[Snap Judgment intro]

**Glynn:** Okay, in one of my favorite books of ever *American Gods*, the magical Neil Gaiman takes us to a place where every year in the winter, after the temperature drops below zero, the lake freezes into an ice sheet. The locals, they drag a junkyard car, haul it to the middle of the lake, and then they raise money for a local charity by raffling off tickets, each ticket detailing a precise time. But in the spring, that car is going to break the ice and sink beneath the water. Whoever calls it closest gets the big prize.

Now, I'm from Michigan, and this is a real thing in places I grew up. It's how the PTA raises money for the high school basketball uniforms, or maybe a new roof for the firehouse. In fact, people have been known to make sure they're holding the winning ticket with a stick or two of well-placed dynamite, so that the car stinks when it's supposed to.

But this past year, my old stomping grounds, they couldn't have the contest. No raffle for after school programs, no sticks of dynamite. Because for the first time in living memory, the lake didn't freeze over. Being from this place, it's hard to adequately express the surprise, the shock. Our connection to the cold, we revel in it. We fetishize it. We play and work and roll and sleep and run and fish in it. This is not just a thing to reckon without there. This is the thing that touches the soul. And in the book, a deity arrives to maybe set things right. But today on Snap Judgment, no God's magic answers from the sky. Instead, instead, I know a guy.

[upbeat music]

Snap Judgment proudly presents, Not So Tiny Dancer. My name is Glynn Washington. Bundle up, winter is still coming, when you're listening the Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

We begin even further north than Michigan, the banks of the Hudson Bay in the middle of Canada when in the 1970s, a young kid named Dennis Comparye, used to would play in the streets with his friends. Snap Judgment.

[riveting music]

**Dennis:** It was a happy place to grow up in. There wasn't many rules or regulations for a young kid. We could play road hockey until we dropped dead just about all winter. There was no streetlights or anything like that, so when it got dark, we played road hockey with the northern lights shining up over us. It really did help increase your visibility, which is pretty cool. I don't know how many hundreds of thousands of tons of gravel they crushed to lay the foundation down for the town. Being that far north, there was no lawns or greenery like you would see further south. As a kid growing up in Churchill, our boogieman, our bad guy, was always the polar bear.

**Anna:** The bears did come ambling through the town of Churchill. They'd walk by the school, the airport, and if they were hungry--

**Dennis:** Bears would take dogs off the chains for sure. And they're still doing it. Bears were always in the back of our mind.

**Anna:** Can you describe what would happen in the town if there was a polar bear coming through?

**Dennis:** There was a telephone system, the phone would ring, and it would let you know. But the main way of knowing if there was a bear in town was the dogs acted up. As soon [dogs barking and howling] as one dog smelt the bear or noticed that there was a bear around, there was a kind of a specific dog howl, because most of the dogs were huskies, that every dog in town would pick up and you knew it was time to get the hell home or figure out what you're going to do. The houses we lived in in Churchill at that time were not very well built. They were basically shacks, my father would kill me for saying this, but the walls were thin. And in the dead of winter when you crawl into your bed at night, if the wind was howling and there was a lot of thumps or whatever on your house, you were worried there was a bear coming to get you. People were scared to death of bears back in the day.

They figured if the bear could see you through the window, he's going to come for you. So, you just turned the lights off and my father would haul out his rifle and make sure it was loaded and put it by the door just in case. I constantly had nightmares about polar bears. That was the demons you had to fight.

**Anna:** Was it the same polar bear in your nightmares or was it just different ones?

**Dennis:** No, it was the same guy. He was called The Bear. [laughs]

**Anna:** Did you tell your parents, or did you tell anybody?

**Dennis:** No, I didn't. I wouldn't dare tell my dad about my nightmares. He'd throw me out in the snowbank and make me work through it. But nothing much was said about that. One time, I was out playing road hockey till all hours of the night and the dog howl come up and I thought, "Well, I've got to get going home." It was pitch black. So, I started going for the house and the dogs got louder and louder. I was running for dear life home, so already my heart was pounding thousand miles. Each side of the road was long ditches. So, you're going down into a ditch and up on the road and down into a ditch. Our house was just across the road from this ditch. I could see the lighting in mom's kitchen. Right there on the road, right in front of me was this big old bear and he was huge. And he just stood still, didn't move, just like a statue.

He had these watery-looking eyes, head slung low, and he was kind of looking at me through these ancient eyes. I thought my life was over. This is how I'm going to end. My legs were starting to give out, but I thought, "Well, I can't stop." It's just something just lifted me up and carried me up over onto the road and just crossing right in front of the bear. I was carrying my hockey stick and I just held my stick out. When I finally got to our porch and I didn't go into the house, I just stood there stunned for a second. Then, I looked back at the bear, we locked eyes for about three or four seconds and that was absolutely amazing. And because he was an older bear, his muzzle was shell black because the hair on his head was kind of thin. I swear to God, he just huffed and turned his head away and just ambled down the road.

**Anna:** For many generations, Dennis and the rest of the town of Churchill had lived their lives avoiding the bears. But as the 70s turned into the 80s, polar bears became an object of fascination for the rest of the world. An opportunity started to develop in the town, the business of taking tourists out onto the ice to see these massive creatures.

From being a kid who was so scared of bears, how did you end up in this business?

**Dennis:** Well, the guy who built the buggies, my friend, Len, needed a driver and I said, "Sure, this sounds like fun, so let's go." I wasn't walking out in the land looking for bears. I was inside a tin can with tires on it. So, it was relatively safe in my mind.

**Anna:** This tin can that he would be driving was an invention of his and his friend, Len's. It was kind of a monster truck tour bus that they built to take out on the ice.

**Dennis:** Well, you take the chassis of a five-ton firetruck, then you take a bunch of great big tires off farm equipment, and you put that--[crosstalk]

**Anna:** They got an old engine, 12 seats from a school bus, a little platform for a propane heater with a chimney cut through the roof.

**Dennis:** -covered and across from the propane heater was a cut-out seat and a five-gallon bucket for the toilet. And away you went. That was Buggy 1. That's how went to see the bears.

**Anna:** You were going to be the first driver of this buggy?

**Dennis:** I was the first driver, yeah.

**Anna:** Were you nervous? How did that feel?

**Dennis:** Well, like anything else, you can't let them see you sweat. You just jump in and go, and you had unsuspecting paying guests there who didn't have a clue. More often than not, because the original buggy was not 100% doable, so to speak, there was often breakdowns and we didn't even have a radio system back there. So, if the breakdown occurred, I just turned up the propane heater and grabbed my shotgun and walked back to where there was a phone and phoned Len to come and rescue us.

**Anna:** Dennis led tundra buggy tours further and further out onto the ice to Cape Churchill to try and see more polar bears in their natural habitat, hunting for seals, wrestling on the snow, raising their young. One afternoon, a family of polar bears came ambling by and got very close to the buggy.

**Dennis:** This mother and two cubs started walking towards the buggy and the cubs were 11 months old at that time. And usually, they just pass us by without anything at all. But as he went by, the last little guy, he took a look my way and he's seen me and he took an interest in me and he rambled over to where I was and was having a good look at me and I thought this was pretty cool. He didn't heed his mother when she stopped to call him. He just stayed there, trying to figure out who I was. Finally, the mother got his attention the way he went.

The next day went back to the same area. Sure enough, we found that mother and two cubs again, resting that time. When we got close, that same cub took up another interest in me and he come to the back. And at that point I said, "This is kind of cool." I played a little game with him where I'd duck down behind the wall on the deck, and he couldn't see me anymore. Then, I'd pop up and he took great delight in that. And then, I ducked down again and because he couldn't see me, he would stand up on his back legs and walk backwards to get a better look. When I popped up again, I burst out laughing. It looked like he was trying to dance. It was the most comical thing. We would do this every time we found each other out at Cape Churchill for the next three weeks. It was a smart bear, and we got this kind of connection together.

**Anna:** Dennis named the baby bear Dancer because of the peekaboo dance he would do. At the end of that polar bear season, Dennis went back home to Churchill and didn't see Dancer again through the spring and the summer. The next year when the ice returned and it was time to fire up the buggy again, Dennis went back out to the Cape.

**Dennis:** The next year, sure enough, I went back, and sure enough, he found us again. This time, he was two years old, and we played that same game. I talked to him and this and that and get a kick out of him. He was a pretty cool bear. When a wild animal takes an interest in you, it's a special thing. You feel privileged, and so, you're looking forward to those encounters again.

**Anna:** The next year and the next year, when Dennis would take out the buggy in the winter season after the ice froze over to take tourists out, Dancer would somehow find him.

**Dennis:** We did that for the next three or four years as it got bigger.

**Anna:** But then, Dennis stopped driving all the way out to Cape Churchill. The polar bear business was getting fancier and more buttoned up. He got new owners. They didn't want a scruffy guy like him driving tours for days out onto the ice. He says he was more deadhead, and the industry had become more bank manager. So, they had him doing work closer to town.

**Dennis:** I never went back to the Cape for about five or six years.

**Anna:** Five or six years. After those five or six years, Dennis really wanted to get back out to the Cape. He wanted to find a way to get there on his own without a school bus full of tourists.

**Dennis:** I was on the computer, and of course I'm interested in animals. All of a sudden, I clicked into this thing called Africam, where they had live cameras at these watering holes in Kruger National Park in South Africa. So, I emailed the guy, said, "Listen, you guys want to switch things up and do polar bears?" not thinking anything that ever become of it. The next morning, when I opened up my mail, there was a message. They said, "Yeah, let's do it. Let's get this thing going." Sure enough, three months later, three guys from South Africa landed in Churchill with enough equipment for me to set up a live cam for polar bears.

**Anna:** He asked if he could set up the webcam in old Buggy 1, his first love. He made the argument that it would drive customers to the business.

**Dennis:** When I took over Buggy 1 to go do the webcam, Buggy 1 was in the garbage heap. It was done. His day was over. So, I resurrected it. I rebuilt it. I tore out the seats on the inside and built myself a bed and made room for the camera gear and this and that.

**Anna:** But Dennis couldn't drive back out to the same spot on the Cape where he'd seen Dancer years before because the ice had changed. There wasn't enough ice to drive out there anymore. It just wasn't accessible. He was going to have to go to a different area.

**Dennis:** For us to get to Cape Churchill, you had to have land-fast ice, which is ice that forms on the land and grows out first, and we'd travel on that to get to the Cape. But that wasn't happening anymore.

**Anna:** This was going to be a new adventure, taking a different route, and he probably wouldn't see Dancer.

**Dennis:** I didn't think it was going to happen. I always hoped it happened because I know they're smart bears and this and that. I knew there was a bit of change in the ice formation and this and that. I didn't think it was a probability. I never seen him for about six or seven years.

**Anna:** So, Dennis drove the new route out to the Cape, plugged in his webcam, and sat alone in the buggy, watching and waiting.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Oh, yes. You're going to want to hear what happens next to Dennis in his makeshift bus on the edge of the frozen Hudson Bay. Stay tuned.

[riveting music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Not So Tiny Dancer episode. When we left Dennis, he had set up his webcam and was quietly hoping to see his old pal Dancer one more time.

[intriguing music]

**Dennis:** It was around the first week of November and I'll always remember these days. I woke up early as I always do, with the binoculars, and trained the camera on whatever I could find. I put the binoculars down and drinking my coffee. And all of a sudden, there was a big whomp on the buggy. Something shook the Buggy and I thought, "My Lord, what the hell is going on here?" It was pretty harsh, it rocked the hell out of the buggy and spilt my coffee. I said, "Well, my Lord, what's going on?" The windows was frosted up, so I took a scraper and I scraped a patch of the windows that I could look out of. When I looked out, there was this great big bloody bear staring at me in the face. When he seen me, he got up and walked backwards. It was Dancer. He found me after six years. So, I just about dropped to the floor. There was my old buddy, who I never seen for six or seven years, and he's 50 kilometers away from where we usually met. He searched me out and there I was.

**Anna:** How did you know it was him?

**Dennis:** Oh, my God. Nobody could dance like him. Come on, how many dancing bears do you think there is out there? Of course, that was him. He did have some telltale scars on his nose and stuff like that from way back in the day, so yeah. He had a special shape and a special walk to him. And he was very animated and very goofy. I instantly knew it was him. He was a bear's bear. He was just packed with muscle everywhere and he had this comical expression on him. A lot of the bears, they have a concerned look, "Where am I going to get my next meal? Am I going to get into a fight?", this or that. But Dancer, he never looked like that. He looked like he was always content and always had a bit of an amused look on his face, like he was chuckling to some kind of a long joke. That's what really intrigued me about him, that he didn't seem to have a care in the world.

I think I mentioned before the size of a bear's behind tells if he's a good hunter or not. The more big the behind is, the more of a warrior this bear is. And Dancer had a huge behind.

Every year for the next five or six years after that, around the first week of November, he would find me again. Didn't matter where I was along that coast, he would wake me up, depends on the time of the day, with a big wallop, the side of the buggy. I slide the window open and he would stick his big head in there. Bears, they gather all their information through their nose and take a big whiff, and he could just cause a small hurricane inside the buggy. We'd visit each other for the next two or three weeks until the bay froze over and away he went to hunt. And it got pretty intimate. I could scratch him behind the ear and this and that.

The buggy I was in was very small. They had sliding windows off on the bus that slid sideways. So, he could take his claw and he could push the window open anytime he wanted to and stick his head in and have a visit. He loves the smell of coffee. You could tell, he had that twinkle in his eye that I'm sure he was almost as happy to see me as I was to see him. I never felt threatened one bit from Dancer. In fact, I used to get on the ground with him. That was probably the stupidest thing to do ever, but I felt secure enough during those moments when nobody was around that I could go ahead and do it.

**Anna:** Dennis would park Buggy 1 at the edge of the Hudson Bay during freeze-up. There was no vegetation around, just short, red willows and tundra moss.

**Dennis:** To everybody else in the world, there's absolutely nothing there and it's stark as stark can be. Being born and raised in Churchill and having used to the land, it's quite beautiful. It's a different realm, if I can put it that way. You step out of one dimension into another. You're right, it's very desolate and the wind makes it more eerie. The slow pace of the bears and this and that can really play with your senses. I don't know how many people in this world have lived through an arctic winter, like 40 miles an hour winds and -30 below and everything's howling and creaking. You can't see too far out the windows. It's an eerie feeling to begin with, and it brings on some melancholy and maybe even a little bit of apprehension or fear that the furnace is going to go out and you're going to freeze to death in your own little buggy.

**Anna:** Some nights, it would feel cozy and beautiful. And some nights, it would feel alone. There was one night where it felt particularly alone.

**Dennis:** That night, it was about 2:00 in the morning and kind of a slump, I guess, is what you call it. A little bit of depression and this and that and wondering what the hell you're doing out there in the freezing cold night like this. My mind wandering across wide open spaces. There is a trickle of cold air on the back of my neck. I turned around and there was my pal, Dancer. He had his head fully in the window and was just looking at me without making any sound. He was completely quiet. I was a bit confused about it because usually he's rambunctious as hell when he sticks his nose in the buggy, he loved the smells in there. But he was so quiet this time. It daunted me that he was intuitive. He could pick up on my melancholy and my silence and my stillness. And yeah, he absorbed that energy that I was going through. It really makes you think, doesn't it?

**Anna:** But as desolate and isolated as it sometimes was, it was never long before there were people around, people wanting to get close to the bears.

**Dennis:** The business of polar bears in Churchill just took off like a rocket. In a matter of years, there was one buggy, the original Buggy 1 that I drove. And like 10, 11 years later, there were 18 buggies going to the same area. Most of the time, the buggies were circling the bears. I think for the most part, some people are respectful and kept the noise down and stuff like that. But then you get-- I know you guys are going to kill me down there, but you get these mid America farmers with John Deere hats on, sticking their head out the window, going, "Here, Suey, Suey." It just irked the hell out of me because they're acting like the bears were like a pig or a cow. They're just calling them this and that, and it pissed me off.

The word got out that there was this crazy guy out along the coast who had this pet bear living beside him and it's quite the thing to see. The tourists and the buggies would make a point of dropping by where I had the camera buggy and yell out the window, make him stand up, and this and that.

**Anna:** This would happen often, that Dennis would be interacting with Dancer in some way, and a tourist bus would pull up and then another and another. Sometimes, they'd ask him to call him over or play peekaboo with him. And then one time, Dennis noticed a small change in Dancer during one of those interactions.

**Dennis:** There were two or three buggies around, and Dancer was laying outside by my window, and they were asking, make him stand up, and this and that. And he was looking at me. And so, I went into the routine. "Come on, Dancer. Get up, dancer. Come and see me. Come and see me." He just gave me a long look, and he just put his head down and didn't move. And I thought, "Good. Good for you." So, I just shrugged my shoulders to the other people and said, "No, it's not going to happen today." So, they left. After they left, I stuck my head back out the window, and he said, "Hey, Dancer, what's wrong with you, man?" Then, he popped up and come to the window and stood up for a scratch. What happened is I've never seen Dancer for a while.

**Anna:** Dennis was back and forth town managing the webcam. And occasionally, he'd still take out groups of photographers and documentary filmmakers. This one winter, it had been a long time since he'd seen Dancer.

**Dennis:** I got hired from a film company out of Britain. Anyway, so off we went. At the end of the day, about 3 o'clock, way in the distance on the ice, there was this bear walking. I recognized the walk, the gait, and I knew instantly it was Dancer. I told the crew, I said, "Get your cameras ready. We're not finished yet." I stuck my head out the window and I called him, "Come on, Dancer, let's go. Come on, Dancer." He was a good half mile away. I have a very high-pitched, squealy voice that I'm not too proud of. Anyway, he picked up on it, and he kind of just stopped dead in his tracks and looked toward the voice come. And then, he just come towards me. It took him a long time to get to where we were. He was a slow-walking guy, he was cautious, but he recognized the voice.

When he got to the buggy, I was at the window, and he recognized me right away. I gave it about a one or two minutes, and then I stuck my head out, said, "Come on, Dancer. Come on." And then, he got up and jumped up into the window, and I gave him a big nose scratch. It was quite the meeting for me. I just had a quiet conversation with him out the window, and he was my old friend again. It almost brought me to my knees, but I'm not going to-- that was the last time I was close to him. I seen him after that, but I didn't want to bring any attention to him anymore. He's not a clown [chuckles] bear. He's an honest to goodness bear, and he's not going to do that anymore. I seen him in the distance, but we never interacted. I didn't want to call him over or do that whole thing. It was too hard on me, and he didn't deserve that anymore.

**Anna:** What do you mean it was too hard on you?

**Dennis:** Well, it's hard to say goodbye. I know I'm being a bit silly here about the whole thing, but truthfully, it was quite emotional when you find your old buddy bear again and you can't interact with him. Oh, God, you're going to make me tear up now. But one of the guys stuck out the back and he shot it from on the deck where actually he got the footage of Dancer jumping up and me scratching him on the nose.

[riveting music]

I knew that this would be our last encounter and I would never do it again. He just ambled away after I just closed the window on him. Usually, when I close the window, our visits are over. Because he was on a mission to begin with, he was going somewhere when I called him over, he just continued going. We watched him disappear out into the ice.

[riveting music]

**Glynn:** Big thanks to Dennis Comparye for sharing your story with the Snap. If you want more information on Dennis' work to help the polar bears, you can check out our website, *snapjudgment.org*. Special thanks as well to Iorek Byrnison, Lyra Silvertongue for securing access, and to Lee Scoresby for his help with aerial footage. Original score for this story was by Dirk Schwarzhoff. It was produced by Anna Sussman.

[riveting music]

[upbeat music]

Around the world in less than an hour, are you kidding me? Yes. More journeys away, more movies of the mind, more cinema of sound, all available for free right now. And if you act, right now, before the billionaires take it all for themselves, it's a tragedy you can prevent by subscribing to the Snap Judgment podcast. Snap is on the Twitter, the Instagram, the Facebook.

Snap is brought to you by the team that hasn't discovered the secret for playing outside in the snow. Except, of course, the uber producer Mr. Mark Ristich. See, he's from Michigan, so of course he knows that thermal underwear are a gift from the gods. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, John Fecile, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Bo Walsh, Flo Wiley, Marisa Dodge, David Exumé, Regina Bediako, Annie Nguyen, and Zahra Noorbakhsh.

Now then, no matter what you hear on these streets, don't let them fool you. This is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you could dip yourself in delicious gravy, then try to run butt naked through the middle of a polar bear convention, and you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

[upbeat music]

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*