

PRELUDE

AT THE LAKE, 1979

We were ice cream people.

We ran a multi-million-dollar empire that had thrived since 1938. For generations of Washingtonians, our name was on the tip of the tongue when they thought of ice cream and candy. Presidents lined up for a scoop next to office workers and laborers. At the scarred wooden tables in the various Gifford's parlors around the DC area, lovers held hands and children celebrated their birthdays, year after year. Come opening time, there was almost always a line at the door. On more than one occasion, when a first-shift worker failed to show and the store didn't open on time, small mobs broke in and served themselves. Almost everyone left payment on the counter.

In the Gifford's parlor, watching a waitress balance a tray of sundaes as she approached your table, everything must have seemed perfect. Beautiful, even. Maybe I seemed perfect, too, that boy under his mother's wing as she swanned past the tables toward the back of the store. What a dream to be the prince of ice cream!

Except it wasn't.

In 1979, I was five—too young to understand much about our family business, let alone what was about to happen to it and to us. Today, I'm still not sure I understand.

Gifford's Ice Cream and Candy Company was founded by my grandfather, John Nash Gifford. He died in 1976, leaving the business in turmoil. His wife, my grandmother Mary Frances, lay dying in a hospital bed. My father, Robert Nash Gifford, struggled for control of the empire against both his father's last surviving

partner and my maternal grandfather, Allen Currey, who maneuvered to take over in my name. In the chaos, my mother, Barbara, signed on with my dad in an elaborate plan to siphon off profits and plunder the payroll and pension accounts.

As a child, I knew none of this. My paternal grandparents were strangers to me—their history hidden, muddled, erased. From my parents I learned only that I was an accident, easily ignored. What little I thought I knew about my family was a lie, and it would take me over three decades to figure that out. The fact was, long before the public end of Gifford’s Ice Cream, my father had decided to kill it.

This is a story about what was lost. It’s a story about the dead. It’s a story about me. It begins at a lake in western Maryland.

My earliest memory.

The water in Deep Creek Lake was dark, calm, and chilly, even under the harshest summer sun. My mother called it “mountain water” with a strange, spooky reverence in her voice. Water without a bottom, she said. Deep Creek Lake, though tamed by man, seemed primordial. There were a few man-made beaches, maintained by the Wisp or Alpine Village, the two major resort hotels, but most of the shoreline was comprised of drowned trees, rocks, and sticky black mud.

As we approached in our Caprice station wagon, we passed a turnoff just before the Wisp that led to an abandoned quarry. Three great caves had been blasted through the side of the mountain, and ruined chain-link fences had been thrown up as ineffectual barriers. Around these gaping maws, rusting equipment lay forgotten. Slippery humps of rocks made dangerous trails back into the darkness, each surrounded by oily black water.

Mom was a rockhound. The first thing we did after we checked into our hotel, instead of going to the lake, was to cross the road and climb to the quarry site. On our trip in 1979, new fences had been installed to block access to the caves. But Mom had anticipated this and carried along a set of bolt cutters. She made a hole in one of the fences, grabbed my hand, and led me

through, producing a cheap flashlight that cast a weak beam as we slowly moved into the caves.

A cold breeze blew from within the heart of the mountain. A barely audible hum, punctuated by sounds of dripping water and skittering rocks, summoned mental visions of ghosts and monsters. Mom stopped to chip rocks out of the walls while I nervously watched the crumbling ceiling. Occasionally she would shout in triumph and bend down to show me the fossils she'd been extracting—strange, ancient creatures trapped in stone. I carefully touched the outlines of their bodies, and Mom told me that, one day, we would become fossils, too.

Eventually, we went far enough for the daylight behind us to grow distant and then vanish, leaving us alone with the flickering beam of Mom's flashlight. In that darkness, she shouted: "I am here! I have come!"

I feared that this might be a summons and waited nervously for a response. I looked up at her, her face hidden in shadow. She stood unflinching, waiting.

"I have brought Andrew!" she added.

Her hand, hard on my shoulder, kept me pinned at her side. After a few tense, quiet moments, we turned and left. She seemed disappointed. I asked what was wrong as we emerged back into the warm summer day. She shook her head, now sullen and distant, and pushed me along the dirt road. She didn't speak for the rest of the evening.

First thing every morning for the entire vacation—for every vacation at Deep Creek, year after year, rain or shine—my parents would rouse me and we would go out on the lake in a rented boat and motor around without any sort of goal in mind. We spent entire days motoring the lake like this, my father making endless circuits of the erratic shoreline, pausing to float near the most desolate stretches, where the water disappeared behind the gnarled branches of sunken trees.

Between the two of them, they would empty a cooler of beer and bourbon. Mom would take each can out and tap the top with

her fingers before cracking it open with a sigh. When the gas got low, Dad would pull into a dock and refuel, and then we'd start off again. As we drifted aimlessly, my father sat in the captain's chair, staring ahead, while my mother turned the number of flattened beer cans into a math quiz.

"How many cans now, Andrew?"

I'd dutifully count them, prouder and prouder of my ability as the number went up throughout the day.

Despite the lazy tours of the lake and the alcohol, neither of them relaxed. They always seemed on edge, living underneath a layer of fear. If a fellow boater hailed us or asked if we were in trouble, Dad would start the engine and speed away at full throttle as Mom looked back and shouted: "I think they're following!"

My mother told me that I shouldn't trust anyone. I wasn't to speak to strangers, or leave the hotel room, or get out of the boat. If anyone spoke to me, she said, I must not forget that they were "the enemy." She told me that everyone out there—"a world full of strangers"—wanted to "steal" me. Because we were famous, my father would chime in. Mom would nod and say that they would "brutally rape and torture" me.

I learned three rules: trust no one, speak to no one, and tell no one your name.

These warnings extended beyond our summer vacations at the lake. Every Halloween, at Gene's Costumes in Kensington, Maryland, both Mom and Dad would point to a policeman costume and whisper in my ear: "Don't trust police officers, because they are probably just evil men in disguise. You can buy a cop's outfit and ID right here. Anyone can. Always remember that."

At Deep Creek Lake, by six each evening, we'd tie up the boat and head back to our rented cottage on the grounds of the Alpine Village. My parents ordered room service, and then they would sit together to drink and argue steadily until I passed out in front of the TV, their harsh, hushed voices my troubled lullaby.

Part of our daily circuits around the lake brought us into the long, thin cove where the dam loomed on the horizon. We usually gave the dam a wide berth, but one day we came very close to

it, and Dad cut the engine. For several minutes, the boat drifted slowly closer, and I watched, staring in awe at the large structure in front of us, the tips of trees just visible in the valley beyond. In my child's mind, I pictured the dam from its other side—a colossal wall with all that dark, dark water backed up behind it and our tiny boat floating on top. It made me feel so very small, so very fragile. We were maybe a few hundred yards away from the dam, the current gently pulling us towards it, when Mom leaned down and told me a story.

“There once was a family just like ours,” she said. “Mommy, Daddy, and a little boy. They used to always visit this lake, just like we do. Then, one day, something terrible happened . . .”

She let the tension build, the boat drifting closer to the dam as my father watched me levelly, occasionally sipping from a Dixie cup of bourbon.

“They were lost,” Mom continued. “They got sucked under the dam, and nobody knew what happened to them until, weeks later, they found their boat far down the river.”

Her arm stretched toward the dam and beyond to the hard-scrabble woods of western Maryland, her face serious, her eyes hidden behind aviator sunglasses that reflected the summer sky and the dark water around us.

“All that was left were three skeletons,” she said, pointing at her chest, at Dad, and then at me. “Mommy, Daddy and a little boy . . .”

We drifted closer and closer, and then Mom laughed good-naturedly and went to start the engine. She turned the key, but nothing happened. A look of alarm spread across her face as she tried again, then again. She rushed back to the motor and pulled the emergency ripcord. The engine choked and sputtered but didn't start. Her voice low, shaking, she called my dad over and he tried to start the engine. One, two, three pulls on the chain. The motor coughed but never came to life.

“It won't start! Oh my God!”

Mom turned to me, her face a mask of terror. She clung to my father, who grimly stared at the engine. It was the first time I had

seen them frightened, and I started to cry and shake, tearing my eyes off of them to look fearfully at the dam as we drew ever closer.

The warning signals from the dam started to sound—to my child’s mind they seemed like great, piercing klaxons that screamed through the air. I covered my ears. We were close enough to see people watching from the shore and an observation platform, close enough to see the water being sucked towards the dam, to feel the boat pick up speed. I pissed my swim trunks and screamed.

Then Mom started to laugh. She gave my dad a playful punch on the shoulder. Grinning and chuckling under his breath, he took his seat at the wheel and turned the key. The engine started up right away. The boat turned and sped away from the dam. The klaxons cut off and, with nothing but the roar of the boat’s engine and my mom’s laughter in my ears, I lapsed into a shuddering silence, sitting in a puddle of my piss, staring back at the dam. I couldn’t stop crying. I couldn’t feel anything.

My mother’s laughter faded. She watched me for a moment, then sneered and said: “Pull yourself together. Boys don’t cry!”

But I couldn’t stop crying. I stared at her, gasping, sobbing, shaking. She set her jaw and turned to my father, screaming at him, saying that he had frightened me. She yelled at him all the way back to the hotel docks, then through the lobby, out the back, and all along our short walk to the cottage. Guests and staff stared at us. Mom dragged me by my hand, and I stumbled behind her, still numb. My dad never shouted back—he only nodded meekly and mumbled his familiar refrain, repeating: “Sorry, Barb . . . sorry, Barb . . .”

They fought into the night as I huddled in my bed, unable to sleep, the sound of the dam’s sirens echoing in my head. I couldn’t stop crying, sucking in dry, heaving breaths, sweating through the sheets and shivering. A hotel worker came by and knocked on the door. I heard him say that Dad had forgotten to tie up the boat and that it had drifted into the lake. Mom yelled at him, then slammed the front door of the cottage repeatedly—banging it shut, opening it up again, and smashing it closed again, all the while unleashing incoherent animal shrieks.

Finally, there was silence. I heard the door open again, slam shut, and then Mom burst into my room, throwing the door aside with enough force to drive the doorknob into the drywall.

“Your dad’s gone,” she said in calm, even tones. “He left us because you cried. Because you just had to ruin a perfect vacation.”

She ordered me to take down my pajama bottoms and lie on my stomach. Then she turned her diamond rings around so the big, sharp stones were facing inward. She spanked me until blood started to flow freely onto the sheets, each blow punctuating her words: “Your . . . father . . . is . . . gone . . . because . . . of . . . you . . .”

Dad had run away. He’d rented a car and was driving home while Mom spanked me until I bled.

My childhood is defined by moments like those at Deep Creek Lake. It was our summer getaway, but for me, especially after that 1979 trip, it was an annual torture. At the lake, my parents were free of the family business, not to mention most of the family itself. They behaved like animals briefly escaped from their cages, drinking wildly and concocting pranks at my expense or at the expense of neighboring guests and hotel employees.

After that episode in 1979, my parents avoided the dam. I developed a lifelong phobia of water, and on future trips to the lake I huddled at the bottom of the boat and tried never to look at the water, tried to push the thought of it beneath me from my mind. I spent each outing on the lake in a near catatonic state, thinking only of that dam.

I still dream of that dam. In my dreams, we get sucked under and I have to fight my way awake through the impenetrable, inescapable blackness of that cold, rushing mountain water.