

PATENT LEATHER GENE
(working title)

2020 Lenten Season Novella
an original work of fiction by Larissa Dahroug
all rights reserved Larissa Dahroug 2020
(925)320-1000
thekittypantsranch@gmail.com

*dedicated to the abused and slandered
and written in spite of those who abuse and lie about them*

CHAPTER 3

Old Dykes Pointing Fingers

The mid after noon sun fell through the sliding glass door in Joan's kitchen as she sat at the table opening her mail. She lit a cigarette and let it balance between her lips while she picked at her cuticle, grabbed a loose emery board and filed a jagged edge off the thumb nail she was using to slice open envelopes. There was at least two weeks of mail splayed across the table top. The smoke curled around her face and burned her eyes making it hard to see. Joan smoked intermittently throughout her life; mostly when she was worried, or more accurately, when she was making worry in her son's life. Robin didn't know about his mother's periodic habit. She had made a big show of quitting when Frank had died and as far as Robin knew she hadn't had another "cancer stick" since. It was a soap box she regularly climbed on when they were together in public and saw someone smoking. She'd say something like, "Look at that selfish fool, killing themselves and everyone around them. Don't they know we all need to breath?" Robin would agree and praise her for having had the good sense and will power to quit. Joan would soak up Robin's praise like a sponge. Sitting alone in her home now, she coughed and the lit cigarette fell from her lips into a pile of opened junk mail sitting in front of her. As she coughed the fluffy pile of torn envelopes and credit card offers began to smolder a bit. She grabbed her glass and tossed the remaining contents on the small fire, forgetting just how strong Bacardi 151 is. The tiny smolder that could have been put out with the palm of her hand shot up in flames and started a much larger problem. Joan jumped up from the table in a panic then saw the extinguisher her landlord had mounted to the wall next to the gas stove. Joan pulled the lever and drenched the entire table with white foam. She dropped the extinguisher and fell forward, hands on her knees panting, adrenaline shooting through her body.

As she stood up catching her breath, she saw the half empty bottle of Bacardi on the counter and grabbed it. She removed the top and took a long swig straight from the bottle, then lit a fresh Virginia Slim. The kitchen was a mess. In addition to the fresh mess on the table, there was a pile of dishes overflowing from the sink and bags of garbage stacked against the center island that needed to be taken out. Her housekeeper, Doris, had quit six weeks earlier. Joan told Gertrude it was because Doris' mother was ill in the Philippines and she was going back to care for her, but that was a lie and Gertrude knew it. Gertrude ran into Doris at the market one day

and Doris had told her why she quit. She said she quit because Joan was mean drunk. She said Joan had insisted she only had a drink when there was something to celebrate and Doris had told her something about her whole life being one big party then and walked out the front door leaving her key in the bowl on the side table. Gertrude had laughed. Joan didn't know this and neither she or Doris had any intention of telling her. Robin didn't know Doris had quit. The last time he visited his mother he had taken out the trash, wiped down the kitchen and put dishes in the dishwasher. Joan had told Robin Doris was on vacation. He hadn't asked any more questions after that and now she couldn't get a hold of him. She just knew that bitch wife of his had something to do with it. She had probably poisoned him or something. It was just like one of *her kind* to do that. She had to get that girl out of their life some how. She just knew if it weren't for Gene that Robin would be there taking care of her, Joan. It was driving her mad.

Joan opened the pantry to get a big trash bag to clean up the mess on the table. She had to get that taken care of as soon as possible in case Robin happened to stop by. She couldn't let him see that. He'd have too many questions. She opened the door, stepped in the closet and pulled the pulley to turn on the ceiling light. The bulb flashed and popped. "Damn it anyway!" Joan barked, cigarette in hand. She absentmindedly ashed on the floor. Under the sink she found the flashlight Robin had left last time he had unclogged the sink for her. Back in the pantry she scanned the shelves for the trash bags, not the kitchen size, but the thick black liners she used for the big can in the garage. The beam of light hit the case of Bacardi. She opened the flap and counted how many bottles she had left. When she heard the company was no longer going to make the 151 she had purchased three cases of twenty four bottles. The first case she gave away as Christmas gifts. A couple bottles she had let them pour at the bar at Frank's funeral and Robin's wedding. She was now down to how many bottles? She ran her finger over the tops of the remaining bottles...one...two...three...four...five...six...seven...eight...nine...plus the open bottle on the counter. She was going to have start being more careful with the stuff. No more sharing. She didn't have much left and she didn't think she was going to be able to find any more. On the shelf above the box of Bacardi she found the box of thick trash liners. She grabbed the box with her cigarette hand, turned off the flash light and returned it to its place under the sink. Her cigarette was down to the filter. She sucked in one last puff off it and dropped it into the sink of dirty dishes. It made a small hiss as it hit some old coffee in the bottom of a three day old coffee cup.

Standing next to the table she spread open a bag holding one point against the table with her hip and the other with her right hand. Then with her left arm she swept the entire contents of the table into the bag. The arm of her pink oxford was smeared with half dissolved ink from glossy mailers that hadn't burned but were still saturated in the fire-stop foam, greasy ash, and some salsa from a paper plate she had forgotten had been on the table as well. She slipped the blouse off and shoved it in the bag as well. The table was smeared looking and needed wiped, but, in all things weren't that bad. There was just one small spot directly under where the blaze had flared that looked burned, and it really was a very small spot. A placemat would cover it easily and if Robin saw it she'd tell him it was from the bottom of a hot pot or some such thing. Not a big deal. She knew there had been a couple bills in the mail that she hadn't opened yet, but nothing was over due. What ever they were they would send her a first notice once they came up over due. She always paid her bills. Being late on one or two this one time wasn't going to hurt anything. Besides, if it did she would just call and play the helpless old widow card. It always worked. People were so easily persuaded once she let them know how hard her life was, being a widow and having such a sick daughter in law causing strife. Joan slipped her feet into an old pair of Frank's sandal slides she still kept by his chair and took the bag of burnt evidence out to the dumpster in the parking lot behind her condo. Ed Corbit was out letting his dog take a crap. For some reason he kept asking Joan out on a date. She had told him no five times already, but he just kept asking. She tried to tip toe but was a little tipsy from the 151 and Frank's sandals were far too big on her feet. She stumbled and yelped when she hit her head on the corner of the painted concrete wall masking the dumpster from overt view. Ed noticed her and started in her direction, dragging the pooping dog along by his leash.

Joan tossed the bag into the dumpster then slipped off the sandals and headed back towards the condo as fast as she could but she wasn't fast enough. Ed cut her off just in front of her back patio. She could see the sliding glass door into her kitchen just over his shoulder. Ed was standing in front of her with a big goody grin. His mutt-dog was cowering at his feet with it's tail between it's legs. Joan hated the animal and the dog wasn't fond of her either.

"Hey there Joanie-girl!" Ed said.

"My name is Joan, or Mrs. Randall, Ed." Joan replied.

"Why, Widow Randall, how are you today, ma'am?" Ed mocked with a chuckle.

"Ed, I'm not in the mood, please let me by."

“You shall not pass!” Ed chided mimicking the Gandalf character from that stupid movie Robin and Gene forced Joan to go see with them that one Christmas.

“I mean it Ed. I’m not in the mood.” Joan shifted her weight to one side and placed her fist on her hip, cocking her head the other direction trying to look serious and tough. In her other hand she had her late husband’s shoes.

“Oh, Joanie, you are too much. So what’s a guy gotta do to snag a dinner date with a hot ticket like you? I have a buy one get one dinner coupon for Sero’s I clipped out of the bulletin this past Sunday burnin’ a hole in my pocket. Whadaya say? You and me? Tomorrow night?” Ed looked so hopeful.

“I say blow it out your ass, Ed. I’m not interested. Why don’t you ask Eleanor down the block there? She’s been after you since your wife left ya ten years ago.” This was mean and Joan knew it. Eleanor was developmentally disabled and sweet on any man with a dog. She hoped Ed would finally get the message. Ed just laughed.

“Oh, Joanie. You’re just too much. That’s what I like about you. You got spirit, girl! Well, if not tomorrow maybe some other time.” He looked down at his poor pooch who now had the leash wrapped three times around his ankles. “Come on Dillon. Let’s go home and find your milk bones.” Ed stepped out of the loop around his ankles and tugged on the leash making the dog follow.

“And make sure to pick up your dog’s shit you old fart!” Joan called after him. Ed just laughed and stepped over a turd. Joan rushed across her patio and through the sliding door.

Once back in her kitchen she scanned the room deciding what needed to be done next. On the handle of the oven she grabbed a stained tea towel that said in faded letters: ‘Anything Goes at Grandma’s House’. It had been a gift from the twins a few years ago. She dampened it under the faucet and wiped the remaining grime and residue off the table top. Then she rinsed and wrung it out and tossed it down the stairs to the basement where her laundry room was located. The rag landed on a pile of laundry that had been accumulating for the past three weeks. She would have to do a load soon or go buy some new underwear and towels at Target. Maybe Gert would want to make a trip. She always needed litter and Fancy Feast for her beasts. Plus that would give her a reason to swing by Robin’s house and see for herself what was going on over there. It was only 2PM. He would be home from work around 6 if he was in the office. The last message she had left Robby had been that morning after Gert had called to tell her about the cop and medic and Gene in her bathrobe. So far things were going as planned and no one was

any the wiser. Robin had even confided in her like he used to! The last time he stopped by he mentioned something about Gene putting up a camera and how he didn't feel comfortable with it on the house. He said he felt like Gene was being, what was the word he had used? Unreasonable? Unrealistic? Un-something. Whatever it was he had said, it had been music to Joan's ears.

Stomping up the stairs to get her purse and a fresh blouse to put over her sleeveless t-shirt, Joan caught sight of herself in the mirror. Ugh. Her hair was a mess and her eye make up was smeared from the smoke in her eyes. She decided to take a quick shower and freshen up entirely. She didn't want Gert or Robin or Gene smelling cigarettes on her, especially since she had read Gene the riot act this past New Year's Eve when she caught her having a puff with one of her scum-bag college friends. She just knew those two were sleeping together behind Robin's back. She had said something to Robin a few days later but he had told her mind her business, that Jeremy was just a friend and besides he was gay. Joan told Gert she thought her poor boy was under some spell, that Gene and her type were all witches and that Jeremy was far too macho looking to be a gay. Gert had nodded in agreement. Joan decided to ring Gert and let her know she was on her way over. The phone only rang once.

"Hello?" Gertrude answered.

"Gert. It's me. Joan."

"Oh hi Joan. I was just going to call you. Are you going to book club tomorrow?"

Joan had forgotten about book club. The book was right there on her night stand but she hadn't read the chapter for this week. Maybe she'd do that tonight or tomorrow morning.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe. I haven't read the chapter yet. But hey, I wanted to ask you something."

"What's that?" Gertrude asked as if she had been expecting an inquiry.

"You need litter or Fancy Feast? I was gonna head over to Target to pick up a couple things."

"As a matter of fact I do need some litter." Gertrude said conspiratorially. "And maybe you can check in on that boy of yours?"

"Exactly!" Joan proclaimed. "I just need to jump in the shower real quick. I've been cleaning up over here and need to get the stink off before I go out and anyone sees me. See you in about an hour or so."

"Sounds good. I'll be here." Gertrude replied.

"Okie-dokie. Bye."

“Bye.”

Joan cradled the receiver, stripped down and got in the shower. She scrubbed her hair twice just to be sure the cigarette smell was all gone. Once she dressed she brushed her teeth and smeared on some eye liner and mascara and a purplish lipstick Gene had given her for Christmas. She decided to put on a short sleeve t-shirt weight maxi dress because it was one of the first things in her closet plus Gertrude was usually wearing some kind of hippy dress and they could be matchy-matchy like school girls. Gertrude and Joan had hit it off immediately when they met at Dr. Shelton's *Widows 101* group. Both had a caustic sense of humor and a mean streak. Both women enjoyed a drink when they met, but they had learned *how to drink* together. Drinking, gossiping, and meddling were their favorite things to do. Well, those things *and* book club. Joan tolerated Gertrude's cats and Gertrude tolerated Joan's sons. They were the best of friends and right now they were working really hard at “getting poor Genie the help she so desperately needs.” Or so they said.

The truth was, there was absolutely nothing wrong with Gene. Gene was a very good person. Joan was just terribly jealous of Gene. Gene had everything she Joan wanted. Gene was talented, well liked by her friends and colleagues, kind, and smart. She also had a clean, tidy home that she and Robin owned, and most of all, the thing that bothered Joan, Gene had Robin. Of course, Joan had her older son, Tim, as well. But Tim had moved to Australia to be closer to Melanie's family when they had gotten married, then decided to stay there after the divorce to be close to his children. Joan and Gertrude had made a trip to visit once the year Robin had turned forty, but Tim had told her to never come back. The two women had behaved horribly and hadn't even brought a gift for the twins who had, up until that point, never even met their grandmother. It irritated Joan every time Gene mentioned anything about sending something to the twins for their birthday or Christmas. Joan never bothered to send so much as a card. She was the grandma. She felt it was the twin's place to call her. They never sent her a birthday card either, she had told Robin the one time he said something.

Before walking out the door to her Kia, Joan cupped her hand in front of her face to check her breath. She wanted to make sure you couldn't smell the Bacardi or the cigarettes. She didn't think so, but just to be sure she'd go through the McDonald's drive thru at the end of the block and get a cup of coffee on her way to pick up Gertrude. Coffee covers everything. Then she remembered something. Dillon! That dog was good for one thing and one thing only. Shit. She

dug a plastic bag out of the trunk of her car and ran around back to collect Ed's dog's poop. Until recently it had annoyed Joan that Ed never picked up after his animal, but then she had found a use for the turds. Wrapping the bag inside out around her hand she collected the feces, sealed the bag and tossed it a box in her trunk. Then she looked over both shoulders to see if there was anyone watching her and hopped in the car. It was 3:15 when she pulled out of the McDonalds parking lot with her coffee. She was running a little longer than she told Gert, but Gert would wait. She always did. Besides, it was only a couple miles away and what else was Gert going to do. Nothing. That's what.

When Joan pulled into Gertrude's driveway she was careful to pull all the way to the back out of sight of Robin's house. She didn't want them to see her car and know she was around until she was ready to knock on the door. She parked the car in front of the detached garage in Gertrude's back yard. She could see the old Cadillac parked through the garage windows. It had been Felix's car. Gertrude hadn't driven in years. The last time she had tried to take it out of the garage she smashed the right headlight trying to get it out. Instead, Gertrude called a cab, or Joan drove her wherever she wanted to go. The two women had considered being roommates, but Joan couldn't stand the cats. Besides, having her own place had grown on Joan. She could do what ever she wanted without anyone knowing, like smoke, or watch Orange is the New Black and jerk-off, if she wanted.

Joan got out of the car and knocked on Gertrude's back door. Gert called from the front room, "It's open." Joan opened the door and stepped over a pile of cat litter the cats had dug out of the litter boxes just inside. She didn't know how Gertrude lived with that. Joan walked through the kitchen and dining room to the front sitting room where she found Gertrude peeking through the drapes up at Gene's house.

"What do you see?" Joan asked.

"Nothing right now. She just went out and got the mail a few minutes ago." Gertrude replied excitedly. "I don't think Robin is ignoring you. I think he's out of town. I haven't seen the car in days." Gertrude finished as she pulled her face from between the dusty drapes and turned to greet her friend and partner in crime. "Did you bring any more with you?" She asked Joan expectantly.

"Oh. Yeah. I forgot. I saw Ed and his idiot dog earlier. I have a fresh deposit in a baggie in the trunk. I'll sit it by the back door before we leave. You know that old dip-stick asked me out to

dinner again! Said he has a coupon for Sero's. Like that would sweeten the pot or something."

Joan shook her head in disbelief and Gertrude laughed.

"Are you kidding? What an old fool. What'd you say?"

"I told him to blow it out his ass and ask the retard down the street instead."

The two women cackled. Then Gertrude stepped into Joan and kissed her on the cheek. Joan looked her in the eyes and asked, "So are you ready to go?"

Gertrude took her friend's hand and rubbed the interior of her palm. Joan kissed her back. "Get your purse, you old dyke and let's go." Joan told her.

"OK. I just need to pee first."

"OK, but hurry up."

Gertrude disappeared up the stairs for a couple minutes then Joan heard the toilet flush and the sink run. Gertrude reappeared drying her hands on the front of her muumuu.

"I wish you wouldn't do that." Joan said as she looked at the two damp spots on the front of her friend's dress.

"What?" Gertrude asked.

"That!" Joan replied nodding toward Gertrude's dress with her chin. "You have two big damp spots. People are going to think you're incontinent."

"Oh, who gives a shit?! If anyone says anything to me I'll just go pee on them."

"Stop it. Now let's go." Joan picked up Gertrude's purse from a near by chair and handed it to her. The two women stepped out the back door toward the car. As Gertrude locked the door behind them Joan got the bag of dog poop out of the trunk and sat it on top of a covered bucket that was next to the steps leading up to the back door.

"Is Connor going to stop by tonight to get this?" Joan inquired without looking up at Gertrude.

"Probably not. I told him to not come by for a couple days after this morning. You should have seen it Joan! It was beautiful. She's so upset! You're a genius!"

"Yeah, well, it's only going to work if that boy Connor keeps his moth shut. How much did you give him?"

"Oh, I gave him enough."

"How much is enough?"

"Twenty five a week..."

Joan cut Gertrude off. "Twenty five a week! You think that's enough?" Joan spat as she unlocked the doors of the car and the women climbed in.

"You didn't let me finish." Gertrude protested as she buckled her seatbelt. "You never let me finish."

"OK. Sorry. Go ahead. Finish." Joan goaded.

"I am. I am. I've been giving him twenty five a week plus three of my methadone." Gertrude finished.

"But what are you taking for your back? Do you have enough to get through the week?" Joan was concerned.

"Plenty. I've just been cutting them in half and adding more vodka to my Crystal Light. Don't worry. It's worth it to see that stupid girl loose her mind up there after all she puts you through."

Joan tipped her head to the side and smiled at her good friend.

"Gert, I love you, you know. For the first time in my life I actually have someone who loves me as much as I love them." and she patted Gertrude's hand as it rested on the armrest between them.

"Oh, shut up you old dyke and drive. My cats are hungry and I know you saw the litter in the mud room when you came in."

Joan put the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway. Gertrude turned on the radio and looked for WDET. *All Things Considered* came through the speakers.

"I think that Ari Shapiro is Jewish, but I really like him." Gertrude said.

"Oh yeah? Since when do you give a shit about Jews or the news?" Joan retorted.

"Oh, you know Felix and I used to listen to NPR all the time. Public broadcasting was the only thing he ever listened to or let me listen to."

"Yeah, and that old fart also said lesbians were all going to burn in hell."

"We're not lesbians, Joan. We're bi-sexual."

"Oh, are you dating men again now?"

"Well, no."

"That's what I thought. Look, I spent my whole life being what my parents wouldn't beat me for. I'm not going to go advertising things now, but I'm also not going to pretend you don't stick your tongue down my throat from time to time or play with my tits." Joan snarled.

"I'm still attracted to men too, Joan. You can't change that."

"Oh. OK. You're right. I'm sorry. Just as long as you don't go accepting any coupon dinner offers to Sero's any time soon." Joan laughed. Gertrude reached over and touched her hand on the wheel.

"I don't even like Greeks." Gertrude joked.

“Shut up. You loved My Big Fat Greek Wedding.”

“Oh yeah. That’s right. And I like George Antonopoulos too! Oh and gyros!” Gertrude laughed so hard she began to cough. “Hey, wanna stop at the Coney after Target and have an early dinner?” she managed after recovering from the laughing-coughing fit.

“Eh...maybe for carry out. I want to be back by six and meet Robin before he even gets in the house.” Joan answered.

“Are you sure that’s wise, Joan? Maybe give them a couple minutes. I don’t think she cleaned the dog shit off her front porch yet, but the railing is in the way of my view even with binoculars.”

“What?!” Joan screamed. “She left the dog shit for my Robby to find and clean up after he’s been out of town for weeks?! That horrid little slut. I can’t wait to see her taken away. I hope they stick her in a straight jacket.”

“Joan, don’t you think you’re taking it a bit far? We’re just trying to split them up, right?” Gertrude furrowed her brow at Joan who was now looking for a parking spot.

“Do you have your cripple placard with you?” Joan asked Gertrude.

“Yeah. Wait. I’ll find it.”

Joan pulled into the first spot right in front of the store and let the car idle until Gertrude pulled the blue and white golden ticket out of her bag and hung it on the rear view mirror.

“Have you told Robin about us yet?” She asked Joan as the placard swung back and forth gently.

Joan pressed the parking break and removed the keys from the ignition and turned toward Gertrude. “No. My love life is none of his goddamn business. He tries to control me enough as it is. Unless he’s going to leave that stupid cheating good for nothing tramp and let me move in like his father wanted I’m not telling him anything.” Joan pouted. Gertrude pursed her lips before she replied.

“Why don’t you just move in with me? I have plenty of room and the cats never go in the other bed rooms. You can have two rooms all to yourself, and a bathroom, totally cat free. Plus you wouldn’t have to deal with Ed or your landlord anymore and think of all the gas money you’d save.” Tears were welling up in Gertrude’s eyes.

Joan was getting mad now. Keys in hand she pointed her index finger at Gertrude and shook it gently as she spoke. “We’ve been through this, Gert. Do you really want to put Felix’s stuff in storage? Those rooms with all that stuff still smell like him on hot days. I don’t want to be in the middle of that. Besides you wouldn’t like living with me. It would ruin all the mystery.”

Gertrude had never even been inside Joan's condo. A couple times she had waited in the car while Joan ran in to get something, but Joan always had a good excuse why she shouldn't come in. She was beginning to think she was hiding something. Gertrude balled her fist and pointed her finger right back at Joan.

"You know that's not true. You're just scared to tell everyone you're gay. You're a coward!" Joan gasped.

"Was I coward that time I let you kiss me in the movie theater?! Was I a coward that time we held hands at the mall?" Joan was livid.

A tear escaped from Gertrude's eye. "Now you know we were the only ones at that matinee and holding hands doesn't count. We're old. For all anyone knew we were helping each other from falling over. Besides, I used to hold my sister's hand all the time when we were kids." Gertrude was now crying.

"Kids and grown women are two different things. Now stop crying your old bat or I'm going to cry too." And with that Joan burst into tears and threw her arms around her friend, and no one walking by even noticed.