

## Chapter Two - Epiphany

It was rare to wake up to find snow on the ground. But January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1963, was such a rare morning.

"Come on!" Denny's mother, Betsy, shouted as the door closed behind her.

An atmospheric trough, a U-shaped band of pressure, had pushed over the land during the night. But by morning, advancing winds blew the clouds away and the sky was as blue as a robin's egg. The whole sky was cleansed as if by scrub brushes.

Sharp angled morning sun cast stark shadows over white snow.

From his bedroom window, Denny saw fresh powder sparkling on the ground like sugar. From the sound of voices outside, he could tell his father was happy.

Denny's father, Eddie, and Eddie's friend Jerry, had rolled snow into a large ball, pushed it down the road, then back, and then to the middle of the yard. The snowball was two meters tall and would stay there melting for months.

Denny turned his gaze from the scene outside to the bare wall of his room.

He'd had another dream. He pushed the covers back and lay down again, feeling heat from a desert he'd never seen. He felt his toes sink into soft, wet sand at the edge of a river.

At first these dreams were fun, like going on a trip. But his father had yelled, "Ain't no such thang as people havin' other lives. They's just one life."

After that, the dreams happened less frequently.

Some days he was obsessed by them; they were so real. But as his father had explained, this was a sign something was wrong.

"It was when I was big." In his country-accented, childish voice, this is how Denny explained that he had been an adult in the dreams.

But he didn't talk about them anymore. His father Eddie always yelled at him, "You ain't gonna live that long." Then he'd laugh menacingly. "You ain't never gonna be big."

Sitting back up on the bed that morning, Denny knew, if he closed his eyes, he could go back to the dream. He had done it before. And, despite knowing it was wrong, he closed his eyes and suddenly there he was, walking barefoot in wet sand, next to a river. He was not white. His skin was dark like the people who lived in Shake-Rag. And he was a woman. He saw gold

bracelets on his wrists. He wore a long dress that went almost to the ground. He could feel his body, the weight of his hips, his breasts moving as he stepped along the sand.

In the dream, he'd been walking toward a boat. There was no motor and no sail. Men stood holding paddles at each end. The boat was shaped like a banana, its middle curving down and each end arching upward. It was painted gold, blue and red. It had an awning with a golden chair underneath it. That's where he was going. He was going to sit in that chair. There were people on the boat. They watched him. The men wore white kilts. He saw people walking in front of him and behind him. They were all going to the boat together.

A snowball smacked the glass pane next to the bed, bringing him back to the present. "Come on outside," his mother yelled through the window.

Denny had never experienced snow.

He swung around in bed and stood up to get dressed. Not knowing how to dress for snow, he put on jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, his coat, and a hat his mother had bought him at Christmas.

Then, he grabbed his Barbie doll.

Outside, the snow was cold. Reaching down to take white powder into his hands, he immediately dropped it. The cold hurt his fingers. He bent down to play with his doll, pretending she was walking through the snow. "It's cold today," he voiced for her.

"...that dam' doll," his father shouted.

Jerry threw a snowball at Eddie, hitting him on the side of the head, distracting him.

"You Goddam'..." Eddie said, laughing, spinning around to throw a snowball back at his friend.

Denny looked down at the doll, then up at his father. He had been told over and over. He knew he shouldn't play with dolls. He stood up. The front and side yard were fields of white. Tree branches hung heavy, weighed down with frozen powder.

He went back inside, Barbie doll in hand.

He thought about Eddie's friend, Jerry. Had Jerry thrown the snowball to distract his father? Denny turned and looked at the front door from inside the house as if it were transparent, as if he were looking at Jerry through it.

Was Jerry trying to protect him?

Denny was almost six and precocious. However, he was not mature enough to understand, to put events together, to see a pattern.

Sometimes Jerry would show up when Eddie was going into a rage, when he had threatened violence.

When Eddie yelled insults, telling Denny he was a freak, Jerry stepped in, contradicting him. Jerry bragged on Denny's intelligence and his character.

Jerry tried to reason with the brutal man. He defended Denny's mannerisms, explaining how Native American Indians understood feminine males. "Life's gonna be hard enough on him as it is. You don't need to make it worse," Jerry had said.

Once, from his bedroom, Denny overheard Jerry and his father talking. Eddie explained that he and Betsy, Denny's mother, had decided to be tougher on Denny, to turn him into a man.

Jerry talked about the damage violence does to a child.

Denny overheard Jerry saying, "He has a beautiful singing voice," and "he's not like the rest of us country folks."

Eddie responded, "Maybe he was plopped down here from outer space or somethin'." He had laughed coarsely at his own joke.

That snowy morning, standing inside the living room, hearing the voices of his father and Jerry outside, he thought about Jerry's words.

Suddenly, a new thought struck him.

Like a bolt of thunder, he saw the truth.

He was not evil.

His mouth opened, as if to gasp, but he drew in no breath.

He stood rooted to the floor.

He was not evil.

He looked around the living room. It took hold of him. He stared at a velvet-covered placard his mother had hung on the wall. Written in silver glitter were the words, "The Gift of God is Eternal Life." He held on to the image as if holding on to this new reality.

He was not evil.

It was as if he emerged from darkness.

He was stepping out of fog.

He would remember this day for the rest of his life.

Before that morning, without knowing it, he'd believed himself to be damned. He believed he was the work of the Devil. Without knowing how it happened, or why, he suddenly realized he had thought of himself as evil.

It had been drilled into him.

It had become his identity.

Now, in an instant, he knew it wasn't true.

His father said he was the Devil's creation, that his birth was a mistake, that he should not have been born. He remembered his father's constant litany, "...you ain't never gonna 'mount to nuthin'."

But this morning the little boy, Denny Shields, realized, like an explosion going off in his mind.

He was not the evil one.

*It was his father.*