

CHAPTER 4 – ZOO LIFE

A large sign stood before Amanda and Haley as they rounded the row of shrubs by the parking lot. Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium. Tacoma, WA it read.

“We’re here!” Amanda shouted.

“We’re here!” Haley shouted back.

They bought their tickets and went in. They passed by a large polar bear sculpture. Several kids were standing and sitting on it.

Greeted by tranquil sounds of nature they were not. A large gathering of young children was massed near the entrance. Chaperones were busy running around doing a head count. It looked out of control. Amanda grabbed Haley’s hand and moved quickly to get clear of the group.

They decided to visit the aquarium area first. Inside were exhibits of sea horses, sharks, salmon, and octopi. The concrete pillars and facades did not help to create an underwater illusion. Before long, whatever sense of tranquility there was had been broken. They moved on, trying to keep ahead of the mass of children who were now running rampant in the aquarium. They left the crush of children behind inside as they exited out of the dark aquarium into the brighter outdoors.

They arrived at their first outdoor exhibit.

Voices rang out from other visitors. “Penguins! – Over here – What’s in there? – Look at them breakdance – Can’t penguins fly? – Why don’t the penguins want to go in the water?”

It was quite clear why the penguins weren’t going in

the water, at least to Amanda. The water was still, no waves. The brief video clip from the Arctic and Antarctic she had caught on television earlier showed penguins diving into heavy surf off rock cliffs, no such challenge here. The still water smelled and looked moldy. It was a cesspool.

Before they even reached the next exhibit, they heard a loud series of ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs.’ It wasn’t obvious what the fuss was all about as they rounded the corner. Surrounding a large pool were dozens of children eagerly anticipating something in the water. A different group of children.

A stream of water shot up. A bluish colored creature surfaced. It was a beluga whale. Its light blue color turned to gray as it exposed its top to the air. The beluga circled repetitively around the pool edge delighting the children that were all lined up. Amanda looked on. She felt like she was part of an audience for a freak show. She glanced over at Haley. Putting aside any further such feelings, she tried to be more interested.

Was she thinking too much she wondered as she watched Haley being intrigued by the beluga. It appeared to have a perpetual smile, perhaps fooling its young voyeurs. Amanda wanted to move on. She spotted the sign for the polar bear exhibit and decided that maybe they could beat this other group of children to it, once they passed the otter exhibit though. They spent a brief minute watching the otters frolic around in their play area. The small little furry creatures could not hold their attention longer as the moment of seeing a live polar bear drew neared. She grabbed Haley’s hand.

Finally, the section that Amanda really wanted to come for, and the attraction that she hoped would put a big smile on Haley’s face too - the polar bear exhibit. Amanda couldn’t help but overhear some of the other visitors’ conversations as they walked toward the entrance.

“I need to go to the bathroom – I’m going over here – No, you stay over here – I’m tired – What do we get to see next? – That beluga was way cool!”

The strategy worked. They walked under the sign that

read: Polar Bears – Underwater Viewing. Only a few other children and parents were inside.

The first thing they saw was a large mosaic tiled picture of a standing polar bear inviting visitors to measure themselves up against it. Along another wall were various panels describing polar bear facts. The showpiece however was the area set behind a line of thick glass windows. Directly behind the windows was a shallow pool, small, bowl shaped, no deeper than 10 feet, and not very wide at all. Set behind the pool was a small concrete area with a grassy hill rising to the rear of the enclosure. A bright orange ball sat untouched, floating on the water. There was no polar bear.

“I can see him!” Haley shouted. Lying motionless in the far back of the exhibit was a solitary polar bear. They stared at it amidst the increasing background noise. A faux stream meandered around some fake rock mounds. Whatever moment of connection between the bear and them was shattered as kids started to stream in.

“Hey, it’s over there! – Move! Let me see! – Stop shoving, kids! – We can take a picture with the rest of the class – I’m hungry”

While they struggled to maintain their position, Amanda thought she heard what sounded like two women gossiping about their sex lives. They chatted while their children were being entertained as part of a mob. There were no conversations like this on the Discovery Channel. This was not the Arctic.

Everyone else was looking on, oblivious to the reality of the situation it seemed. A feeling of sadness came over Amanda. She wondered if anyone realized how manufactured the zoo was. She noticed the reflection of the adults and children in the plexiglass, they were faint when viewed against the pool of water behind it. This is how kids learned their attitudes toward nature. This is how Amanda had learned.

They continued to gaze at the lifeless bear. Amanda noticed a plaque with small photos of each bear. They each had a name, unlike Amanda’s stuffed animal. Their names

were Glacier, Blizzard, Boris, and Kenneth. All of them came from the wild, only Boris was zoo born.

A strange silence soon fell over the exhibit. Most of the kids and parents had disappeared. They had seen what they came to the zoo for, another animal. Another animal that they could take off their mental checklist, but they had scarcely learned anything at all. Amanda knew she didn't know too much about polar bears, but she did know one thing, polar bears spent a lot of time on ice. She took another look behind the glass windows, there was no ice at all.

They walked out of the polar bear habitat.

“What did you think of the polar bear Haley?”

“He looked bored. He didn't look very happy.”

Amanda pursed her lips together and looked at Haley sharing her sentiments.

“Do you want to sit down and get a drink?”

“Ok.”

Amanda couldn't help but overhear a conversation between a zoo employee and a visitor.

“...the sign shows four bears, where are the others?”

“Resting in the back. Sometimes we put two out. We're the only zoo in the world with two males out at the same time. I hope to have all four out someday.”

“So you rotate among them?”

“Yes. If they are sleeping on the island then the public gets grumpy. I'm not happy. When they're swimming in the water they're popular. When the public is happy, I'm Happy.”

“I guess you better get in there.”

“I know.”

The polar bear keeper had been conditioned to the whims of the masses Amanda realized. He was like a politician. Perhaps it was just democracy in action. After all, most people aren't content to just watch animals sitting around, we pay to see action.

Amanda walked up to the counter and ordered two sodas. As she waited, she noticed a sign advertising a frozen

drink treat, available in cherry, blue raspberry, and cola. Amanda remembered drinking these when she was a kid. Except this time she noticed something else. The cartoon character promoting the drinks was a polar bear.

It was not enough to have polar bears in a sad looking 'cage.' They were also being used to sell drinks, right across from the entrance. How many of the visitors - both parents and children - would walk away from this experience to the exhibit with respect for these large, beautiful creatures? Amanda turned her head away in disgust and paid for the sodas.

"Over here!" Haley shouted.

They sat across from each other at the small table. Again, Amanda noticed the other visitors. A large group of school kids was also in the area, there must have been several school groups visiting. They had names like - Raquel, Marisol, Alexa, Max, Ian, Julia, and Mercedes. Did the people who live in the Arctic have names like this?

"Let's go look at the polar bears - Let's go potty first - Where are we going? - Why can't they make these things closer together? - Does anybody need to go to the bathroom? - I'll stay out here - Wash your hands when you're done"

Amanda tried to ignore the chatter as she looked around. She noticed the large water pump system next to the bathrooms of the polar bear exhibit. The incessant hum of the water pumps groaned ever louder. More kids streamed by, some in colorful strollers. She noticed a few hardy kids wearing shorts. She noticed the sign asking people to please stay on path. A path. Were the paths in the Arctic marked?

Just when it couldn't get more unreal, two zoo employees began to walk past them.

"Anteater coming through!"

Sure enough, they were pulling an anteater. It was a bizarre sight. There were no anteaters in the Arctic, that much Amanda was sure of.

At least she could take comfort in the natural setting. Her gaze went upward. The whole area was surrounded by

tall and ubiquitous, Northwest evergreen trees. But, something didn't look right. Her thoughts went back to the documentary and photos that she had seen on her polar bear calendar. There weren't any trees. The Arctic was treeless.

This zoo was a place of constant stimulus as visitors went from one exhibit to the next. Nature was not a place of such different stimulus. Did the Arctic have ice cream stands with coolers and cola machines? There was such a focus on convenience.

This zoo was an illusion, and a very bad one at that.