He's here. Don't you have some errands or something?

LORENA

Miss Davis, I just came back. But, sure, I'll go talk to Leroy. You know, I don't care what goes on with Mr. Cantor. He's a nice man. Very polite. Wish Leroy was more like him.

(she exits; JOAN goes to the front door and there's EDDIE)

EDDIE

Surprise! I'm actually here!

(JOAN hurries to him, they hug)

JOAN

Hello, handsome.

EDDIE

Hi, sweetie. Turns out Ida went into Rancho Mirage to have a long lunch with a friend. We'll have some time. Maybe have a swim. You know ... after.

JOAN

Let me get you a drink. (*she moves to the kitchen, pours*) The oddest thing just happened. I'm so glad you're here.

EDDIE

What, Joanie?

JOAN

You're not going to believe this. I have a fan!

EDDIE

Just one? Come on. I know better than that. We're all members of the Joan Davis Fan Club.

JOAN

Right. This one is different. She's young. Maybe in her mid-twenties. Sort of plain, truthfully. I feel a little sorry for her. She's a mailman. Or whatever you call them these days. She rang my doorbell to deliver a package. Then she started going on and on about how much she loved the show. And me.

EDDIE

What did I tell you? You're not finished. There are lots more out there like her, I'll bet.

JOAN

It was kind of exciting. It's been a while, you know?

EDDIE

When your pilot sells and you're back on the air every week, you'll--

JOAN

It didn't.

EDDIE

I can't believe that. I thought it was a clever premise—you as a lady astronaut. Slapstick in space.

JOAN

Ummm. Didn't get off the ground (*both laugh*).

EDDIE

At least, we can laugh about it. Jerry will find you something. I'm sure of it. You know, I've been thinking, Joanie. While you're waiting, you should write a book like I did. You've had an interesting life. People would want to read about it. Your fans especially.

JOAN

Please. What they'd want to read about is us. You handled that pretty well in your book, by the way, calling us "friends and colleagues." You don't think they could read between the lines? Between the sheets?

EDDIE

Not a chance. Vetted by the publisher. I didn't even tell him the truth. You could do it, too
(*pause*) Ah, I remember the first time I saw you on stage.

JOAN

Uh oh. Here it comes.

EDDIE

That vaudeville act with your husband, what's-his-name. I could never figure out how you could slide half-way across the stage on one heel without falling over.

JOAN

Oh, honey. Many, many months of practice and a lot of bruises. You always bring that up when you want me to do something.

EDDIE

Think about it, won't you?

JOAN

Eddie, you know I'd rather do a hundred pratfalls than write anything other than a check. The School of Hard Knocks doesn't teach you a lot about grammar.

EDDIE

Problem solved! I'm going to write down the name of my ghost writer. You just have to tell her stories and she'll take care of the rest. You don't have to tell her everything, you know. You might even have fun doing it.

JOAN

Sure would bring back memories. Not all of them good. Let's make a deal. I'll do it if you'll help me.

EDDIE

I'd love to spend more time with you, sweetie. When I can. Uh oh. I just remembered. Ida said she'd call before she came home in case I needed anything at the drug store. I need to go soon. Maybe we could take just a few minutes in the other room.

JOAN

I don't like doing it that way. You know that. Wish we could figure out a way to kill her off.

EDDIE

Joan! Don't say such things. She's the mother of my five children.

JOAN

Yeah. Even then, a busy boy, weren't you? I'm kidding. I don't want her dead. Not really. Can't you at least think about a divorce? Can't go to jail for that.

EDDIE

We've been over this, many times, Joanie. You know that Ida and I belong together in the public's eye, like Tracy and Hepburn, Gable and Lombard, Lucy and Desi. Oh, sorry. But, sweetie. You know I'd be ruined in this town if I divorced her. You understand that, don't you? Come on.

JOAN

No, but yes.

EDDIE

I'll call you later.

JOAN

Promise?

(he draws her to him and they embrace)

EDDIE

Promise. Anything for you.

Scene 3

A few weeks later

(JOAN is looking out the front window; sees DONNA and opens the door)

DONNA

Hello, Miss Davis. I have a package for you again. You get a lot of those these days, dontcha?

JOAN

I guess I do. You're very good at delivering them. Would you like to come in for a Coke? It's really hot today. Especially in that god-awful uniform.

DONNA

Well, maybe for a minute or two. It wouldn't hurt.

(JOAN goes to fridge, brings out a Coke, pours herself a glass of vodka, returns to living room)

JOAN

Here ya go. Ice cold.

DONNA

Thanks. *(pause)* Hey, Miss Davis. Do you remember that episode where you tutor the football kicker after your high school reunion?

JOAN

(smiles, is into it) Sure I do.

DONNA

You were trying to encourage him so you gave him a bunch of pastries. *(they both laugh throughout the telling of the story)*. He got so fat that the coach ordered him to lose weight.

JOAN

That's when it got good.

DONNA

And you helped! Or tried to. It was so funny watching you wrestling with that heavy gym equipment. Slipping and falling. You made it look so easy but I'll bet you got hurt sometimes. Right?

JOAN

It's hard being a girl comic. I remember that was the episode where I broke a bone in my hand. It wasn't the first broken bone, either. Please don't tell anyone. No one laughs if they know you get hurt. They kept a nurse on the set and I kept her pretty busy.

(LORENA enters, says her line and exits)

LORENA

Going to the liquor store. I'll be back soon. You need anything else, Miss Davis?

JOAN

Nope. Thanks. *(to DONNA)* Why don't you sit for just a while. You must be very tired, all that work. You're such a little thing. Why do they make you wear that hot jacket?

(dogs yapping frantically, water splashing)

DONNA

What's that?

JOAN

(agitated, runs to the glass door to the pool) Uh oh. Oh, no. The dogs got into the pool again. Oh, no. No.

(DONNA runs to the door to see)

DONNA

Can't they swim?

JOAN

No. What am I going to do? Where's that damned Lorena?

DONNA

(removes her jacket and shoes and runs outside) I'll get 'em.

JOAN

Oh my god. Please save them.

(splashing, yapping)

DONNA

(offstage) I will. I got 'em. Don't worry. Please. They're fine. It's OK.

JOAN

Would you put them in the pool house over there, please? Lorena should have kept the goddamned door closed. I don't know what I'm going to do with her. I don't know what I'd do if they ...

DONNA

Sure thing. *(grabs a towel and wraps it around herself)* Hope you don't mind if I borrow this towel for a bit. I don't often get a chance to jump into really nice pools like this.

JOAN

Oh my god. How can I thank you? You saved their lives. But you've ruined your uniform. Will they make you pay for it? Let me take care of that. I'll write you a check.

DONNA

Nah. It'll dry out in this heat. Glad I was here to help. I really need to go. I've taken up way too much of your time already.

JOAN

(almost tearful) I'm just so glad you were ...

DONNA

Oh, Miss Davis, if I can pay back even a fraction of the pleasure you've brought me. But, of course, I can never do that.

JOAN

(walks DONNA to the door, big hug) You're very special, Donna.

DONNA

(exits) Thanks. See ya around.

Scene 4

(EDDIE and JOAN at breakfast table; EDDIE is in his briefs and shirtless; they are having breakfast)

EDDIE

I thought you said you couldn't cook eggs?

JOAN

Just cracked 'em into a pan and turned on the gas. A guy's gotta eat, right? See, we don't need Lorena around.

EDDIE

My bags were already packed in the trunk of the car when Ida walked out the door. Having the time with you to ... be together last night was ...

JOAN

Yeah, it was.

EDDIE

So tell me about the dogs in the pool. You started to yesterday but we got ... um, distracted.

JOAN

I was crazy. I don't know what I would have done if Donna hadn't been here. Remember that scene in the Milton Berle movie at RKO? I almost drowned and Miltie saved me. Of course, he expected me to repay him later but was he sorely disappointed. *(both laugh)*

EDDIE

She jumped in? You didn't ask her?

JOAN

Hell, no. I was too scared to say anything. I looked for something to grab them with and saw her jump in. No hesitation. If I hadn't been so terrified it would have been funny. Like a Harold

Lloyd picture. Boy, those postal uniforms smell terrible when they get wet. What a hero. Quick-thinking girl, that Donna.

EDDIE

Sorry, sweetie. Glad it worked out. I hope it doesn't bother you that I'm not wearing a shirt and pants at the breakfast table. Ida would have a fit.

JOAN

You should know better than to serve up a straight line like that. Anyway, you have on boxers. Much to my regret.

EDDIE

Maybe after breakfast ...?

JOAN

Anytime. You know that. Oh, Eddie. We're sitting here like an old married couple, aren't we? You in your shorts, me in my robe. I sure wish that were true. I'm even eating breakfast. I get excited just thinking about you. And hungry.

(doorbell)

EDDIE

You expecting anyone?

JOAN

No. Lorena wouldn't be coming back. Besides she has a key.

(JOAN goes to the door, opens it to see DONNA)

JOAN

Donna! You're very early today.

DONNA

I am. Sorry, Miss Davis. But there's a big package that won't fit in the box. Sorry to disturb you.

(hands it to her)

JOAN

Thanks *(beat)* Oh, no. You're mistaken. This looks like it's for the people next door. I didn't think I had ordered anything this week. Always glad to see you, anyway. Come on in.

DONNA

Thanks. I can't stay. *(pause)* Is that Mr. Cantor?

JOAN

Um. Yes. We were, um, just going over a script for a new project.

EDDIE

Hi, Donna. Good to meet you. I've heard a lot about you. I'd get up, but ...

DONNA

(laughs uncomfortably; continues standing by the door) I can see you're busy. I have to say, Mr. Cantor, I'm a big fan of yours. Your movies with Miss Davis are my all-time favorites. Especially that musical with George Murphy. *Show Business?*

JOAN

You aren't old enough to have seen that. Remember that one, Eddie? It was almost like our real lives. Just last night, we talked about the poster in the hall. Uh ...

DONNA

It's been running on TV this week. That program where they run the same movie all week? I've seen it every night. I know all the songs and most of the dance steps. You were both wonderful. You can do anything, seems to me. So romantic, you two. In a funny way, of course.

JOAN

(to EDDIE) What did I tell you? This girl is a keeper.

EDDIE

She sure is.

DONNA

Well, I have to run. I'm so thrilled to get to meet you, Mr. Cantor. Boy, first Miss Davis and now you. Am I lucky or what?

(JOAN and DONNA move to the doorstep)

Sorry about the wrong delivery. Don't know what I was thinking.

JOAN

No problem, dear. I'll see you again soon.

(DONNA exits)

EDDIE

Thank god it wasn't one of those gossip battle axes. Don't even want to think how the press would fry our buns.

JOAN

I don't think those old hags would get off the barstool long enough to make house calls. But you, my boy, can stop by any ole time.

EDDIE

There's your audience, Joanie. A new generation that didn't watch *I Married Joan*. They don't know about all your movie and stage work. They might read your book, though, and you'd be famous again.

JOAN

I wish she were a writer. She told me the other day that she had more questions about one of the storylines on the show. What a fan. Boy. Where was she when I needed her?

EDDIE

Forget the dishes for now. Let's find something to do in the other room.

(he leads her toward the bedroom)

Scene 5

A few weeks later

(JOAN is on the sofa watching TV; there's an insistent pounding on the door; dogs yapping; she hurries to open it; EDDIE rushes in)

JOAN

Eddie? What's wrong? You look terrible. Something happened.

EDDIE

(out of breath and frazzled) She knows. She knows everything. Well, most of it.

JOAN

What? How? God, Eddie. Sit down. You look like you're gonna explode.

EDDIE

First, Joanie. Pour yourself a stiff one. You're gonna need it. While you're at it, pour me one, too.

JOAN

What? What do you mean? Who knows? She knows—knows what?

EDDIE

Everything. About us. You know. Everything. She threw me out. My stuff is in the car. Said she's going to call her lawyer. And Hedda and Louella.

JOAN

Jesus. Maybe it's a good thing. This is what we've wanted, in a way. Once it's done, she'll be out of your life and we can ...

EDDIE

You don't understand. She's going to the press with this. I'll be ruined. I don't know what to do. Yet. I still have the TV show, a career, thank God. You're lucky you don't have so much to worry about.

JOAN

Oh, thanks.

EDDIE

I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way.

JOAN

I know, I know. What are we going to do? I know you can find a way out of this. Remember that time one of your kids found us out by the pool? You came up with a story about how we were rehearsing the love scene from our next movie? She believed you.

EDDIE

She was ten years old. But wait, Joanie. It gets worse. Here's the crapper. You know how she found out?

JOAN

No. How?

EDDIE

It was your sweet little mailman.

JOAN

Donna? MY Donna? Noooo. Can't be.

EDDIE

Oh, yes. Your fawning little fan. It gets better.

JOAN

No. I don't believe this.

EDDIE

Ida has been paying her for months. Her lawyer thought it up. I don't know all the sordid details. It doesn't matter. But Ida was screaming that it had cost her a lot to get the goods on us. On me. I guess your "fan" needed the money. Or something.

JOAN

But that doesn't make sense. I offered her money, to help her finish college. She always turned me down. The only thing I could get her to accept was a Coke and an autographed picture.

EDDIE

She was out to destroy me and you just got in the way. She had easy access to you, to us. A perfect spy. She waited until we were together so she could be a witness. When she saw my car parked out front overnight ...

JOAN

But she knew all about my career. She loved the show. Talked about details of the plots. She could even name the guest stars.

EDDIE

What do you know about her? Nothing, right?

JOAN

Yeah. She always wanted to talk about me. She was so thoughtful. And sweet. And, remember, she saved the dogs. I don't get it.

EDDIE

My guess is that asshole lawyer gave her the ammunition. Probably got somebody in his office to do all the research and fed her the information. I'm sure she doesn't care about anything but the money she made being a rat.

JOAN

And I thought ... I feel like such a dope.

EDDIE

Don't. It's not your fault. She was a good actress. When she caught us that morning, she was almost embarrassed. Remember? She played this as if she had done it before. A real pro.

JOAN

I don't want to think about that possibility. What do we do, Eddie? Tell me. How can we make this work for us?

EDDIE

I have to contain the damage. Deal with Ida first. I can't let her divorce me. It can't happen. It would be the end of everything. All I've worked for. And I don't want my girls to find out.

JOAN

What about me? Us? Isn't this a chance for us to ...

EDDIE

Joanie, you know I love you.

JOAN

Don't go back to her. You can stay here. Don't go to a hotel. Please.

EDDIE

No, no, no. You know I want to, sweetie, but I can't. We have to stay away from each other for a while. I can get her back on track. It's happened before so I have an idea about how to fix it. I need to think.

JOAN

What? What do mean? What's happened before?

EDDIE

It doesn't matter, dear. I need to call my lawyer in Beverly Hills. To figure out how to make this go away. How to keep her quiet. He can do it.

JOAN

I don't understand how this could happen. Everything was going along so well. I just feel sick.

EDDIE

You go lie down, sweetie. I'll be back in touch when things calm down. And lotsa luck with that lying bitch who delivers your mail. Bet she's long gone now that the job is done. Or found another undercover operation.

(EDDIE goes to the door, but JOAN stays on the couch as he leaves; he gently touches her shoulder as he goes)

Bye, Joanie.

JOAN

(calls out) Lorena!

(LORENA enters)

LORENA

Yes, Miss Davis?

JOAN

Pour me a tall glass of lunch, will ya? And make sure you've put in the usual order for the case of vodka. I'm gonna be here for a while. I'll sit here and I'll wait. He'll be back. I know he will.

END OF PLAY