

Walking His Life Away



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Sports Illustrated July 24, 2006 issue

For race walker Albert Heppner, making the 2004 U.S. Olympic team was all-important—perhaps, in the end, too important

By Gary Smith

July 25, 2004

Who knows why?

In two weeks they'll light the world's largest wick, let some white birds loose and then start lining up men and women from around the earth to see who can run the fastest from here to there. The fastest down straightaways, around curves, over barricades, through puddles, even clenching metal sticks. Who knows why? For days you'll sit in front of your TV and watch all of these races. Except for one.

It's the oddest and longest footrace, the one that forbids the competitors to go as fast as they can—in fact, that forces them to walk. It's the one Olympic race you'll scoff at, at first. Then ignore.

That's the race I'll be watching closest. See, I know what happened one day five months ago in the race to get to this race. I know how much can be at stake when a man takes a four-hour walk: Everything.



Original Layout

Al Heppner was the first race walker to arrive. He appeared just as dawn did on the U.S. Olympic Trials 50-kilometer course at Chula Vista Marina, a few miles south of San Diego. His stomach hurt. He hadn't slept. No one had ever wanted a race as badly as he wanted this one.

The others began to materialize in the wan gray light on that Sunday in February: the race officials, the media, the walkers and their dearest friends and loved ones, along with a few dozen high school cheerleaders that the event's organizer had mustered to create noise and excitement.

No one else cared about race walking. No one else would watch men or women walk that funny walk for hour after hour. Neither the NCAA nor the U.S. and European pro track circuits bothered to hold the event. Bob Costas, NBC's Olympics host, would say that having a race to see who can walk the fastest is like having a contest to see who can whisper the loudest.

The walkers assembled for the 7:30 a.m. start. They'd all long since made it to the other side of mirth and disdain. They'd all had seven-year-olds follow them and ape their pumping arms and swaying hips. They'd all heard 20-year-olds barrel by in rusting cars and scream Fag! at them on country roads. They'd all shed their need for the world's approval, attuned their ears and hearts to an inner voice. Except for one.

Al stood out. He was the 5'8" piper of race walking, the 29-year-old with the munchkin's cackle who was loved by everyone in his fringe fraternity. The one so loud that other walkers would remind him to use his indoor voice. So vulnerable that he'd sob on a stranger's shoulder after being disqualified from a race. So exuberant that he'd end up on the dance floor at a postrace party, his shirt soaked, juking like no Jew ever juked, encircled by people chanting, "Go, Al! Go, Al! Go, Jiggy!" Rabbi Jiggy. That was just one of his nicknames.

"Don't make it happen, Al," fellow race walker Dave McGovern counseled him at the starting line. "Let it happen." Al nodded. He had heard it a thousand times: Patience. Stay inside yourself. Walk the first 25K slower than the last 25K. Don't try to bust open a 31-mile race early. It's lethal, Al.

Only he and four other Americans—Curt Clausen, Philip Dunn, Sean Albert and Tim Seaman—had a real shot at the four-hour time necessary to qualify for the Athens Olympics. No more than three could go. They'd all trained together every day for years at the ARCO Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista.

Foremost loomed Curt, the reigning U.S. champ, the gritty U.S. champ determined to make his third straight Olympics, then return to law school. Philip, the quiet bookworm—Al turned inside out—had been Al's enemy a few years earlier, the two of them forever clashing for the third berth on national teams, but who could sustain anger at a puppy like Jiggy? Mild-mannered Sean seemed on the verge of breaking the four-hour barrier for the first time, nearly in command of his long legs and arms in this cruelly mechanical event. Tim, Al's fiery roommate at Wisconsin-Parkside, was a 20K specialist who had said he'd likely stay in the race for 30K and then pull out, use it for conditioning. . .or was he lying in the weeds, ready to pounce if he saw a chance to steal an Olympic berth at 50K?

"Go, Al!" a fan screamed as the gun sounded and the walkers took off. Who wouldn't root for him? He was the greeter at the gate, the man who popped up from his moonlighting post behind the customer-service desk at the training center dining hall and showed all the newcomers where to get their mail, their rubdowns, their grub, then helped them haul in all their belongings, thrilled to welcome one and all—Americans and foreigners, swimmers, skiers, shot-putters, shortstops—to the fantasy factory in the Southern California desert. He'd carry his lunch tray to the far table where a new arrival ate alone. He'd take the Honduran cyclist to the airport at 5 a.m., beg the outraged decathlete to make peace with the offending kayaker, concoct nicknames for them all. Hey, V-Dub! Big John Stud, my man! What's happenin', Apples? He turned his cramped dorm room into the campus lounge, the gathering place for field trips organized by camp counselor Al to the amusement park, beach, ball games, bars and dance clubs. He turned all these masters of abstruse and exotic athletic skills into the most unexpected thing: a family.

"You can do it, Al!" came the cries as he and the four other favorites, in a cluster, fired away from the pack. Al settled into rhythm and felt the nightmare of the 50K begin: his heart pumping hard enough to generate 3 to 3 1/2 steps per second, equivalent to the rate of a 100-meter sprinter, pumping even harder than a marathon runner's heart because he had to use more of his body to create locomotion and then maintain that rate for nearly two hours longer. His gait requiring a gymnast's explosive strength in the hips and hamstrings, a dancer's fluidity. The mental strain unrelenting, because if he fatigued or lost focus covering those 31 miles at a 7:40-per-mile clip, he could violate one of race walking's two bedrock rules and be disqualified. One rule stipulated that his lead leg remain straight from the moment of contact with the ground till the leg passed beneath his hips. Al could usually follow that one. The other one, the rule that tortured him no end, decreed that at least one foot be in contact with the racecourse—both feet could never be off the ground at the same time.

Agony loves company. That's why most 50Ks began the way this one did. The best walkers broke away and forged an unspoken pact, one man doing the hard slogging out front for a few minutes, cutting wind resistance, then dropping back and drafting behind the next leader, each man drawing psychological comfort from the group for 35 or 40 kilometers, functioning on trust. Trust that his competitors would sustain a pace that would keep him on target. Deeper trust, in himself, that he'd have what it takes to devour them all in the jungle of the final 10 kilometers.

For the first seven kilometers Al, Curt, Philip, Tim and Sean upheld the agreement. Then Curt grabbed a handful of toilet paper from a tabletop and began to surge away.

What should Al do?

Stay with Curt, the race walking sages had advised him. After all, they said, he knows the 50K's secrets and trip wires the way a husband knows his wife's. Let him take you to a 3:58 finish, Al, take you all the way to Athens.

But now Curt, far too early, was pulling away. Did the tissue paper in his hand mean what it seemed to, that he was about to make a toilet stop and was speeding up to compensate for the time he was about to lose? Or could it be a ruse?

Al's competitive lust had cost him before. Once, when he was six and his father's bike moved ahead of his, he'd pedaled so furiously that he'd pitched over the handlebars and broken his arm. At camp six years later he broke his arm again, astonishing counselors who had never seen a boy dive with such fury in a friendly game of Capture the Flag. Too many times he'd been disqualified from races because he couldn't restrain his urge to go faster, faster, couldn't keep both feet on the ground.

Curt's lead increased. The race walkers all let him go, mindful of that toilet paper. Except for one.

No, Al, No. . . .

Those who knew race walking muttered those three words as he went after Curt. They all wanted to protect Al. They all knew the story of Al and the monsoon in the 2000 U.S. Olympic Trials. They all knew how he'd had one of the three Olympic berths in the bag that day, leaning into the 30 mph winds and frigid downpour to share the lead with Curt and Andrew Hermann, opening up a seemingly insurmountable 2 1/2-minute advantage over Philip Dunn after 37 kilometers when Philip pulled a hamstring and stopped dead. How Al had slowed a little then, had lost the protection of the other two walkers and begun to shiver, then shake and finally shut down with hypothermia, watching in a daze as Philip bit back the pain and stormed past him to become the third Olympian. How Al had swooned into a race official's arms before the finish, been cocooned in blankets for an hour before comprehending the catastrophe and weeping. Then lapsed into a deeper fog, finally departing from the Olympic Training Center by mutual consent because no man that depressed could remain there.

If only Al had done what the other walkers had done before the race: put on a T-shirt beneath his singlet. But then, people were always saying, "Al, what were you thinking?" The first oven he ever owned caught fire because Al thought that he was supposed to keep oven mitts in the oven. One night his roommate at Chula Vista, triple jumper Von Ware, returned from a three-day road trip during a rainstorm and found all his shoes on their balcony because Al had decided to rearrange their dorm room. The balcony had no overhang. Ware's shoes were soaked, and one sneaker contained a swallow's nest with four eggs. Ware wanted to wring Jiggy's neck as the swallow dove and pecked and shrieked at them, but how could he? Al was his, and everyone else's, little brother.

Al's six-month depression after the 2000 trials frightened all of them. For half the day Al would lie in bed or on a couch, staring at floors, at ceilings, at SportsCenter repeats. "No, Al, no," they pleaded when he told them he was joining the U.S. Army that August.

But everyone was wrong. Boot camp jolted Al out of his depression, the Army accepted him into its World Class Athlete Program, and—bingo!—that December, Specialist Albert Heppner was back. Back in race walking, back in the ARCO Olympic Training Center, back in his old dorm room, back in the family.

His old buoyant self again, leaping out of his car to dance the Electric Slide with a pretty pole vaulter on the side of the road at 2 a.m., another of those women whose relationships with Al didn't quite pan out. And now, back in the U.S. Olympic Trials, chasing his redemption, closing in on Curt in kilometer 10.

It wasn't a ruse. Curt peeled off the course and ducked into the portable toilet. Al, the man who needed people all around him, looked back. He was way out front, all alone.

What should Al do? The men behind him had stuck together for years, and Al was their glue. He exchanged gifts and shared holiday meals with them, played hoops in Mexico and gasped for oxygen with them during altitude training in the Andes. He was the mediator, the one who needed most to be liked. . .and yet the one who'd turn grim and silent a few weeks before a big race, torch the pace that coach Enrique Pena set for them in training, take off and turn practices into wars.

The contradiction of his two needs—for love and conquest—contorted him, confounded him, churned again and again in his training log entries: Focus on yourself! In how many other athletic disciplines would America's highest-ranked rivals find themselves together on a five-hour hike at the bottom of a gorge, as they did a few days after last Thanksgiving in the mountains west of San Diego, marveling as they stared 450 feet up at the Pine Valley Bridge, the highest in the U.S. interstate system? Chortling together after Al reached into a thicket of poison oak and then made matters worse, much worse, when he took a pee?

Now Al faced the second critical juncture in the race of his life, a decision that cried out for the least of his skills: calculation. He could slow his pace and rejoin the others, as the cognoscenti hoped. Or he could roll the dice, maintain his pace and his lead, begin to sow doubt in his competitors' hearts. After all, he'd left the pack and walked a sub-four-hour 50K once before, a 3:58:45 second-place finish to the late-charging Curt in the 1999 U.S. nationals. He was in better shape now, the best condition of his life, and better form too, having surprised even himself by winning the award for best technique in a race just a few weeks before. Damn it all, he'd been beating every one of them, even Curt, in their daily training sessions over the past few weeks. Why should Al shadow Curt and settle for a second-or third-place ride to Athens when he could win and go in style?

Curt popped out of the john and fell in with the others. Al made up his mind. No, he wouldn't slow down and rejoin the men behind him. No, he wouldn't maintain his lead and his pace. He accelerated and began to pull farther away.

The numbers flashed on the website monitoring the race. The walking fraternity across the country joined the ones along the course murmuring those three words. No, Al, no. . . .

His lead swelled to 30 seconds. . .45. . .a full minute! He heard his mother's squeaky voice imploring him onward. He glimpsed his father cheering him on too, no matter how perplexed the old man was. Seventy-one-year-old Max Heppner cared nothing for sports, couldn't fathom how a footrace had become life and death to his flesh and blood. As a child in the Netherlands he'd had to run for his life, hiding from the Nazis for three years in an attic, a barn, a windmill, a bathhouse, a chicken house.

Max lost his grandfather to the gas chambers, his father to disease and his companion in hiding—a boy eight years older than he—to a hammer blow from one of the people Max's father was paying to hide them from the Nazis. When the horror ended, he and his grief-ravaged mother washed ashore in America, where he eventually married and for 15 years tried to live as if the Holocaust hadn't happened

to him, tried to muster the only response a man could make to six million deaths: creating one new life. Finally, when Max and his wife, Evelyn, had almost given up hope, came the miracle: Albert.

Then, four years later, the wallop. Max left his wife and son, having fallen in love with a therapist who'd lost relatives to the same butchers, a woman with whom he could finally talk about the depression and nightmares from all the memories he'd buried. Evelyn turned Al over to her sister in Cleveland and sank into depression too. Nobody could say how it all affected the boy, but he didn't take it sitting down. He bounced off walls, crawled under chairs, ricocheted through stores, ran circles around his house when he returned home to Columbia, Md., a few months later.

He kept slipping out of the quiet house, finding his way into a chair at neighbors' dinners, materializing in the empty seat at strangers' restaurant tables. Evelyn took him to see a play and nearly choked when she looked up during a dance number and saw Al on stage, shimmying for all he was worth. He ended up on Howard High's pep squad, the only white boy among a flock of African-American girls, bringing down the house with his hip-hop moves. Sure, depression was rampant among children of Holocaust survivors, but how could it catch that dynamo out there with the gold chain, backward cap and baggy clothes all a-flapping?

His father, by now, had found a mission. He'd joined a group of Holocaust survivors and organized an international seminar on the subject, begun delivering lectures and laying plans for two books and a movie he would produce about his family's experience, all under his new name, Amichai—Hebrew for "my people live." Al stopped staying with him every other weekend and in summers. He wasn't going to be the son of a Jewish Holocaust survivor. He was going to be a winner, baby, red, white and blue.

One problem: He had to be an athlete first. He was too short and scrawny to play the all-American sports he adored, but there was one thing, God knows, that he could do: run circles. He became one of the top three distance runners at his high school, amazing teammates when he'd run off after races to run some more, but it wasn't enough. He wasn't the best. One day when he was 15, he and a buddy shook with laughter at a Junior Olympics meet as they watched some little kids bobbing around the track in a most peculiar way. "I'll do that next week," Al said. "You watch."

"Bet you a dollar you'll never do it," said his friend. Al entered the next week's 3K race walk, drawn to the strange discipline that both released and restrained his boundless energy but seduced even more by the heft of that first-place medal draped around his neck. So what if he was the only entrant in his age group?

His relatives and neighbors were astonished and relieved. The pinball had a path. A calling, like his father. The kid who couldn't afford college had an athletic scholarship. The boy who had to run would walk.

Curt veered to the toilet again. Philip and Sean, too, were wincing with stomach distress. Everyone was wrong. Al kept increasing his lead—1:30. . .1:40. . .1:45—as the halfway point blew by. His form was flawless. Out front, alone, he didn't have to struggle with his doubts or his impulse to run. Out front he commanded everyone's eyes.

This was better than the best night of his life, that magical eve in Poza Rica, Mexico, six years earlier, when Al—dead last and racked with intestinal pain in a race the U.S. team had entered solely for conditioning—defied his coach's order to stop after 30 kilometers, obeying instead the adoring cries of

the female spectators who'd fallen for his baby-face grin, who waited five hours for him to finish and showered him with kisses, flowers and lollipops until security guards escorted him away. It was "a brief moment in my life," he wrote in an article, "that I will always treasure."

Yes, Al was race walking's bard. Singlehandedly, he'd solved his dilemma—what if he became an Olympian and no one ever knew?—by making sure people knew, by writing previews and wrap-ups of all his races, by collecting the e-mail addresses of everyone he met, nearly 500 of them, and sending his stories to them and to a half-dozen race walking periodicals and websites. The off-weeks he spiced with amusing Day in the Life of Al and His Fellow Walkers chronicles that were so well done that you'd wonder why he was walking his life away instead of spending it with all those other sports-smitten Jewish lads who couldn't jump or jack a curveball—the ones in the press box.

At last, today, he wouldn't need to clang his own bell. His triumph would be in the San Diego newspaper—who knew, might even merit a few lines in Sports Illustrated trumpeting AlHeppner, Olympian. An upgrade, for sure, over SI's Faces in the Crowd mention of his NAIA 5K championship in 1997, laminated on a plaque that hung on his wall. Sweeter than his appearance in the "Your Portfolio" feature in USA Today's Money section.

The small crowd filled his ears with the most heavenly music of all as he blew through the 30K mark: "U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!" Imagine how that would sound when he marched into the magic circle on the floor of the Olympic Stadium for the opening and closing ceremonies. Oh, rest assured, everyone back home would see Al. He'd come bursting out of the stadium tunnel, high-fiving Iverson and swapping e-mail addresses with LeBron, boogying with the Swedish synchronized swimmers and twirling the Canadian gymnasts round and round. He'd be mayor of the Olympic Village by the dawn of Day 2.

Thirty-two K's down. A two-minute lead over Curt and Tim, with Philip, more than a minute behind them, slowing down and about to throw up. All of it, every bit of Al's obsession, worth it now: the 100 miles a week of walking, the interval training so intense that even the 10,000-meter runners marveled at it, the sleepless nights in the \$5,000 oxygen tent designed to simulate high altitude and increase red-blood-cell production, the arrows spray-painted on the roads in the neighborhoods of all the friends and relatives he visited out of town to mark his 15-mile routes. All the exhortations plastered on his walls—GET PSYCHED!... BELIEVE IT!... TASTE IT ALL! All the details etched into his daily racing log for years: weight, pulse, heart rate, body fat, lactic acid level, mileage, times, temperature, weather, route location, goals.

Balance? Perspective? The all-eggs-in-one-basket stuff that Jim Bauman, the sports psychologist at the Olympic Training Center, and Al's parents worried about as the 2004 Olympic Trials drew nearer and memories of his 2000 crash returned? Sure, Al knew balance was important. But not too much balance, because somewhere out there some unbalanced sonofabitch who lived and breathed and slept the Olympics even more than Al did was waiting to kick his balanced ass. Somewhere some guy, burrowed even deeper in a tunnel to overcome enormous obstacles and reach the Games through sheer will and wanting, was being videotaped for an up-close-and-personal profile that would make eyes mist in homes across America.

"But what happens if you don't make it this time?" his mother fretted on the phone.

"Don't worry, Ma, this time I can handle it," he replied.

"There's a million other things you can do, Al."

"I have to get to the Olympics, Ma."

"But it's not going to change your life, Al," Tim Seaman chimed in. "I made the Olympics, and look where I'm living—an apartment in the Mexican 'hood."

"I have to get to the Olympics, Tim."

They didn't understand. The dreamer had cased dreamland and found it: that one small window left ajar, that one entry for an ordinary athlete into the world's most extraordinary athletic showcase. It didn't matter that Poland's and Russia's best walkers could cover the 50K 20 minutes faster than Al ever had. It was good to want something that much. It made him feel alive. He was surer than ever in 2002 after his father, eager to be closer to his son, paid for Al to take a four-day course called Landmark Forum, a '90s incarnation of the est self-empowerment workshops that swept the nation in the '70s. Al loved it. Landmark, he told people, made him understand the reason that he hadn't made the 2000 Olympics: He hadn't wanted it badly enough. He hugged his dad, who flew from the East Coast to attend Al's "graduation," and he crowed, "Dad, you gave me life twice!"

Nothing could stop him now that he'd been given the green light to want even more than he'd wanted before. Not the hernia surgery in 2003. Not the decline in his performances that meant he had to give up his dorm room at the Olympic Training Center. Not a new wave of depression that began to devour him, no matter how many times he was reminded that he could keep training, working and eating at the center. Not the nights when the Prozac he took to combat the depression, possibly triggering a manic reaction, made him more hyperactive than ever, kept him up dialing friends across the world, playing video games and cleaning out his closet.

He flew to Maine to improve his custom-made walking shoes, added yoga to his regimen of walking, weightlifting and swimming. He swore off women. He vowed that he was going to bring his splintered family together in Athens. He made a sign and taped it dead center in the bathroom mirror of the condo his parents helped him buy in Chula Vista:

NOBODY WANTS IT MORE THAN ME
ATHENS 2004

He stopped taking Prozac. An Olympian couldn't possibly need such a crutch, and besides, the quest killed sadness better than any drug could. "It's just situational depression," he told people. "I'm fine now. . . . My life is like a fairy tale now."

He affixed a second sign to his wall—THERE'S NO 'I' IN TEAM, BUT THERE IS IN IRAQ—because if he didn't make the four-hour Olympic qualifying time, he'd likely lose his place in the World Class Athlete Program and might end up being reassigned anywhere.

He rose at a meeting of the track and field athletes at the training center, wearing the ATHENS 2004 sweatshirt he'd bought a year before the Games. The speech he delivered might set off alarms in other settings, but in this one it lit a blaze. "The Olympics are a precious, precious opportunity," he cried. "I'm serious as a heart attack!... It's a fragile opportunity, and you've got to make sure you're doing everything"—his fist pounded a table—"every goddam thing you can do to put yourself in the best position to make that team. . . . But it's not good enough to make the team! That's why I brought this

freakin' sweatshirt! My goal is not to make the team, my goal is to contend for a medal! If you guys can't see that, if you guys don't want to contend for a medal, then you guys shouldn't be here! I don't even know if I'm gonna make the team! There may be a monsoon again! I hope to God I do, but I may not. But I swear to God, if I make it, I'm fightin' for my country." His fist pumped. The Olympic hopefuls whooped. "I'm going to the goddam Olympics because I'm gonna try to win a medal! And I'm gonna freakin' die rather than lose!"

Al began to slow.

Had he failed to take enough liquids and carbohydrate gels, underestimated the effect of temperatures climbing from the 40s into the 60s on a course with no shade? Or was he just recovering for a kilometer or two, girding for the home stretch?

Al slowed even more. On came Curt, chewing at the gap. On came Tim, catching a second wind and deciding to go for it all. By the 34th kilometer, it was written all over Al's flesh: He'd miscalculated. At 35K, Curt and Tim went by him as if Al were planted in the asphalt.

The world around him began to whirl. He crept the next five kilometers, and then the horror of 2000 flashed before his vacant eyes. Philip, seemingly out of the race minutes earlier, stormed past him into third place. . .again. "C'mon, Al, go with me," Philip implored, his heart aching this time for Al. But Al couldn't. No one, until afterward, would realize how much pressure he'd heaped on himself, how much energy had been consumed by the Olympic flame that burned within him.

Curt won in 3:58:24, the only walker to slip in under four hours and qualify for Athens. Then came Tim, Philip, Sean. . .and finally Al, staggering home fifth in 4:23:52, bending over at the finish line, being kissed on the back by a race official whose heart was broken too, then staggering into a blanket that someone held open for him, sagging onto a stretcher, trembling with dehydration and disbelief that his dream had slipped away again.

Yes, Al, Yes.

You still have a shot, a helluva shot, everyone at the training center reminded him. There's the World Cup in Germany in May, and if you don't get your four-hour race there, then Wisconsin-Parkside will hold a 50K and you can try again. There are still two slots open, Al! Keep your chin up! You can still go to Athens!

Al nodded, said little. He didn't tell them that there was nothing left inside him, nothing left at all. Everyone was relieved that he didn't seem quite as distraught as he had been in 2000.

His father encouraged him all he could, then left California and flew back home two days after the race. His mother remained at his condo. On the third day, he mustered a smile as he headed out the door. "I'm going to train with Tim, Ma," he called. He met Tim at the Olympic Training Center dining hall for a breakfast with California congressman Randy (Duke) Cunningham and Olympic candidates who'd received federal scholarship money to attend college and graduate classes.

The congressman had heard about the race. He rose and told a story of a silver dollar his father had given him to keep in his pocket as a reminder never to give up, and how that coin and his father's admonition had helped him survive a drill sergeant who took him to his breaking point at flight training

school in Pensacola, Fla., and later during harrowing moments as a fighter pilot over Vietnam. He concluded by rolling silver dollars across the table to Al and Tim.

"That's for you to keep," said Cunningham, "to remind you, the way my silver dollar from my father did for me, never to give up."

Who knows what that silver dollar meant to Al? He left the dining hall with it, ran an easy three kilometers with Tim and 20K race walker John Nunn, then said goodbye to them and Coach Pena. It was 11 a.m. He climbed into his SUV and departed.

No one knows what filled those next eight hours. He exchanged a series of calls with his mother, promising to pick up her cousin in San Diego that evening so the three of them could eat together at seven. At 5 p.m. he told his mother he had to stop at the airport and pick up a friend. Instead he drove toward the mountains. There was a place he remembered.

A light mist fell. He neared Pine Valley, the gorge 45 minutes west of San Diego that he and the other walkers had hiked down three months earlier. His mother called at 6:50 wondering what had become of him. "Sorry, Ma, the weather's bad, my friend's plane's late," Al lied.

"Please, Al, my cousin's waiting," she protested. "Can't you find someone else to wait for your friend?"

For the first time, she heard an odd ring to his reply. "Uh. . .I'll try," he said. She called again six minutes later. The cellphone, lying near his wallet, rang again and again in his car.

Al began to walk across the bridge. Cars hissed past him on the wet asphalt. Dusk pooled in the gorge below. He stopped not even a third of the way across. He wouldn't need all 450 feet.

Now that the flame was out, the rules made no sense. He looked over the railing. The emptiness went on and on. Both feet left the ground.