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Introduction

ANN WALSH

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Loss is one of the earliest — and the hardest — of life’s lessons. The puppy that is run over on the highway, the kitten that becomes ill and has to be put to “sleep” and even the frog scooped from the lake who lies still and lifeless in our pudgy toddler hands — experiences such as these are often our first exposure to the agony of loss.

But a loss does not always mean a death. There are many other ways of losing something or someone we love.

For most of us, the first person in our lives that we lose is a grandparent. Two of the stories in this book, “Sisters” and “All is Calm,” are about such a loss. One deals with the death of a grandparent; in the other story it is the mind of

the grandmother that has gone, lost to Alzheimer's disease.

Our parents are older than we are, so it stands to reason they will probably die before we do. We may not think about this very often; in our hearts, however, we know it is true. In "The Canoe," a story set on the West Coast of Vancouver Island, a First Nations father and son confront each other as they work through their grief for the wife and mother whose death they mourn.

In the stories "Cold Snap" and "Dear Family," the parents are still alive, although they are very much "lost" to their children.

Sometimes brothers and sisters die, but we can lose them in other ways, too. The stories "Snow Angel" and "A Few Words for My Brother" are about young people who lost the battle for a normal life before they ever had one — they were born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. The brother and sister in these two stories could not be kept safe, even though they were armoured by the love of their adoptive families.

Two of the stories in this book are about the death of a school friend. In "Hang On" a young boy visits with the parents of his injured friend and tries to offer them comfort. In "Kick" the classroom bully has died, and one of his victims must deal with the confusing emotions that death leaves in its wake.

Sometimes we see the loss coming, and we do everything we can to prevent it. Such is the case in "Explaining Andrew,"

a story about a young man trying desperately to help his schizophrenic older brother. But that brother, the person he was before he became ill, no longer exists. He has been replaced by someone who is physically the same but whose every thought and action have been changed by the disease.

The death of a small child brings with it one of the darkest of times. In “the sign for heaven” the loss of the child to whom she is teaching sign language shakes the faith of a young girl as she wonders why God would let a child die.

“Dreams in a Pizza Box” is the story of young people who lose both their only parent and their home. Their lives change drastically with this loss and only a few carefully stored mementoes remain of what was once a family.

Almost everyone who grieves goes through several predictable stages before emerging from the darkness. In “Balance Restored” we watch a young girl as she makes her way, slowly, through these stages.

These stories are all about dark times. But, as in real life, the darkness lifts. It sometimes is hard to believe, but eventually time works its magic and the healing begins. We still miss what we have lost, but we no longer mourn so violently. Eventually, all grief gentles.

Perhaps this book will help others find their way out of the dark times and into the sunlight.

Snow Angel

BY CAROLYN POGUE

...

Elizabeth Ann arrived on the shortest day of the year during a wicked snow storm. Her mom blasted in with her and then stood on the door mat blinking in the bright light. Elizabeth Ann wore a yellow and white snow suit. Her long black eye lashes glistened with melting snow. Her mom looked messy, like she'd got dressed in a hurry. She hadn't brushed her hair and she wasn't wearing a hat or boots, even though the snow was deep. She smelled of alcohol.

Elizabeth Ann's mom is my aunt but we hardly ever saw her. She steered clear of us most of the time. We all lived in Yellowknife, which is not a huge city, but we never visited her. She burst in, didn't knock or anything, just opened the

kitchen door and stood there. We were finishing dinner.

“What are you looking at?” she demanded, stamping the snow off her runners. “It’s just us. Just family. Thought we’d pay you a Christmas visit.” My mom stood up, staring at her younger sister. Mom’s face moved between gladness and shock. “Come in, honey,” she said, and went to hug her.

My aunt pushed Elizabeth Ann toward her. “Hey,” she said, “I actually need a little favour. Just ’til I get on my feet again.” Her eyes glistened but she stuck her chin up and clamped her jaw tight to stop it from shaking. “Just ’til I get on my feet again,” she repeated.

She touched Elizabeth Ann’s cheek with the back of her fingers. “You be a good girl for your auntie.” Then she turned and ran out the door. There was deafening silence at first, then Mom asked, “Mary, could you close the door, please?” When I did, I found the suitcase on the porch. That was the last we ever saw of my aunt. She just disappeared. Mom thinks she went to Edmonton or maybe Vancouver.

Elizabeth Ann was four years old when she arrived, half my age. She had wavy black hair, big eyes and a deep belly laugh. “What a big laugh for a little kid!” people said, and they’d laugh, too. For a while, anyway. The other thing that people said was, “My! She sure is a *busy* little girl!” which meant, “Couldn’t you get her to sit still and be quiet for five minutes?” It seemed that Elizabeth Ann had a spring inside her. She’d whirl around the house like a tornado and then suddenly you’d find her fast asleep on the floor or under a

jumble of cushions on the couch. Shanti called her “Miss All or Nothing.”

Shanti was the most patient with her, but Shanti is patient with everyone — including the creatures she dragged home. Shanti means “peace” in Hindi, so I guess that explains it. We adopted her when she was three years old; I was four then. Shanti was quiet. Pretty much the opposite of Elizabeth Ann.

Shanti’s side of our bedroom was usually floor-to-ceiling cages, boxes and fish bowls. You never knew who’d be sharing the room with us: a sparrow that crashed into a window, a kitten with three legs, gerbils that kids didn’t want anymore, goldfish saved from “the big flush.” Mom said, “Eventually the unwanted and helpless seem to find their way to Shanti.” Shanti nursed them to health, or buried the ones that didn’t make it. She was famous for her animal funerals. You can still see the stones in the yard with her printing on them: “Rest in Peace Foofoo,” things like that. What I remember is that “the tornado” calmed down when she was with Shanti and the animals. There was a gentleness in her, then.

Jessy, our older brother, liked Elizabeth Ann, as long as she stayed out of his room. He was ten when Elizabeth Ann arrived, and he was busy being a chess wizard, a boxing champion and a grade four genius. He really didn’t have too much time for Shanti or me, much less a noisy little kid. If Elizabeth Ann sat still to hear a story, he’d read to her. If

she wiggled, he'd close the book, sigh, and retreat to his room to get smarter than he already was.

Our mom didn't seem too fazed by having a new kid. Maybe she really believed it was temporary. She moved her home office into a corner of the kitchen and made her office into a small extra bedroom. Actually, it was like a closet, but Elizabeth Ann loved it. It was big enough for her imagination and that's all she needed.

Mom runs "Second Hand Rose," selling used clothes and moose hide mitts and mukluks that Dene women make. In the beginning, Elizabeth Ann went to the shop, just like we had before we started school. Mom had art supplies and books there to keep kids busy. But Elizabeth Ann preferred playing dress-up with shoes and clothes or talking to customers. The ones with a sense of humour kept coming back; the others came less often. They didn't think it was funny when Elizabeth Ann looked under the door of the change room and yelled, "Boo!"

Mom is a pretty ordinary mother. She loves us, which is a good thing to know, and she doesn't freak out too often. She reads, plays Scrabble and takes us camping every summer. She works on the Peace and Justice committee at church and writes letters for Amnesty International, which is all about writing to political prisoners.

I like reading, too, and writing stories. This makes me a geek at school sometimes, but mostly life is pretty ordinary. I like fishing on Great Slave Lake and at Uncle Bill's in Peace