

# Bones & Jokes

Ted Jonathan

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## These Words Are of No Help to Holly

At 51, Holly is the oldest resident at the Bronx homeless shelter for women. Her barn owl face—features large circular glasses in a brown plastic frame, resting—low—on the bridge of her nose. Flabby but healthy—with grayish-brown hair—she is the only white resident.

Tomorrow will be Christmas. Her first in 12 years without Pumpkin and Rhett—her two mixed-breed dogs. She used to celebrate Christmas with them, in her tiny Washington Heights apartment that the three of them shared. At the foot of the small fresh tree would be three carefully wrapped gifts. Every year, the dogs would knock the tree down, and Holly'd go through the motions of scolding them—inwardly, delighting in their traditional mischief.

Within the past year both dogs died. Alone—she'd sleep most all the time. The temp-agency stopped calling altogether. She lost her tiny apartment. Under her bed at the shelter—and always—within arms reach, is a 4 ounce Maxwell House instant coffee jar. The red plastic lid—of which—has been twisted shut tight. It contains the ashes of her dogs. It is a small glass jar—with a red label.

## Third Floor

Our next door neighbor was a tall young lady. Denberg was the name on her door. She was raising a little girl and boy alone. Don't know how I knew her first name was Judy. Her boy was nine. Two years younger than me. His name was Jody. An older man moved in with them. The name on the door then read Colello/Denberg. He was a cheap-looking cocka-doodle-doo in a three-quarter black leather coat. Like my father. Across from us lived a well-groomed kid in his late teens with good posture who wore burgundy penny loafers. I thought he might have a classy accent, but he never said boo. I don't recall ever seeing his parents, but was sure the neatly twined stack of books which would sometimes appear by the incinerator chute had belonged to them. Four more doors. In the far corner was a red-headed divorcee and her two kids. Her loner son Steven Stoltz was my age. He was good with dogs and roamed the streets and alleys surrounded by mangy strays. One night his shapely older sister Carol was sitting on our front stoop, her transistor radio blasting something new, "All Day and All of the Night," by The Kinks. The song was exciting. And so was she. Three apartments housed lone old ladies. Two of whom were no longer capable of carrying their chairs downstairs to sit in front of the building. One could, but never did. Her name was Ceil. She knew how to talk to people. And liked my mother. More than once, she would knock on our door and ask, *What's wrong in there?*

## SALAMANDERS

How he got pinned Woim or why, none of us knew. He looked regular enough. Like any one of us slightly older teenaged boys who also lived in the projects. Fact is, we didn't know or care what his real name was, or if he even had one.

One day, out of the blue, he approaches us and boldly says, "I don't go by *that name* anymore." As if he ever had a choice in the matter. "Okay... Woim." He must've been about 17 when I heard that he got drunk and drowned at Orchard Beach.

Following every summer rain thereafter, a putrid odor of unknown origin would rise and linger in the projects and the grounds would be littered with wriggling worms. Figured it somehow had to do with the death of Woim, but kept that to myself.

Decades later, the cool air soothed as I walked through a lush park following a summer rain. Trees and flowers...but most pleasing was that there was no else around. I felt a sense of wonder. Like when I was a little boy in the Catskills after a summer rain...

*The cool air smelled green. Tingling mist tickled. On the dirt road by the woods tiny orange dragons appeared. Soft yellow-underbellies.* But when I stepped out of the park onto the busy city street, for no apparent reason Woim popped into my head.

He'd been dead a year or so, when I learned the girl I was out on a date with was his sister. Pretty, with waist-length black hair, Joanna wore a white sundress. She seemed obsessed with St. Francis of Assisi. As far as obsessions went, I figured, a damn good one.

At the movies we saw actors dot vast wheat fields in *Days of Heaven*. She smelled of garlic, but I didn't care. Said she was devoutly Catholic like her Puerto Rican mom. Her father, a Czech gypsy, had long since abandoned them. Joanna Redzosko...Woim...Redzosko.