

AL GOMEZ

Anna was steamed. “All the good spots are gone. I told you.”

Thirteen going on 35, Al Gomez told himself. He knew this was a non-issue. When you’re watching a million-and-a-half bats drop from the underside of the Congress Avenue Bridge to start their nightly foraging, it doesn’t much matter if you’re picnicking right on the river bank or 20 feet back—that’s one hell of a lot of bats. She wanted to be right on the edge of the water to take pictures with her new birthday camera. She’d lined up her mother before they even left the house, saying that she’d be able to use the snaps in science class next fall in middle school.

Anna and his wife Connie had already been sending silent messages to him because he got home late from work. Now Anna huffed off to the riverbank with her camera, while Connie snapped open the picnic blanket and shook it out onto the ground.

“Ants, Mom.” Their seventeen-year old, Isabel, who’d start her senior year in high school next fall, stared at the nest’s entrance next to the blanket, her face showing both fascination and repulsion. As she raised her foot to tromp down on it, Al stopped her, not quite comfortable somehow at the prospect of all those little mashed bodies.

“Don’t, honey,” he said.

She looked at him quizzically.

“Not a whole nest. That’ll just stir them up. Let’s move the blanket a bit.” He pulled it about five feet over, annoying Connie a little in the process. Now it was even farther away from the bridge, though still about as close to the lake. Hopefully, Anna wouldn’t notice when she came back.

As Connie and Isabel began setting out their picnic supper in the residual heat of the early July evening, Maria, 22 months, wrapped her right arm around his leg at the knee, her left thumb resting wet

and secure in her mouth. He sat down on the parched grass and she immediately climbed into the lap he'd considerately made for her. As she leaned her head against his chest, he gave the top of it a little kiss.

He had left work early. Today, he was to remove two smaller windows from the kitchen wall of a house, retool the openings to take a single, bigger window, and install the larger model with its more efficient insulating glass. But termites had stopped the project in its tracks. Al yielded the area to the exterminators, while the woman he was working for hovered and wrung her hands.

He stayed till they started applying the poison. As some termites began to stagger out, obviously affected by the chemicals, he left. He would return tomorrow to replace not only the window but also any siding damaged by the insects.

This left him with the afternoon free. He guided his pickup along a meandering route across town, then drove up a quiet street toward the capitol. Traffic thickened, the street widened to accommodate it, then thickened again. When the capitol grounds came in sight, he parked his truck and sat for a while, watching.

Two men well into their 30's crossed the street in silence and made their somber way up the drive and out of sight. A balding, older gentleman followed them, his wife at his side. A car pulled up beside his truck and backed into the space behind him. The driver, a 40ish woman in a white nurse's uniform, got out and headed toward the entrance.

*I wonder if she was there, too.*

Three military officers, probably from Bergstrom Air Force Base, soon followed her. They passed a woman and a boy coming out. He was obviously her son and looked close to high school age. She made her slow way back down the drive, dabbing a tissue at her eyes while the boy's face showed equal portions of gravity and awe.

Al picked up the newspaper from the passenger seat and reread the headline: "WAR AND REMEMBRANCE: Texas Gives Thanks to American Veterans." The story went on to say how a touring

replica of the Vietnam Memorial was in Austin. There was a photograph of someone wearing a VFW cap laying a wreath, and another of a man in jeans and tee shirt and wearing a green beret. Eyes closed, he seemed to be steadying himself against the Wall with one hand. Tears were running down his face.

Al knew it wasn't a question of whether he'd visit the Wall. He would, of course. And it wasn't a question of wondering what might happen when he did. He knew it would open a yawning hole into a past he hadn't consciously visited in some time.

He remembered being a bit of a mess after he got back—drinking too much, waking in the night from he didn't know what, cycling through a couple of dead-end jobs. But Connie had stuck with him and helped him get himself right side up, while keeping Isabel oriented on school. After a bit, he was able to get on with it. Anna was born as his home remodeling business began doing well. Usually, he modernized kitchens and baths. Every so often, he'd do an add-a-room project that he enjoyed because they were all a little different. But the pleasant, if occasionally hectic rhythms of work and home would have to give place to this—this Wall.

He dropped the paper on the seat and resumed watching the foot traffic going back and forth. He felt the earlier place and time rising slowly inside, immersing him deeper and deeper in it. He thought about the names he would look for on the Wall and began to remember faces. Ken Janowitz—blond-haired, blue-eyed stud. Before he took his own turn, Ken liked to watch the action in the stalls at Mama Huong's. Abruptly, Al found himself gaping at Ken as the exploding RPG round threw him into the air.

Then it was Casey Jones. He stared at the black grenadier as he drifted by. His eyes looked straight at Al, blinking in slow motion at him. Casey seemed oblivious of his bleeding chest, hit by machine gun rounds as he fired off red smoke at the NVA.

Someone tapped on the right front fender of his truck and he looked around. A meter maid was gazing at him inquisitively and pointing at the expired parking meter. He glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw that the nurse had long since driven away. He looked at his watch and realized that he'd

been there over three hours and would be late getting home for the picnic. He grinned nervously, throwing a little wave at the meter maid, and cranked up the truck.

Maria was more than half-asleep when Connie brought him a large paper cup of sweetened iced tea. Their youngest daughter was his pet, no doubt about it. Her dark eyes went deep and she always seemed preoccupied with some serious issue or other. Connie would shake her head sometimes at the way he liked to hold her on his lap, but she always seemed pleased. Occasionally, when Al and Connie were alone, she would call her their little mistake. Usually, it was late at night and they were snuggling on the couch before going to bed. Her words actually expressed less the fact that Maria was the result of a torn condom and more that Connie didn't want it to happen again.

She'd gone on the pill—an assertive move for a Latina, even after she had left the Church behind in favor of their hasty civil ceremony—until it induced phlebitis and she had to spend four days flat on her back popping aspirin. So it was back to condoms, reinforced by spermicidal foam and a diaphragm. She seemed content, so he kept quiet about the taste of the foam. If they had another kid, he told her they'd call it Houdini.

She always called herself 'just a housewife,' but was deep into both the local and the state women-for-choice movements. She had no patience with either the dried up, celibate old bishops, as she called them, who still demanded abstinence or the rhythm method, or with the right-wing politicians who loved to throw a saddle over the abortion issue and ride it into the legislature on election day. The weathered Gomez station wagon sported a bumper sticker that read, 'Keep Your Laws Off My Body.' And she carried the sense with her that it was a fight not just for herself, but for her girls as well.

His brother Ricardo, with two sons, would tease him mercilessly about fathering only girls. "What's the matter, Al? Not enough hair on your balls to make boys?" Usually, Al would respond with a head shake and a grinning "Fuck you, Ricky." But he once confided to him that Maria was here because in high passion he'd stressed the condom so much that it literally disintegrated—only a slight

stretch of the truth—with nothing left but a few shreds of ravaged latex. Ricky had let his jaw drop just a bit, hooked on the story despite himself. “Believe it,” Al said conspiratorially.

Instead of going to Nam, Ricky went to school. He sheltered there until he didn’t need to any more, and then his master’s in sociology got him an immediate position teaching high school. Right now, he was an assistant principal. In another few years, he’d probably be running his own school.

Ricky never talked about sitting out the war. Partly, Al thought his silence on the subject must involve a little shame. He was sure it also included Ricky’s concern for his older brother as well, and Al’s difficult period right after he got back. Still, he felt they should have long since addressed the issue and laid it to rest. Such a huge thing looming up between hermanos carnales, brothers in the flesh, ought to be talked out. But Al didn’t quite know how to start such a discussion and he suspected Ricky was afraid to.

He was grateful, once he got back from Nam, that Connie never brought up the angry, puzzled arguments they had before he enlisted. His wife and small daughter were irrefutable grounds for deferment and she couldn’t understand how he could turn his back on them. The plain truth was, he didn’t quite understand it himself. When he tried to sort it out in his mind, he got fragments of newsreel images—Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima, GI’s getting 20 feet up the Normandy beach and collapsing into sudden stillness. If anyone could have seen his mental movie screen, they’d have thought he was romanticizing the war. There was some of that, but the core of it went much deeper. It was simple to him, but at the same time he couldn’t put it into words. Thinking about trying made him feel embarrassed. He silently ridiculed the screen images for not having a John Wayne soundtrack. Yet, he believed their message. His first major firefight showed him the fine print in his own movie contract, but then it was too late. After that, it came down to surviving.

Anna was easier to get along with when she came back from the water. She’d gotten some good shots of the bats sweeping low along the surface and then up into the sunset. They were still emerging by the thousands from under the bridge. Al watched uneasily as the dense, amorphous swarms set off

with grim purpose on the hunt. He thought of his old grandmother and how she would sometimes tell him about the ancient ways—about the bat god, lord of night, winging the darkness. Or was he the god of death?

He managed to eat a portion of tossed salad, but only picked at the enchiladas that had cost Connie a lot of time-consuming handwork. Later, he broke a chocolate chip cookie into bite-sized chunks for Maria, hoping it looked like he was eating some of it himself. She ate with her usual preoccupation, while Connie watched him surreptitiously from under hooded eyes.

When Maria had enough of the cookie, he lifted her gently from his lap, then stood and handed Connie the keys to the station wagon.

“Can you get the girls home okay?”

She took the keys from him. “Where are you going?” she asked apprehensively.

“I need to walk.”

“The Wall?” she asked. He nodded.

“Why don’t you wait and we’ll go with you.”

“Better if I go alone, I think.”

She looked at him a moment. “Are you all right?”

The pain in her eyes reflected his own. *The fear isn’t only hers, either.* But then his mouth relaxed and he gave her the sign of affection he usually reserved for Maria and kissed her hair.

“I’m okay,” he said.

As he walked up the hill, he turned once and waved in reassurance. When he got out of sight, he deliberately left Congress Avenue, the direct route to the capitol and the Wall. Instead, he slowly zigzagged through the streets. Eventually he found he had circled the capitol grounds and was approaching the Wall obliquely. It was full dark when he finally arrived at the foot of the drive.

The grounds were well lit. He moved gradually along, surprised at the number of people here after dark. Then he remembered this was a 24-hour operation. The drive curved, leading him up a little

rise. He caught his first glimpse of gleaming black emerging seemingly out of the ground ahead of him, its top edge straight and unyielding. He stopped and looked at the part of the polished facade he could see, knowing that the carvings on it, too small to read at this distance, were soldiers killed in the war.

He moved forward again, his motion making the letters flash and flicker on the dark Wall, shimmers of black on gleaming black. Each step he took broadened the width of the Wall, pushing its bottom corners farther apart and revealing more names. And each successive panel held a greater number of dead, thousands and thousands stretching across the glossy black.

He felt himself about to lose his sense of the separateness of these names, that the individual identities of Janowitz and Casey Jones and all the rest were about to be pulled into the vast and anonymous oneness of a collective dead. In resistance, he began to think of each name as a kind of container, cradling someone who had hoped, as he had, to survive across the time of his tour and return to a homecoming on the other side of the Pacific. Leaving Nam at last, Al had stared out the window for hours until the westerling sun abandoned his eastbound plane to the night. But while he himself had finished his crossing to landfall and dawn, these had not. With savage cruelty, death had forced them onto a dimmer, vaster sea, pushed them into a deeper darkness. He walked more and more slowly toward the ranks of names, and farther and farther from any rational grasp of what had happened. With an almost bitter irony he found that the only way he could endure having been a part of it all was to look on the Wall itself as a sea, an ocean of soldiers killed in battle. To force a corner, at least, of his reluctant mind to accept what he'd at first resisted, and cast all of these individualities into a single great expanse.

And it was only the merest luck that his own name wasn't carved here. He knew that. In the final analysis, no action of his own had kept him alive in the blind chance of combat. So why wasn't he grateful he'd made it through? If he hadn't, where would Maria be now, conceived after his return? Would she be in some limbo for souls who never found their way to breath? But she *was* here, grave and lovely in her child's mystery. Why wasn't he glad? Eyes glistening, he stood stock still, caught

whole inside the emotional core of something his mind was powerless to understand or even name.

From very far away, a voice was saying, “Can I help you find someone?”

“What?”

“I’ve got an index that tells which panel each name is on.” She must have been 60, white-haired and just a bit heavy, but tanned and exercised. She held a book that looked like a phone directory. “If you give me a name, I can tell you where to find it on the Wall.” Was she the mother of one of these names? The damned war lasted so long, she could be a widow or grandmother or sister. Maybe she’s just someone who wanted to come and help.

He hesitated, thinking of his squad leader, Chuck Paxton, but he got home okay. He thought of the firefight that pushed Paxton around the bend and the people who bought it that day. “Try Ken Janowitz,” he said.

Her first check came up empty and a couple of different spellings were no better.

“I don’t think they ever found the body,” Al said. “Could that be why he’s not there?”

She shook her head. “We’ve got the MIAs, too.”

He couldn’t understand why Janowitz wasn’t in her book. “I was there,” he said. “I saw the RPG round go off right under his feet.”

“Do you have somebody else?” she asked. “Maybe we’ll have better luck.”

She found Matt Kessler’s name right away. “Panel 15 E, line seven,” she told him.

He located the name without difficulty. As he looked at it and touched it, his mind pictured Kessler out in the paddies, grinning gamely under the double load of radio and personal gear. The claymore had chopped him up badly, but at least he never knew what hit him. Not like Mingo Sanders—Al remembered how close Mingo came, how he was slowly suffocating and finally collapsed just as they got to the hospital. He would have died right there if that nurse hadn’t instantly cut a hole in his throat and stuck in a tube.

Then a whole line of KIAs began to drift unhurried through his mind, mostly the men he got close to and then lost after he took over the squad from Paxton. Friendship always meant loss. It was that simple, no way around it. Again, he felt the incomprehension wash over him and he wondered why he was standing here reading Kessler's name instead of the other way around. He shook his head, wishing he could explain it all to Kessler, and then decided to try.

He looked around for the woman. "Do you have a piece of paper and a pen I can borrow?" She did.

*Dear Matt,*

*I'm standing at the Wall now. I touched your name and it made me remember you out in the paddies.*

*I'm sorry it was you who had to die that day...*

Pausing, he wondered who Kessler had left behind. He thought about Connie, his own strong pillar when he got back, and Ricky, needling out of guilt and love—and the girls, especially little Maria. She was God's homecoming gift, something still and lovely in this strange, alien peace. The deepest parts of his life were so simple now, but not for Kessler. Who would be in Kessler's life now, filling some small part of the void that Nam gouged out inside? If it was the other way around, would Matt press his fingers against the Wall? Would he come and touch Alejandro Gomez? There wasn't a doubt in his mind.

*I'm sorry it was you who had to die that day instead of me.*

Again, his eyes shimmered but refused to spill.

*I love you.*

*Al Gomez*

He folded the note twice and carefully wrote *SP4 Matt Kessler* across it. He knelt and, steadying himself on the Wall with one hand, laid it at the foot of Kessler's panel.

For a brief moment, he felt fulfillment at having written the note, but then the feeling slid

impersonally away. Somewhere inside, an engine of emotional wheels and cogs was supposed to be responding, but was seizing up instead. Pulleys and gears froze, locking in place. He stood abruptly and spun on his heel. He laid down half a dozen quick steps, then realized he still had the woman's pen and went back to her. Thrusting it wordlessly into her hand, he stood there a second, looking into her eyes as their hands made brief contact. Yet, despite the vividness of this seeing and touching, he had the conviction that he was simultaneously somewhere else; somewhere not perceptible to his senses, but so much more real that it threw into shadow everything merely seen and touched.

He had no idea what that other place was, except that it wasn't Nam. It must be somewhere in the void between there and here. He decided this was how people in science fiction movies felt when they were being transported from one place to another, disassembled for shipping into the billion different electrical impulses they were made of. Still technically a single entity, yet radically different because the entire intricate web of connection linking all those impulses had been ripped out whole. Hands wouldn't obey, feet lacked any will of their own, and feelings that wanted to get inside each of those impulses couldn't penetrate even one. A thousand million infinitesimal charges, cheek by jowl, yet total strangers to each other.

And what happens to somebody if those charges can't rewire themselves at the other end of the transport?

His feet turned him away from the woman and carried him swiftly down the drive. He'd left the river with a clear destination, but had wandered along in no hurry. Now, he drove himself onward with urgency to reach no place he was aware of. He walked north for a long time, then looped back southward. His pace gradually tempered and he swung back toward the north. It occurred to him that he was going in circles, but he didn't care.

Far up the deserted avenue, he glimpsed an illuminated church and began to focus on that. Its Gothic spire was bright in the glow of several intense spotlights, a permanent testimonial to the

congregation's faith and fiscal soundness. As he got closer, he could pick out the individual buildings of the church complex on both sides of the quiet street, including a two-level parking garage for the Sunday morning crush. He looked up at the tower. He had to admit it was impressive, even though he thought it would fit better in New England.

He passed a curbside oak, squatty from the unforgiving press of Texas heat, then leaned against a lamppost, gazing up. A hundred feet above the tower, a tiny flash of grayish black flickered against the darker sky. Soon, there was another, and then more. *Snow in Austin on the second of July*. He chuckled. Then he realized what he was looking at. The tiny flashes of gray were the undersides of bats' wings caught by the spotlights. There must have been hundreds of them stacked above the blazing lights, wheeling and turning and darting, but why?

Then he knew. They were on the hunt.

Moths were being pulled in and held by the shafts of light. In their turn, the ravenous bats were drawn to the moths, to the kill. And the flickers of gray winked above—hundreds of them, thousands.

Bat god, lord of night.

*How long does this go on? Till dawn?* The moths came on unresisting, drugged by the light, fluttering dazed to their slaughter. *How many bats are hunting them?* Thousands, hundreds of thousands. *How many moths did one bat kill in a night?* Anna told him once, but when he tried to do the math his mind had boggled. As he stared up now, his brain was seized with fresh incomprehension. All he knew was that every flash and flicker meant a death, while an intense snowstorm of gray was raging above the spire. They dipped and swooped, snatched and killed, and still the moths staggered onward, pulled oblivious into the light.

The carnage. The carnage.

Then, in the flickering above the tower, he recognized the letters shimmering on the Wall. All at once, everything was clear to him. Suddenly, he knew, knew how it all fit together, and knew he had

known for a very long time. Deep inside, things were breaking free. Pulleys and gears began to move, wheels and cogs turned recklessly. He felt a little whimper of sound explode into a gasping cry and tears began flooding down. For one last rational moment, he wondered how it had kept itself hidden inside him so long. Then it swept him mindless away, shuddering with sobs. He clung to the street light, sliding desperately down to the curb of the empty street, hanging on and shaking. Trembling there, weeping, alone. He knew now—lured, used, abandoned. He knew everything.

Slowly the racking sobs eased, then faded. His forehead, damp but cool, felt like a fever had broken. Gradually, he became aware of how calm he felt, how strangely free of the old, unnamed burdens, and then of how quiet the street was. The silence was almost profound.

In the distance he heard a single car and watched it cross the street down at the next corner. Beyond, he saw a lone bicyclist heading his way. He watched the rider's gradual progress from his perch on the curb, his arms still draped loosely around the street light. Al wondered why he wasn't trying to figure out what he'd just been through, but he simply didn't feel the need. The rider turned out to be a young guy sporting a back pack, probably a grad student cramming at the university library before it closed for the holiday. Al watched him as he neared, noticing a faint, strangely pleasurable warmth in himself from what he'd just gone through. Right now that was enough. The kid rode by without even seeing him, and it was just as well. He'd probably have thought he was a drunk. Al chuckled at that from the vantage of his gentle little high.

Suddenly all the church lights went out. He noted he was startled, but not panicked. A normal reaction. It was the sort of unexpected thing that, right after he got back, would have released a monster charge of adrenaline, wiring him and keeping him wired. But tonight he was free of that. Normal.

He decided they must have the lights on some kind of automatic timer. Must be midnight, maybe later. No wonder it's so quiet around here. Connie would be worried, or worse. With his earlier track record, he couldn't blame her.

Up the way the bike rider had gone, a car turned into the avenue and started coming toward

him. Time to head for home. He stood, steadying himself on the lamppost. Then he realized something was funny about the car. Coming that slow at this time of night it had to be a cop, making sure doors were shut tight and there were no unwelcome flashlights moving around inside the church buildings. He started to walk the opposite way, the car slowly approaching behind him. He realized that sometimes they looked for bad guys that way, too. What if the kid on the bike is a burglar? Or a rapist? He fought the urge to pick up his pace, as the lights behind him grew stronger. He imagined the cop asking what he'd been doing at eleven o'clock tonight. Al couldn't even tell him what time it was. As the cop spotted him, he heard the car behind him accelerate suddenly and saw the headlights intensify. There was the sound of brakes and the car door opening.

“Hey!”

*Please don't let it be an Anglo.* He turned.

“Al! Where the hell have you been all night?” His brother Ricky hurried toward him—relieved, angry, but apparently mostly worried. His car stood at a 45 degree angle to the curb, the driver's door wide open.

“Walking around.”

Ricky put both his hands on his brother's shoulders. “You all right?” He thrust his concerned face into Al's and inhaled.

“No, I haven't been drinking,” Al said, annoyed.

“Well, when you first got back...” Ricky paused, unable to find words that wouldn't get him in deeper. He shrugged.

“Yeah, I know,” Al conceded.

“I'm sorry, I...we were worried.”

“We?”

“When you weren't back at midnight, Connie called.”

She must have gotten Ricky out of bed. “What time is it?”

Ricky looked at him strangely.

“I’m not wearing my watch, okay? What time is it?”

“It’s after 2:00.”

Al made a little face. “Gonna be a long day tomorrow.”

“Connie said you left for the monument about 8:00. Where have you been for six hours?”

“I didn’t go straight there. I walked around a while first. I don’t know how long. Then when I left, I started walking some more.” He thought a moment. “I wrote a letter while I was there.”

“A letter? Who to?”

How to tell him? “A Nam buddy.”

Ricky was frankly puzzled. “Couldn’t he get to town for it?”

True. The wisp of a smile softened Al’s mouth. “He’s on the Wall, Ricky.”

He watched understanding dawn on his brother, followed by a rush of emotion, as Ricky grasped that Al had been corresponding with the dead.

“You sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine.”

Ricky paused. His eyes faltered and he looked down. “Well, *I’m* not. Not by a long shot.” He straightened and looked at his brother. “Not since you told us all you were going to enlist.”

“What do you mean?”

“You and I have never talked about—the war and all that.”

Especially ‘all that,’ Al thought. He looked at his brother. Ricky was scared. “It’s late. Let’s go home.”

“If I don’t do this now, I’ll never do it.” He took a deep breath.

“Ricky...”

“The war was wrong. I believe that.” Ricky’s eyes narrowed and his mouth tautened. “My

classmates who didn't go to college—Pete, Chachi, Greg Andrews, Roberto—drafted, sent over, killed. Just like that. And I was a sophomore at U.T., sweating my way through finals.” He shook his head. “Chachi and I—after school, we’d sit around the living room and play our guitars, remember? And then...” The pain of the memory seeped into his eyes. “I’ll never forget that year, never. Funeral after funeral, I thought they’d never stop. And the flag on the caskets—as if that explained everything, made it all okay. If you dared to ask why, people acted like you were sabotaging the war effort. Don’t I wish. And *you*.” Ricky’s face twisted into a mix of anger and incomprehension. “Why did you enlist? The end of your senior year, you had Connie pregnant, and the two of you ran off right away that summer and got married. The war could have lasted another 20 years and they wouldn’t have taken you. I never understood.” Ricky paused. His expression softened a bit. “And me,” he said, sadness shading his features. “I was right about the war. Why couldn’t that have been enough? But at night, when I was done studying and didn’t have anything to keep my head busy, I’d think about Chachi and I’d have these—but I was awake for them.” His anger at himself rose again. “Why couldn’t I just be right? Why did I have to be scared, too? After Chachi I knew it could happen, so I stayed in school. And after a while, I felt okay with that. It was okay for me. But then *you*...” His struggle to understand was failing again and his eyes began to fill with tears. “That’s when I found out what it *really* meant to be scared. I never had a good night’s sleep the whole year you were there. You and Chachi would get all mixed up together in my head. Sometimes, I thought maybe you went over because I didn’t, and then...” Even as his anger flared, the tears began to slide down his cheeks. “God *damn* it, Al, I hated you so much that year, and I was so scared for you.” And then the anger slid away. His eyes were pleading. “And I was...I was ashamed. I...”

His eyes were begging for a forgiveness he was powerless to give himself. Tears ran freely and his lips were trembling, while Al was dry-eyed and calm, and wondering how he could be this man’s brother and not know he could feel such pain. Al wanted to tell him how, before his tour was half over, he knew that Ricky was right. He shook his head sadly. “Ricky,” he said simply, and embraced him.

“Hermano. Mi hermano.”

They hugged tightly in the quiet street until Ricky was able to stop crying. The coming of this deeper part of the night had finally ended the killing above the spire. Although his sleep would be brief, Al sensed it would be sweet.

“Whoo.” Ricky exhaled softly, brushing his hand across his eyes. Al hoped his younger brother had dropped an old and heavy burden tonight, as he had, but a shame like that could run deep. The choices of his past were in concrete now and could never be changed—just like his own.

But they had talked it out. They had come to a different wall tonight, the one between the two of them, and pulled down a good-sized chunk of it.

“Come on, hermanito,” Al said. “Take me home.”