

Thinking of You Through the Remnants and Renovations

By: A.X. Bueno

Three months the polar bear thinks to himself, it took three months to get this house back to the way it was before, back to somewhat normal. It was three months of waiting for the renovations to be done, plenty of preparations plus planning, rough adjustments, a lot of cleaning, rearranging, numerous supply runs, some difficult to make phone calls and a lot of work, acceptance and even some sacrifice along the way. It took a lot of weekdays, weekends and many hours even sweat and tears to get things back to how they're supposed to be. The thing is though, that this home, his family home that he's come back to to stay at and been staying at since a few days before Thanksgiving is not truly back to normal or how it's supposed to be and whether it or anything really is okay is extremely questionable. That's because not only were home renovations done and finished pretty recently but three months ago the polar bear's...Theo's grandfather died and that's naturally left everything irrevocably changed. Of course that's just the most major of many events that have affected him for the past few months and overall this year.

They've affected him so much that sometimes he just looks himself over hard in the mirror and sees a changed beastman where he used to be. He's had to deal with a lot over the past year and especially the past six months or so; on top of the death of his grandfather there was also: the death of not one but two neighbors, changes at work that needed to be adjusted to and made him nervous, not just him but his whole household and family getting sick, the extra feeling of isolation that brought on, the death of several more family members back in the Dominican Republic, all the complications and bickering that resulted from preparing the funeral especially since it was happening in another country and neither the Bear nor his mother could make it on account of being sick. There was also the inability to use the bathroom in his home for a little over a month on top of that, the isolation of so rarely seeing his friends and then practically not at all given he had to isolate himself thanks to the sickness as well as circumstances going on in both the world as well as his and their lives, a bit of gained weight thanks to being stuck quarantining at home and on top of that he's not sure how fully him or his mom recovered from the sickness. All of that as well as the usual of life's little inconveniences is just overwhelming and changing him. He feels like he sees all these overwhelming events and the changes they cause when he stares deep enough into the mirror to look for himself in that changed beastman but Theo knows that aside from a slightly bigger face and frame it's all on the inside.

That's what bothers the man turned polar bear more than almost anything else. All this pain, death and misery he's experienced all in these past few months is basically just a statistic at this point or a drop in the vast ocean. That more often than not every iota of the world feels like it's hurting and not only must he accept that and the hardships that he just has had to move forward through in these few short months but also the heartaches and pain of the future as those of the past are put behind him as only things that he can dwell on in private. Of course Theo doesn't want the world or anyone for that matter to shoulder his personal pain and burdens but all he

had was a month to mourn the loss of the only grandparent that he'd ever really known, get over the serious sickness he had that admittedly he only got mild symptoms of, get multiple viral tests some of which made him anxious with anticipation, then just adapt to and accept all the changes that come with a major loss quarantined and practically alone aside from his mother who was also sick. The bear leans over the now cleaned of all the remnants of his grandfather's old room table on the verge of tears and just close to emotionally breaking.

Theo has lost track at this point of how many times since that soul shattering December day he's been close to just bursting into tears or gets just randomly overwhelmed with an all consuming anger that comes and goes without explanation though usually it comes when he reflects a while on life. He's this perpetually on the brink ball of swirling emotions that neither can afford to break or is even able to anymore. Reaching a point where snapping or actually letting go of his emotions became a luxury he can't afford as he has to be an unbreakable support pillar both for the mom who has no one else to help her and the job that he's still somewhat new to and still needs him. There was a point where he was properly venting out his emotions here and there to friends and families willing to listen but he stopped that a little while ago, didn't want to just bring people down with his unfortunate circumstances and personal sadness, to be that guy. He's not even sure what keeps him going anymore, he's struggling to find motivation and do the usual things that bring him happiness like playing games or watching videos or making his potions, it's all become a slog to him and now he's all consistently exhausted.

He always thought his grandfather's death would shatter him back when his mind wandered into thinking about the eventuality of man's passing and in ways it did but also not in the harsher ways the polar bear expected. Theo pictured himself as more of a grief ridden mess and maybe some actual physical change to his look or something but despite how he feels and how different it feels now to look in the mirror now even more than before he's still the same except not really. After a couple of minutes of just kneeling over from the grief and sadness but nothing actually happening the bear proceeds to stand tall at all 9 foot 10 of his height before sitting down and sighing, he's been sighing a lot lately, as if he were a teapot blowing steam out of the only place it currently could. The table may be clear now of all that remained of both the old belongings of Theo's grandfather that they kept as well as the things left over from the closet that got demolished in making the new bathroom and maybe a few things from a cabinet that was moved and is now back where it belongs but a lot of it is still around in other places and then there's the door to the room that used to belong to his grandfather and before that Theo himself. That door is still open with all the memories that are in that room from the bear's past when he occupied it as a kid, a human kid and then later on when it became his grandfather's room when he became a college bound young man before the eventual transformation and getting his own place but now here he is back and all he can do right now is reflect on what is for right now the worst day of his life so far, that awful day his grandfather passed away.

The polar bear's day didn't get a chance to start anywhere close to on the right foot or like usual before things went immeasurably awful as he was abruptly woken up by his mother and told to come to his grandpa's room, fast and he rushed to it without any kind of hesitation. He

could just tell something bad was happening and yet he couldn't even initially process what was happening or what was in front of his eyes as he entered the room and saw a disturbing sight on the bed of the room that he both half expected and was seeing yet couldn't believe or even fully grasp in the shock of the moment. His grandfather's body was lying there dead; with his mouth partially open, whole body unsettlingly still and a face that had a bit of shock and struggle. Whoever said passing in your sleep was the most peaceful way to die was a damn liar because all Theo saw in his grandfather's all too human face was a pain that can't be given justice by mere words. The big bear goes to his grandpa's, his Papi's side and his mother tells him to start giving the lifeless body chest compressions and he does it instinctively without even processing that the body he's putting his paws on is dead.

He does this for a bit while his mother calls an emergency number, it's not even 9 in the morning and Theo's body is moving on a will that is consciously not his but instinctually is as he does partial CPR (cautiously given the strength difference between the polar bear and the old man) for minutes with no end without even truly realizing, the things shock does to someone. Eventually the police come to assess the whole situation and they hear and see it all, leaving and coming back several times as both mom and son were figuring things out. You see, a funeral home had to be chosen before the body could be taken away as a precaution since his grandfather died of a virus that was a pretty contagious threat and both Theo and his mom had it too. This meant that on top of the stress of handling this sudden loss, they were stuck with a family member's corpse that couldn't even be autopsied or handled in a conventional way. The body of Theo's grandfather lay there for a few hours and Theo and his mother had to actually take photos of the body to show the police that were too scared, cautious and unwilling to step inside the house and actually see it in person.

Family, mainly his mom's sister and a cousin, were soon enough able to help them find the proper funeral home. While they waited for the funeral home people to show up the door to his late grandfather's was still ajar to air it out and both Theo and his mom just had to contend that there was a dead body of a loved one laying on the bed his grandpa slept on that they could so plainly see for hours, since the early morning and it was almost noon, it was beyond eerie to focus on. Pretty quickly the men from the funeral home showed surprisingly unphased by this, well at least the one actually handling the body was, he was just jovial which actually did provide a bit of comfort but also was kind of off putting but regardless he came in and with the help of both the deceased's daughter and grandson the body was wrapped in the sheet he died in, moved and wheeled away in a marked car. A choice had to be made on whether or not to keep the sheet that became a makeshift coffin and it was chosen that it would be kept with a promise that it'd be brought back, which it was several days later. It was a bittersweet relief to have the body out of the house though Theo was just glad it was all over for now, this was a lot for the bear to just handle so early and he welcomed the very temporary respite from at least having to worry about and just uncomfortably see out of the corner of his blue and green eyes the eerie and unsettling sight of his grandpa's lifeless body just laying there like a cadaver about to spring back to life but obviously never does.

The sheer heaviness of dealing with the death of someone so close especially when it's caused by and handled under special, extra strenuous circumstances finally hits Theo as he calls his sister to break the news. He insisted on telling her himself because his mom was having to deal with telling the rest of the family and he wanted to help ease that burden at least a little by telling her specifically especially since next to his mom she was the closest family he had right now even if she was across the ocean and a continent or two. On top of that she was probably someone his grandfather loved more than anyone and the feeling was mutual, this would be a heartbreaking call and he wanted to help handle it. The bear grabs his cell phone and holds his claw over the number with hesitation and worry for a second before hitting the call button and dialing. His sister answers pretty fast and his eyes water and are heavy with tears about to form, his voice actually cracks from the strain of having to say what happened. He can't do it, it hurts so much to have to confess that he died and before he can finish saying it in a sentence that the young bear can't bring himself to finish his sister seems to understand the reason he called and she starts tearing up and he's finally able to blurt it out between watery eyed sobs. She cries and for the bear the tears form but can't fall from his eyes in spite of the hurt and pain of the whole situation bearing down on him.

Theo explains everything that happened; how their grandfather was sick and seemed fine at first until he wasn't, how he died in bed, just the events of that whole day and all that surrounded. It was agony to do and he thinks to himself how dealing with and explaining all this is probably the hardest thing he's done so far. In a way it shouldn't be, after all he'd lost two other grandparents before this but the thing is he wasn't close to either of them for a few reasons out of his control so when they died he felt sad but it wasn't a very personal sadness. This though, losing Papi, he gets to see and feel the full weight of that loss all while being mostly isolated and unable to go anywhere and with no one coming by to help. His sister wishes she could be there, a couple of his cousins wish they could be there but they can't, since it's too big a risk. Eventually everyone that needs to know does through call and things settle a little.

The next week or so was spent cleaning out the room that was Theo's grandpa's and also his as a boy before he got left a better one by the sister now all the way on the other side of the world, it was spent making funeral arrangements, deciding what sentimental thing went to who, sending out those little funeral cards and just learning to adapt to a house and life that was now emptier. It hadn't been this empty since Theo was in high school back when he was human with a different name, he contemplated taking that name again to honor his now late grandfather but decided against since his grandpa always accepted and loved him no matter what and he was sure he'd want Theo to be true to himself but still the thought crossed his mind along with many others. He felt guilty and several different types of useless as he watched his mother have to make almost all the decisions for the funeral arrangements and clean up and organize all the old man's stuff and there was a lot to throw away now since Theo's grandpa had and held onto a lot; medical supplies, clothes he had but never wore in spite of how worn down the clothes he frequently wore became from constant use, photo albums, canes and walkers, papers and just the accumulations of a long life. He helped as much as he could, tried to provide emotional support in spite of his own fragile emotional state, and provided all the input he could on the decisions while respecting the opinions of his mother and his grandfather's two other

children(his aunt and uncle) who his mom consulted for every choice and arrangement through text and call.

The hardest choice that had to be made was to fulfill the wishes of Theo's grandfather and have him sent to be buried back in the Dominican Republic. It felt so unfair, so wrong to not be able to attend the funeral all because of the quarantine he was under at the time. He helped take care of the old man for years and was there in his abuelo's final moments along with his mother and yet he didn't get a true chance to say goodbye except briefly to his body at the funeral home before it got shipped off to D.R. That wasn't the first time he'd been unable to attend a funeral that year which already made him feel truly awful regardless of whatever the reason was he couldn't attend but this one was something he definitely should have and deserved to be there for, after all this was the funeral and final goodbye to a man who was there for him more than most and was again the only grandparent the icy ursine really knew in all his approaching 26 now years of life as. There was a special bond there, the man was a role model to the bear, one of the few males in his life that the bear could reliably depend on and looked up to/hoped to age into in a way with how gracefully his Papi aged. However in the end he didn't even know at the moment what cemetery his grandfather was actually in or it's name and had to look at photos to know the type of grave he rests in now, a mausoleum filled with other family members of that generation and the prior one(brothers, sisters and parents of the deceased). He didn't get to go, almost none of the dead's immediate family could except the bear's uncle who was the eldest child of the polar bear's late grandfather.

That created family tension for several reasons the main one being needing to get video of the funeral from someone other than the uncle who didn't manage to get it but thinking more about that whole debacle would only stress Theo more. The semi-aquatic ursine instead does more reflecting on how preventable this all was or could have been, reflecting is most of what the polar bear does now in his free time. At least a full week before the death of the ursine's grandpa they took him to the hospital because of worries with his heart, it was there he got the diagnosis of the virus which took his life and then a few days later his two family members which includes the ursine got the same diagnosis of the same virus. The hospital actually discharged him the same day they gave that diagnosis and that scare saying he seemed strong despite and he was but that strength it still wasn't enough to save him and something should have been said but nothing was, how do you fight the hospital especially when they seemed right at first. The thing is that there were signs, signs of the grandfather's deterioration that him and his mother should have caught better but didn't, there was a loud cough he developed since thanksgiving, there was a couple of nights his usually razor sharp mind slipped up like when he didn't realize he'd already taken his usual medicine or he failed to properly recognize the house they all lived and he stopped a house or two earlier than he should have and actually came close to trying enter it before the bear and his mother stopped him. This deterioration was heartbreaking, surprising and should have been caught well enough to actually do something but it wasn't and unfortunately only the cutting short of an invaluable, irreplaceable life followed.

The ursine thinks more to himself about how more could have been done by himself to try to save his grandpa and keep him alive if he had only been smarter, better prepared like he

always aims to be. If he had done proper CPR on the old man, if he and his mom had gotten him resubmitted at the hospital for possible treatment, or if he had done more to make sure his grandfather had stayed home where he could be safe instead of risking going outside when that was the bear's job. The bear feels like he could have and should have done more to protect his grandfather from the disease that he knew was out there, the bear should have done more to protect himself too he thinks even if it was grandfather who got infected first. Then he hits himself in frustration, the ursine feels it but it doesn't hurt him like he wishes it would have. Theo's grandfather wouldn't have wanted him to be as depressed as the bear has been so far or be beating himself up both psychologically and somewhat literally like this over his death.

If there was one trait his abuelo had it was his stubborn refusal to let anyone be even slightly burdened by his problems even if it was to his detriment. The man was fiercely independent for his age and strong as well as wise. This combined with how gracefully he aged made Theo admire him immensely and see him not merely as a man but as an Ox; prouder, stronger and more stubborn than practically anyone else he knew. He looks to the door of that room that was temporarily a coffin and crypt, the door that has been consistently open since that heartbreaking day that the bear's grandfather died and he thinks more about his months lost relative. The bear thinks about the past and his experiences with the man-Ox that was his grandpa when he was still alive along with the things he missed about him from then.

The icy ursine thinks about the things he misses about his grandpa and his presence in the house like the way he sang to himself when he was happy or how whenever the bear came home his grandpa was always either in his chair watching tv or playing cards or even times he'd catch him just sleeping on the chair in the middle of the afternoon. He misses the way the lights used to be on to greet him along with his grandfather saying hello and asking how his day went when he got home from work. He even misses the way the old man-ox always talked really loud on the phone because of his slightly gone hearing, in a strange way, loud enough that the bear could usually hear his conversation through the closed door of his room without even trying to listen for it. He misses how he could expect the trash cans to be back where they belong on Monday or Thursday because his grandpa was the one to usually put the trash cans back after they were emptied because the bear put them out in the first place, the bear misses having someone else to care for, to give gifts to, to acknowledge its presence when he got home. Without his grandpa around there's only turned off lights and a cold silence that awaits now when he opens his front door, sometimes that dark awaiting silence will be gone during the rare days his mother is home before the bear or she had the day off or even both of them did but even then it's not the same, not as lively or as much of a home as before. Death stopped by mid December to his familial home and it stole a piece of it and the bear that will never be returned and the polar bear is smart enough to know that as well as know that death's grip has never really left the house and all he can do is accept and try to heal.

How is the polar bear supposed to heal properly though when it feels like life just keeps throwing crappy circumstances and misery at him and expecting him to just grin and bear it like it's all not chipping away at him and his sanity slowly and painfully? Theo flashes back again to those first few nights after his grandfather's death and how sleep became something that he

came to dread and have to cope with the possibility that he'd never wake up from just like his abuelo didn't. The polar bear wonders if it would have been easier if he had just passed away in his sleep with the deceiving hope that he was going to make it before something of a struggle and then the end. That would have spared him the awkward holidays where gifts came from family that was far away while he was only grateful and happy to be alive, not even bothering to make any resolutions for the new year because he had lost all hope at the time of a future he could no longer pretend to be certain of. It would have saved him the worries of he'd keep his recent job or not and then the strange transition of getting back into the swing of things while dealing with so much as well as being bounced around locations as his boss tried to figure out where to permanently place him as well as having him fill in for other line cooks who called out with the virus, stressing him out and sort of endangering him in a already dangerous time and profession right now all while many others still work from home. It would have meant that he wouldn't have had to suffer the uncomfortable awkwardness of not having a bathroom for over a month as it was rebuilt from scratch to be exactly the way the bear's mother wanted it to be built for a while and having to use the bathroom only in places like restaurants, work and the gym as well as timing it so he could go at places other than home as much as he could given that all that was there was a temporary replacement toilet. The logical part of the ursine's though knows now that he wouldn't have really died that night or any night when he was still sick with viral symptoms as well as the reason he lived while his grandfather didn't and he wishes he didn't, he wishes his grandfather was still here and that he didn't have to deal with all these painful and complicated feelings.

God, he shouldn't be dealing with this kind of survivor's guilt the polar bear thinks to himself, he's supposed to be strong, capable, able to hold it together, he has to be. He takes a deep breath, it feels harder to do now than before he got sick, he exhales it a little quicker than he expected. Suddenly he hears a creaking sound like something about to give way and that's when he notices that the table he's been leaning on for a little while is about to collapse under his weight, it wasn't made to hold the weight of a whole beastman much less one of his massive size of over 9 feet and he's not even fully sure how many pounds. He misses his old place with it's furniture custom made for people like him that he bought from that specialty beastman furniture store to support his more than human physique. Of course time has lost so much meaning to him now and it's been long enough that his previous home no longer feels real, it feels like he never even moved out. Anyway he moves off the table to head to the newly renovated bathroom with its grey hexagon floor and white walls and small closet and then all the other things in a bathroom.

Theo enters it through a door that didn't used to be there a few months ago in his dining room and thinks some more about how completely remodeling this room would have been almost impossible when his grandpa was here for a few different reasons such as them having to tear down the closet in his room to make space for the larger bathroom and entrance hallway. He goes to that shiny new sink and looks into the mirror above it to look at his face. While it's not as bad as before around Christmastime his eyes still look tired and slightly puffy with dried bits of black skin over the white fur, hard to believe a polar bear could have an eczema flare-up but the proof is on Theo's face along with just general physical and emotional exhaustion. The

ice bear wipes some of the dry skin delicately with a claw before he looks down at his wrists to see small bits of red poking through his white fur, almost unnoticeable but he feels and notices them. Cuts caused by his eczema, they rarely hurt except sometimes when he washes his hands. He does so and then looks at himself again feeling like a weaker, tired husk of himself except a little bigger than before. All of a sudden he feels a cough coming and coughs up some phlegm, another thing that reminds him of how he was sick and just how much that virus messed up the bear's body.

He leaves the bathroom to walk to his bedroom and thinks about how badly he could use a drink right now. Instead of doing that he chooses to reminisce some more about his grandfather. Remembering all the times his grandfather fixed his tie or made sure he looked okay before his interviews back when he was still a man and even after he changed from that, the stubborn way the old ox would almost always refuse to let the bear accompany him on his walks despite his struggling to walk needing a walker or cane, he remembers cooking for his grandpa and adjusting that and his eating schedule around the ox man's, playing cards with him playing this numbers game he knew and taught the bear, the way his grandpa used to make small food messes because his eyesight was going and the polar bear remembers cleaning up those messes as part of his routine more or less. He never thought he'd miss cleaning after and caring for someone in the way the ursine is now where it was so much a part of his daily routine and he adjusted to that so much that he feels emptier and in general less driven to do things. Of course his grandfather was also independently and incredibly capable in spite of circumstances and his age: he woke up Theo when he was struggling to wake up for work or an interview, he helped with the groceries moving whatever bags the bear and his mom gave him which he moved with the help of his walker, he gave money to help with things like buying the occasional pizza which he loved or the bills and rent, he cooked for himself when he needed to, sometimes when the bear was tired or away for too long or just procrastinating the old ox would start doing the dishes for him which was the bear's chore to do so he usually stepped in to do especially since the old ox couldn't do it well thanks to that fading eyesight.

He did all that and more and was just so independent and had the vitality and spirit of someone more than half his age which was 92. He... he was going to turn 93 five months from now in August... his grandfather, he should still be here to celebrate that birthday the bear thinks. Of course some would say that that's a pretty long life and it was going to be his time sooner rather than later anyway but that's because they don't understand the family history there or how sharp he was and how gracefully he was aging. His mother, the polar bear's great mother she lived to be over 100 and his great grandfather into his 90's as well. The bear wishes his grandfather was here so badly to celebrate another year of life and was just here in general and hasn't really stopped thinking that since he died. He also wishes he played cards and dominoes with the old ox more, said "te quiero tu" a little bit more to him, had more conversations in Spanish with him, did a little more for someone who did so much for him and who he loved so much and maybe even gave some kind of last words with the benefit of foresight instead of questioning himself and how good of a grandson he was left with only some remnants of his time here, in this house. Remnants like the watch he gave his grandfather for Christmas which has gone back to the polar Bear now as a momento(it was one of the few

times he knew his grandpa expressly wanted something rather than guessing what he could get him), the carved wooden cane his other daughter, the bear's aunt gave him that she'll get back when she stops by, various caps and clothes the man some of which the man ox never even wore preferring a simple and familiar wardrobe it felt like. There's more stuff since the watch and clothes and came were in the room of the icy ursine but it's mostly in his grandpa's room put back there after they finally cleaned and reorganized everything there bringing that room into its new state of being unoccupied. The rest of his stuff is scattered in places like the medicine cabinet for instance.

The bear sighs as he continues to lie on his bed and just does nothing but reflect and mope, finishing cleaning up and reorganizing his grandfather's room has just brought him down by making him reminisce harder about everything that's happened these past three months and even a little further than that, just life in general up to this point and how bad it's devastated him leaving him a hollowed mess. Earlier when the loss was still fresh he'd vent to and take comfort in just talking to others but now it's been months with every part of the loss's aftermath handled more or less and him feeling like any more venting he did about that loss and what came after would make him sound like a sad broken record. Of course there's still other problems affecting the bear like stuff at work and his health which has definitely taken hits from him being sick and some weight gain due to quarantining to the point where he can't not acknowledge it but struggles to do anything and then there's the other deaths that have affected him, his loved ones and his friends. Thinking about all these problems and the suffering caused by them and then his mind drifts to those who would dismiss and downplay his problems cause this world is cruel and a roar of rage and frustration builds in his chest. Before it can exit the polar bear man's lips though it peters out into a silent scream, the bear is too worn down and tired to know how to channel his anger like that anymore instead tapping his fist against a bedroom wall with no real force behind it.

There's still one thing left for him to deal with for certain regarding his grief, in December which is nine months from now it'll be the one anniversary of the passing of Theo's grandfather and the polar bear will be going with family to pay his respects since he couldn't at the funeral thanks to being unable to go and say his final goodbyes. In spite of losing loved ones before this December will be the first time Theo actually steps foot in a graveyard to give last farewells and mourn a life lost and he's nervous about that for multiple reasons. For now though he'll just do his best to heal and not completely fall apart before December and possibly have a drink later, it's hard to say anymore what the polar bear man will do anymore, the past year has changed his life so much not that he wasn't changing already but still. In the meantime he thinks he's done for now sitting around only to reminisce. You can only think about something for so long before you need to move on but his grandpa's memory in the bear's mind will always be strong.