

CHAPTER 3--THE REAL THING

Three months later and Amanda was still trying to make sense of Stephanie's meaningless and silly death. Any casual visitor to her condo would realize that something was amiss. The dishes were piling up in her sink and dust was accumulating. The normally neat and fastidious Amanda was appearing to be anything but. She decided to write in her journal again, there were more important things to think about than appearances. Journals were becoming a more frequent and detailed activity since the accident.

Whoever said that time heals all wounds must have never been badly wounded. It's been three months and my state of mind only seems to be getting worse. Maybe I should see a therapist? Maybe I should find some support group? How do people get over the death of a loved one? Maybe you're not supposed to. Maybe the living are just condemned to live with their memory. If it is this hard for me, I wonder what it must be like for Haley.

A loose piece of paper dropped out of the notebook on to the floor, as she closed her diary in frustration. She picked it up. It was the eulogy she had written for Stephanie's funeral.

The memory of giving the eulogy felt fresh as she scanned the words she wrote. One sentence stood out – she was always honest with her feelings, even when others were not.

She stared blankly out her window. This was the second consecutive Friday that she had decided to leave work early just to reflect. A glass of wine and a seat on her favorite rocking chair facing the television did the trick. She had been drinking more and more as the days of miserable grief, turned into months. While not yet an alcoholic, if she kept up her current pace, she might very well become one. She was trying to drown her sorrow away in a flood of red wine and tears.

She picked up the remote to turn on the television. Perhaps the drone of the television would further numb out her emotions, but the remote control's batteries were dead. The little handheld wonder of convenience and power was just a useless piece of plastic now.

The blank screen of the television beckoned for its owner to call it to life as Amanda crouched down to hit the power button. Her reflection against the glass immediately made an impression on her as she reached forward to press the button. She looked at herself for a moment, the darkness of the screen hiding her true complexion. Rather than improve her look, it only darkened her image. She gave it no further thought and turned it on. The usual stuff appeared as she flipped through the channels. Low brow talk shows, histories of World Wars, and great battles of the American Civil War. On the sports channels were auto racing, golf, and slick oiled wrestlers putting on a show that always made Amanda wonder whether the action was real, or just an illusion. She flipped through some legal and crime dramas before hitting the news stations. They reported on surfer girl shark attacks, wars in distant lands, and the never-ending

drama of pretty, young, missing girls of the month.

She stopped channel surfing at the Discovery Channel, it was a special on the polar regions that had just begun. She sat down and was mesmerized by the images as she learned about how the Arctic and Antarctica were distinctly different places. At first glance they seemed similar as barren, treeless, and cold places. But one had polar bears, the other, penguins. One had been inhabited for thousands of years, the other, only recently discovered and explored. One was a continent, the other was a sea area with the edges of countries surrounding it. One exploded with life on the tundra in the spring and summer, the other remained a land of ice with much colder temperatures.

The episode concluded and she got up to turn off the television set. She saw her reflection again. Her face stared back at her again, but the bags under her eyes had grown darker. The cool winter air cleared her mind when she walked out to her balcony. The view from her condo was due northwest. On a relatively clear day she could see the Olympic Mountains to the left and on a very clear day, in the far off distance to the right, Mt. Baker at 10,778 feet, and the Northern Cascade mountains. The most obvious sight from her condo window was the rotating globe of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer newspaper headquarters by the water.

There was something calming about being at home while most other people were still busy at work, but today she was getting restless. She glanced over at her bookshelf. Her fingers glided over the spines until she reached the last few titles: *Be All You Can Be*, *The Power Within*, *7 Habits of Great People*. For all the fancy claims, no amount of positive thinking power would help her now. She wondered if their advice really worked. If it did, why was she so messed up?

Even before the accident too. On the outside she was the model of success, but inside she was in conflict about her whole existence. These were ideas that she kept repressed as much as possible.

She felt like a scoundrel now over how she could be so desperate for happiness that she needed such help from gurus. These gurus were like short term drugs. The high kept you going for a little while, but then once it wore off, you were back to square one, maybe even negative one.

Despite the reservations about these books, she decided another trip to the bookstore was in order, the Elliott Bay Bookstore, her favorite bookstore. She could shop the grief away. Maybe a book about death would enlighten her.

The titles didn't shout bestseller. Death & Bereavement Across Cultures, Final Celebrations, In Memoriam, and Making Loss Matter. None of them appealed to her. Maybe she needed to wait a little longer before she was ready to tackle a book on death. She decided to go home empty handed.

A photograph caught her eye in a discount bin, before she could walk out the exit. It was a photograph of two polar bears standing and ready to spar one another on their hind legs, or were they dancing? Amanda picked it up, it was a calendar. Dancing with Polar Bears, \$2.99 it said on the red sticker. Immediately, memories of her childhood bond with her stuffed polar bear came to mind. She had put him away in the closet many years ago, grown ups didn't play with stuffed animals. She was a productive, working adult. No time for children's toys. Amanda headed for the cash register with calendar in hand.

Retreating back into the warmth of her condo, she poured herself another glass of wine.

The red liquid disappeared in an instant. The wedding magazines laying around testified to the dreamy reality that she wished about. The dream was even further away now. Maybe she was just extra cautious because of the starter marriage debacle she wanted to avoid. Chip thought she would get closer, but she only wanted to push away even further. His complaints about her looking for Mr.Perfect even before Stephanie's death were only more irritating. This wasn't the first time she had lost some deep, inner part of herself. When her parents divorced, her fantasy of growing up in a happy, photo perfect family disappeared. She had tried hard to overcome the times of despair and lost expectations. Whatever momentum she had in moving in the right direction was gone. A seemingly random set of events had taken from her a lifelong friendship, her best friend. She felt lonely. Yet, while she didn't like this feeling of loneliness, she couldn't trust her feelings with Chip. Perhaps she feared betrayal in any relationship. Maybe it wasn't just a guy problem.

Until recently, the solution was more work, as if it could be a salve for her emotional wounds. Who needed a boyfriend anyway when the power of the drink was in hand.

"I need to put you up," she announced aloud, referring to the calendar. She flipped to February and walked back out to the living room. "How about here," she remarked as she tacked it to the wall in a conspicuous location. The picture for February was of a polar bear and her cub walking across the ice. It was an unreal looking photo, Amanda thought to herself. She forced a smile, if only to try and cheer herself up.

Looking around her home she decided a house cleaning was in order. It was like therapy. First the kitchen and all of the dishes that had piled up. She downed another glass of wine to

loosen up her inspiration. Then the living room with the various magazines, books, and old photo albums. Then the bathroom with all of its grime and mold. Next up was her bedroom and walk in closet. She grabbed the outfits strewn across the floor and headed for her closet. As she moved outfits around deciding which ones to give away she moved around some old luggage until she noticed a familiar face in a dark corner.

She let out a gasp.

Looking directly at her was a familiar face from long ago. It was her large stuffed polar bear from childhood. He was decompressing from being squeezed into a corner.

She knew he was always there, but she had forgotten about him.

“Where have you been all this time?”

There was no answer.

She stretched her arms and brought him out of the dark closet and in to the bedroom. The plush fur pressed up against her body. Even as an adult, he was still big. She stared into his black beady eyes then shifted her gaze around its entire length. She rubbed one of his paws, imprinted with cushy black foot pads. It even had the red ribbon that she had tied around its neck to personalize him. His presence reminded Amanda of the feeling and sense of stoic calmness that she always felt around him whenever she was in trouble as a child.

She gave him a hug as if she would never see him again. At least for Amanda today, stuffed animals weren't just for children anymore.

The wine blissfully put Amanda to sleep, this time on the floor, her polar bear looming over her like a silent guardian. She dreamed about one of the defining moments of her young

childhood.

It was the final showdown of her parents' marriage. A day when her father's late nights at the office, or wherever else he really was, finally caused her mother to explode. Amanda had sought shelter in her bedroom bunker amongst an army of stuffed animals.

Hearing a strange noise in the living room late at night, she had decided to investigate. Using Polar Bear as a scout, she had determined that it was safe to go down the hallway. She discovered that her father was sleeping on the couch. A stealth run into the kitchen secured some cookies for herself and her new best friend, apart from Stephanie, Polar Bear.

It was the day she gripped her stuffed bear tighter than ever before. It was the day that she first touched her nose against Polar Bear's leathery black nose. And the day that her parents decided to get a divorce.

Amanda emerged from her deep sleep, conscious, but not fully awake. She began to wonder if her behavior as a six year old was a bit immature.

Perhaps it could be explained by Stephanie's insights from reading about how parents in different cultures raised their children. Depending on the way it was done, children matured at different speeds. The field of study was called ethnopediatrics.

The very concept of childhood was different or even non-existent in various countries, or perhaps more precisely, cultures. In some cultures, childhood was not a carefree time, but rather a time of responsibility and learning. In others, to praise a child for the accomplishment of their tasks was to encourage later disobedience and selfishness. How one physically raised a child even affected future motor skills, with the age of a child learning to walk perhaps being the first

hint. A child kept upright, rather than in a stroller, might walk three months sooner than the average American child with better hand eye coordination. In the other direction, some cultures children first walked up to nine months later.

Perhaps uniquely American, was the placing of babies in their own beds and in their own rooms before weaning. So unique, that sleeping with a child was viewed as troubling, rather than normal by many American parents, never mind that this went against the entire history of baby births. It had even become fashionable to use walkie talkies to monitor the baby.

Loving a stuffed animal as a child and as an adult were two different things, but who cared, whatever worked she thought to herself.

The phone rang and Amanda woke up from the final moments of her extended cat nap.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Amanda. Were you sleeping?”

“Hi, Mom. I’m ok.”

“How are things?”

Silence.

“Are you still having trouble concentrating? Are you eating and sleeping well?”

“I’m getting by. Sometimes, I feel numb. I feel numb toward everyone and everything. “

“Are you still getting those headaches you were talking to me about?”

“No, but I feel confused. I still cry a lot.”

“Would you like me to come over? It’s not good to be lonely at these times.”

Silence.

“Amanda, do you think you should see a grief counselor?”

Amanda snapped. “Why does everyone in America have to see a therapist anytime there is a problem. Can’t they just work through it themselves?”

“Sure, Amanda,” Deborah replied, clearly realizing Amanda was now agitated.

Amanda looked at her new calendar again. “Mom, have you ever seen a real polar bear?”

“Huh?”

“Have you ever seen a real polar bear?”

“What are you talking about?”

Her mom didn’t seem to remember the power of her birthday gift from so long ago.

“I think I need to go somewhere.”

“A vacation would be good. Where are you thinking of going?”

“Some place different.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. It’s, it’s, not important Mother,” she stuttered. “I’m going back to bed now.”

“Let’s talk soon. Before I forget, your father called me. He said he’s been trying to get a hold of you. Will you call him back?”

“I turned off my ringer.”

“He’s concerned about you.”

“I’m not concerned about him.”

“Amanda, it hasn’t always been ideal, but he is still your father.”

“Mom, I’m going to bed. I’m tired.”

The line went cold.

She had gotten more distant from her mother after the divorce. Living with her mother, sometimes she would be the star of her mother’s attention, more often, she had felt neglected while her mother sought out other companions or became overly interested in all things work. Visiting with her father and his revolving door of females didn’t help either.

She remembered how a therapist long ago had said that children from openly high conflict homes had worse outcomes. As scientific as it sounded, it was true for her. While by all outward appearances she was successful, emotionally, she could be a poster child. Maybe that is why she was so resistant to her mother’s advice to see a therapist, because she already knew that they were going to be right. There was nobody to argue with. That’s it, it was all her parents’ fault that she was messed up.

“Why did she have to die!?” She screamed out.

Her bedroom companion, Polar Bear gave no answers.

Maybe a real one would know better. The stuffed animal was lifeless, despite her imagination.

Her mother’s call had stirred her, but she felt the need for more rest. If must have been the wine. Alcohol on a near empty stomach worked fast. She let out a yawn.

“I need my privacy tonight.”

She walked over to Polar Bear and picked him up. Stumbling back into her living room, she sat him on her rocking chair, somehow managing to squeeze him in. She rocked the chair

back and forth and amused herself. Then she sprinted back into bed and started drifting off to sleep. She dreamed she would go see a real polar bear at the zoo. Maybe Haley would like to come too.