



Touching the Wall

by Cat Lady Firebird

Amanda had finally allowed the boys to go run around, but she remained on the hill outside the Wall, watching the people who had visited during and after the day's ceremonies. There was a pattern: they came alone, or in twos or threes, but never any more than that. They tended to be middle-aged men, sometimes with their wives, but often without. They'd spend several minutes tracing along the names, particularly the hundred-plus that had been unveiled earlier in the day. Then there'd be a moment — in some cases, a quick one; but in many others, a significantly longer one — where they'd touch the wall with their head bowed.

More than a few left something behind.

She'd brought the boys out to the dedication ceremony, wanting them to understand that there was a serious reason behind this day off of school. Their family's visits had begun with the National Salute, back in November 1982. They'd been old enough then to understand what was going on, although Jamie had grumbled since the event had coincided with his birthday. They'd gotten quiet when they'd seen both their mother and their grandmother with tears in their eyes.

Later, during one of his rare visits, Joe had gone to the Wall alone. He didn't talk about his stint in the Army very often, preferring those around him to focus on the work he'd done since then. But Amanda knew he'd been deployed to Vietnam at least once, and the look on his face when he'd come back after that visit was enough for her to simply make up the pull-out couch in the family room. Their divorce hadn't even been finalized six months at that point, but there was no way she would ever have let him drive all the way to his friend's house in Columbia, where he'd been staying for that particular visit. Not while looking like *that*.

Afterward, they didn't discuss it. But it hadn't been much later when Amanda had taken the boys to the Wall on a random, raw Saturday, and told them what few details she knew. They'd both had solemn faces for almost an hour afterward which, given their ages, was quite a lot.

They'd done quite well this morning, too, remaining silent and listening during

the speeches and the music and the reading of the new names. She'd released them to run off their energy with an admonishment to stay close by, and they'd mostly complied. For some reason, though, she herself had been captivated by the steady stream of visitors that had begun as soon as the crowds dispersed. There was something different about it this year, and while she hadn't personally known any of the new honorees, she'd felt compelled to stay and pay her respects anyway. From a distance, of course.

Still, she was close enough to do a double take when she saw the latest figure approach the wall. He was dressed casually, including a cap, but there was no mistaking the man's height or the way he moved as he knelt down in front of one of the west panels, tracing a newly-added name and then bowing his head for a long time, long enough that she was able to make her way down and put a supportive hand on his shoulder.

Lee jumped at first, but recognized her touch almost immediately and relaxed into it.

"Who?" she asked quietly.

He pointed. "A recon specialist, one of the guys I would drop off and then pick up after six or eight hours. One of the best buddies I've ever had, and the one who taught me exactly what it was they were doing out there. Before then I'd just been flying missions, but once he got hold of me..." He laughed softly before bowing his head again. "He caught it in '70, at Quang Tri. It's always pissed me off he wasn't up here, but now they've fixed that."

She hunkered down next to him. "How long had you been there?"

"I got sent out in July of '69, after I finished Basic and Transition. I think he'd been there a little over a year by then. And he wasn't about to trust his life to some 'wet-behind-the-ears kid' who held a higher rank just because he could fly a helicopter." He had his agent face on, seemingly just reciting the facts. But the roughness of his voice gave him away. "It was only after he died that I found out he was all of seventeen months older than me."

"The War aged a lot of people," Amanda answered softly. "You've never told me when you were over there."

One of Lee's shoulders quirked in a shrug. "Sent out in July 1969, like I said. Transferred to ASA at Alconbury in December of '70 and mustered out of active service

the following March. Finished the rest of my time in the Reserves. And yeah, it grew me up pretty damn quick in a lot of ways.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, a little awkwardly. During the summer of 1969 she’d watched the Moon landing, marched in protests, and mourned her lack of sufficient funds to get to Woodstock. At the moment, those activities seemed like a poor comparison.

He shook his head, casting his eyes back to the Wall and re-tracing the name before reaching into his jacket and pulling out a picture. It was an old Polaroid, yellowed from age, and showed a group of young men laughing and making bunny ears for the camera. Lee, who also had a beer in his hand, wasn’t hard to identify.

“Here,” he said, beckoning her closer and pointing to one of the other men. “That’s him. New Year’s Eve 1969.” For a moment, his face contorted. “Last shot we ever took with both of us in it.” He put the picture on the ground in front of the Wall, propping it up so it wouldn’t easily be blown away.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” she asked, keeping her voice gentle.

He sighed. “Yeah. I had a copy made for myself. But this...” he shook his head. “Nah. This one’s for him.”

Amanda nodded. “All right. Do you want me to leave you alone now?”

He shook his head and stood up, pulling her up beside him and then slipping his arms around her shoulders in a sideways hug. She wrapped hers around his waist, squeezing a little tighter when he turned and buried his face against her neck. They’d only started exploring their new relationship a couple of weeks ago, but the intimacy and support felt perfectly normal and entirely natural.

Lee’s eyes had gone red by the time he picked his head back up, and he took her hand and gently pressed it, palm-first, against the Wall, with his over it. It was warm in the midday sun. They stayed that way for another long moment, his head bowed, before he shifted position to wrap his hand around hers. She brushed his hair back from his face.

“Are you here by yourself?” he finally asked, and his voice was even more gravely than it had been before.

It was her turn to sigh. “No. The boys are somewhere close by. I brought them here for the ceremonies.”

“Good.” Lee nodded. “That’s good, Amanda.”

“I can come by this evening, if you’d like.”

He took a sharp breath, letting it out slowly. “I would, actually. But I, ah, I might not be the greatest company.”

“That’s all right,” she told him. “I’ll understand. And you can decide whether or not you want to talk about him or the War.”

His lips twitched in what, on another day, might have been a smile. Today, though, she understood it as an acknowledgment, feeling the walls between them crumbling just a bit more. And for that, she felt profoundly grateful and honored.

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In memory and appreciation of [PFC Joel B. Simpson, USA](#) (1949-1983), who died far too young as a result of injuries he sustained while serving his country.