

JONELLE (I'll see you soon)
(a portrait of Lee, an AIDS patient)
by Tim Adams
Copr. 1987 by Timothy Rittman Adams
2,653 words

Lee bought his cane at a thrift store in November, a month after he was diagnosed with AIDS. It cost about seven dollars. The grip looks like gold plate, but it's not. It's just a cheap, gold-colored metal, shaped like an eagle's head. He doesn't need the cane inside. He's down to 112 pounds and the diarrhea gives him horrible cramps sometimes, but he's still nearly always been well enough to dash around the house. It's outdoors that he has problems. He tires easily. Did I see the hill going up to his house? He'd have to stop two or three times, on a little hill like that, just to catch his breath.

He'd rather not have to use the cane. People stare at you so much, especially if you're only twenty. They put you in the category of being a victim, a disabled person. In a gay bar, everyone dotes on you if you walk in with a cane these days. They're trying to help, but still, it can be too much. When he has to use the cane, he usually tries to walk with a limp. That way people just think there's something wrong with his foot.

He still likes to go to the bars. Not for sex anymore, of course. He'd never do that to anyone. Besides, he's not handsome anymore. He used to have those blond surfer boy good looks, but he's so skinny now, his hair is thin and lusterless and his face is so drawn that he looks ten years older. Men still cruise him, though. Sometimes he tells them he has cancer, just to keep them interested for awhile. They don't always react well when he tells them the truth, but what is he supposed to do? He just wants someone to talk to. Anything's better than just sitting inside and watching TV and waiting to die.

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He grew up in Compton, Long Beach, and Hot Springs, Arkansas. He ran away when he was twelve, and then he mostly lived in the Montrose area of Houston, the gay part. He ran away because his father beat him. His father could be a good man, but he drank, sometimes a case of beer a night. His step-mother abused him too.

Sometimes his step-mother would claw his arm so hard that the skin came off, but, still, she didn't beat him like his father did.

When you want to discipline a child, you don't just beat him with a heavy leather belt until you get physically tired of hitting him. That's what his father did. Sometimes his skin would be black and blue from his hips to his ankles. Many parents in the South are like that. To them, discipline means a beating. But you just shouldn't treat a child that way.

One day when he was twelve he was play fighting with his big sister, and he happened to slam the door hard enough to get the dog riled up. His parents had a big St. Bernard. So the dog was barking and his father stormed into his bedroom. "Lee, where the hell are you? You get the hell in here!" Lee had slammed the door, and now he was standing outside the house.

"You're going to beat me again, aren't you?" he said to his father. It was the first time he'd ever stood up to him.

"You just get the hell in here," his father said.

So, he ran away. They lived in the country. He ran away from the house, up to Mount Rinati. It was night, and it was raining. He had a pair of black jeans on, a white t-shirt and no shoes. He was twelve years old. He ran up Mount Rinati and he heard them calling after him, but there was so much empty space out there and then he found a big, round bush he could crawl into. Eventually the voices went away.

He had a vision that night, of a white shape that appeared at the top of the bush and blocked his view of the dark sky and the stars. It was bigger than a man. It spoke to him, but not in English. He's never had another vision like that. He was terrified at the time, but then the shape disappeared.

He ran away and was put in a foster home, ran away from the foster home with three girls and stole a car in El Paso and was caught, put in the foster home again, and then he ran away for good, to Houston. He slept in a laundromat for several days and literally starved, and then there was a hustler, a gay male prostitute, who felt

sorry for him and started seeing him every day to buy him lunch. "Let's go to Westheimer," the hustler kept saying. "What's Westheimer?" Finally he went there.

Westheimer Street was the heart of the Montrose area, the gay strip in Houston. He went there and was just starting down the strip for the first time, and as he passed a store a cute guy who was going into the store turned and smiled at him. From then on, Lee knew this was where he wanted to be. He knew he was gay by then. He'd already slept with a man.

He started hustling on Westheimer a day or two later. He still hadn't turned thirteen. He would have three steady relationships in the next six years, with Jeffrey, John and Andy, but he often hustled too, it was so easy to go out and get extra money merely by allowing himself to be picked up, on the street or in a hustler bar. He was very promiscuous. He slept with hundreds of men and always knew he was gay, but, ironically, the most important person in his life was a woman. Jonelle. She was thirty-four when they met. He was fourteen. She was a prostitute too.

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When he moved to San Francisco in October of 1986 he felt fine for the first few weeks, but then he got sicker and sicker. By the time he went to the hospital he was so sick that he could hardly walk. They took a blood test when he came in, and then he lay on a cot for four or five hours. Then a doctor told him he had AIDS. He had all the symptoms. It wasn't hard to figure out.

He asked the doctor to put him to sleep. He just wanted to die. He was in the hospital for two weeks with PCP pneumonia, and then the AIDS Foundation found him a place to stay, a four bedroom flat in the Western Addition. Five other AIDS patients have been through there since he moved in, but now, in early February of 1987, he lives there alone.

On Christmas Eve he hit rock bottom and tried to kill himself with twenty-five Valiums and twenty-five sleeping pills. But he's not like that anymore. He accepts the fact that he's going to die. He always had a weak heart, in the old days. The things that moved others seemed to move him a hundred times more. Often he would

break out crying helplessly in a room full of people, but he rarely cries now, and only in private. He speaks of death matter of factly. He's losing weight so fast, the diarrhea can make him lose three to five pounds in a single night. He gives himself less than a year.

There's not too much to his life nowadays. He sees a therapist twice a week, and then the volunteer support worker from the Shanti Project visits him on weekends. Catholic Social Services brings him his meals, lunch and dinner, so he sees the person who drops the meals off. That's about all. He sits at home and watches television. Dynasty is his favorite show. He keeps track of Moonlighting too, but it's a distant second. In Dynasty he liked Crystal, but then they started making her all mushy-mushy. Some of the things they write for her these days...

His all-time favorite film is The Rose. By far. Nothing even close to it. He knows it backwards and forwards, every scene. He's seen it at least thirty times. He can identify with it. The life she led, the running around like that without knowing what was going to happen next.

And, he likes it because the central character reminds him of Jonelle. That's the biggest part of why he likes it so much, actually. Jonelle.

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He met her when he was going with John, when he and John moved into a shabby apartment complex in Northwest Houston. He was fourteen and John was twenty-four. He thought they were in love at the time. Now he understands that John was just using him for his body. John never wanted to go out and do anything, and only gave him money in exchange for sex. He was left pretty much to his own devices, so, after a few weeks, he met Jonelle, who lived in the apartment complex too. After that, they were inseparable for the next three years. He could do without John and the other men he saw, but he had to have his daily dose of Jonelle.

She was a thirty-four year old prostitute. The man who paid her rent saw her two or three times a week for sex, and then she met other dates in a bar where she cocktail waitressed sometimes. She had been a topless

dancer, but she had a plain body and, really, a plain face too. Still, he likes to say now that they looked alike. She had blonde hair, like his, and blue eyes. Sometimes people thought she was his mother.

It wasn't any one special thing about her. She was just a loud, brassy, uninhibited, open-hearted woman who had grown up the hard way too. When she met his lover John, she took out her breasts and demonstrated the topless dancer's trick of making them jiggle individually. "This one's for you, John," she said, and wobbled a breast in front of his face. That was the sort of thing Jonelle would do. She hung out with a rough crowd, she bought her heroin in the ghetto, she rode with the Banditos, a motorcycle gang that a Houston narcotics detective described as like the Hells Angels "without the class." She had a two inch butterfly tattooed on the inside of her elbow so she could shoot drugs there without showing tracks. She shot heroin, cocaine, speed; she loved Dilaudid, a pharmaceutical "drugstore heroin" that sold for as much as \$50 a pill on the street, that she'd cook up and shoot too.

Not any one thing special. They never had much money. They hung out at her apartment and smoked pot. She gave him advice about men. He left when men came for sex and he turned his back when she shot drugs. He didn't like to see her that way. They never had sex together. The idea only came up once.

She moved to El Paso when he was seventeen, and then he never saw her again. Her lawyer said she died of an overdose. That's all there is to it. It's not much of a story, but how can you explain what makes someone special if she fills a need that no one else had filled, that you might not even have known was there until she filled it and made the blank loneliness that was the need go away? Too many drug convictions had cost her the custody of her children, and he had never had a mother who cared for him and loved him for what he was. They clung to each other.

If he had to choose between Jonelle and Jeffrey, John, Andy, any man he's ever known or had? He'd choose Jonelle, instantly. Maybe she doesn't sound like much. Sometimes the most important feelings are the hardest to understand.

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In February he put an ad in the personals column of the Bay Area Reporter, a local gay newspaper. It read:

GWM - 20

looking for your help NOW. Diagnosed with AIDS 10-86. Asking for possible relationship or permanent home. Can't afford much. SSI doesn't pay much. Just \$1 donation would be very helpful, but I'd be especially grateful if someone would just write me a letter and let me know someone cares and I'm not alone.

The ad was sandwiched between one for "superstar" sex videos and another for gay men with a sexual interest in spanking. Still, it drew many responses, and one was from a gay man in his late twenties who just showed up one day and said he wanted to buy Lee a round-trip air ticket to Los Angeles so he could see his real mother. His real mother, who left when he was two, lives near there. Lee tracked her down when he was seventeen and has seen her a few times since then. He thought they liked each other. She never minded about him being gay.

So, he called her up and asked if he could come down.

She didn't want to see him.

The phone conversation lasted about five minutes. I was there. He had been on a waiting list to get into one of the Shanti Project houses, which are usually nicer than what the AIDS Foundation can offer. His name had come up after all, so I was there to help him move. I heard him explain the offer to his mother, and then his murmured "...oh...I see...mm-hmm..." as he listened to her response. Then he hung up and came back in. Everything had been packed. He sat rigidly on the one chair left in the center of the room and stared past me at the wall. It was the first time I had seen him visibly upset. He is a very brave young man who tries to act stronger than he is, but some things still get through to him, and this had gotten through too. So now his face was set in the stiff, tight-lipped, overly calm expression of one who is trying not to cry.

I asked why his mother didn't want to see him.

"I don't know." He sat very straight, with his elbows positioned on the armrests just so, staring past me. "She said she couldn't get time off from work. She has Monday and Tuesday off, though. I told her I could meet her, but she just didn't want to."

I told him he seemed upset. He said that he was. No matter what he tried to do, he said, he just couldn't get through to her. "Maybe she thinks we've already said our hellos and goodbyes," he said. Maybe it was that she remembered what he used to look like, and didn't want to see the change. He knows he looks a lot worse now.

But her refusal wasn't really so surprising. None of the things that happen to him now are. The last time he tried to call home, his stepmother sighed and said, "Oh, you're not dead yet." There are people he used to know, even gays, who refuse to speak to him now. Once he saved up to go to a nice restaurant, and a customer who recognized him demanded that Lee be told to leave. That's just the way some people are about AIDS.

"How do you think Jonelle would act, if she were still alive?"

"Oh, she'd be more concerned," he said. He didn't need to think about it. "She'd be much more concerned. She'd want to see me no matter what I looked like."

Then he managed to smile a little.

"You understand now," he said.

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