

# The Demise of Walker B. Gifre

by Jamie Mosel

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He was found in the river.

His briefcase and suitcase were found by the pines, and a single trail of footprints found in the snow. In his fingers was clutched a letter.

He opened his eyes. It was morning. The sun did not tell him, nor singing birds, but a chirping alarm. The red numbers flashed, devilishly. It was five thirty. His shades were drawn, and the room was dark. The looming shapes of large dressers, the seams of light at the door bottoms, the expensive rugs. A monstrous TV oversaw the frontmost wall, encased in a mahogany console, polished and glossy. He flicked on the lights, leaving a trail of yellowish luminescence behind him.

At the sink, he leaned over the marble bowl and stared into the mirror. The reflection was that of a man just stumbling into agedness. He was well kept, a set, relentless jaw, precise haircut - at the top it was thinned, at the front beginning to recede - and cold, shrewd, beady eyes. Yet there was a corruption, also, that had woven itself into his features. A shadow too sharp. A square face too calculating, too unfeeling, too insatiable. It was these characteristics that had brought him to the top, that had bought him the house, the car, and the wife.

He ran his pointed tongue across his teeth. They were unnaturally straight, and unnaturally white, but with a creeping bilious stain from coffees, cigarettes, and the occasional cigar. His stomach was padded with decadent foodstuffs. His chin was flapped with skin. The toothpaste foamed around his mouth as he brushed, making him appear the perfect image of a greedy dog. He turned the faucet, listening to the shushing water, and letting it run down the drain.

In his closet, he selected his suit and grim black tie.

Outside, the snow was miserable. It whipped at the windows, screaming, swirling. Whether it was the dawn breaking behind the cold curtain, or the eventide falling was impossible to know. The sun was a tiny dim ball, glowing white. It could easily have been the moon. A grey spiral spun out the chimney of the large house, puffing madly. The garage moaned open. Inside there was a fleet of metal and rubber. But it was a lone, sleek, classy car that pulled out from the drive, revving itself as if to speed, then screeching to a stop within feet of its origin. A shined shoe crunched into the snow, stepping out and cursing its way back into the house. The car remained, spewing exhaust, and humming; he had not bothered to turn it off. The man trotted back to his stylish

vehicle, briefcase in hand. The door slammed shut.

He threw the case onto the passenger seat. The interior was dark, and smooth, and leather. He shifted into reverse, toe poised to press the gas, and peeled out of the drive, down the street. Past the other gigantic suburban homes, though none so intimidating as his, none so full of rooms whose windows, through the night, shone with such electricity -- with such audacity. None who so flamboyantly mocked the outside world.

He sped to work, his speedometer pointing proudly to eighty. He screeched to the curb in front of a towering building, the tallest in the city. He reached for his briefcase, and heard a tap at the window. He turned, expecting the red-capped valet. But there was no one there. The valet was sprinting towards him to open his door. He glared harshly at the uniformed man, but ignored his apologies and stepped coolly past, his long coat swirling around his legs like a shadowy cape. He shoved his hands into his pockets, a paper falling to the sidewalk. He felt it fall, but did not pick it up. It fluttered and spun away with the wind and dizzy snowflakes. He stepped under the shelter of the overhang.

"Aren't you going to pick that up?" asked a hollow voice behind him.

His brow furrowed angrily, and he turned, irritated, and anticipating some young upstart in tattered jeans and knitted cap. He despised their type; they did not understand the way of the world; they did not understand business; they did not understand what it meant to be cutthroat. Always they hung in the shadows of this building -- waiting.

To his surprise, in the center of the sidewalk there stood a smartly dressed young man, in a straight black suit. A corporate man, like himself, but with deep earth-toned hair and bright sea foam eyes. His face was handsome, and oddly familiar. It was a face, almost, that he recognized, as if he had seen it everyday and yet never before. He stood, with a gentlemanly smile, and a sparkle to his teeth, with the crumpled paper at his feet. The older man stared. That paper he had seen blown away. It seemed to him, in that instant, that the ball of garbage was swept into the air, and into the stranger's waiting palm. But he surely imagined it.

"Here," said the man, his voice a rich, clear timbre. "You dropped this."

He placed it in the other's wrinkled claw, with another cheerful grin, and kind smile. The older man looked at it, hardly bothering to un-ball it.

"This is garbage," he scoffed, tossing it to the ground in disgust. The young man stooped and scooped it up.

"It looks like a letter," he said with a shrug. "You might want to keep it." He proffered it to the wealthy man, who took it with a frown - if only to rid himself this stranger- and shoved it angrily back into the recesses of his pocket. He would trash it later.

The stranger put his hands into his own pockets, making to depart. Even in departure, his

air was distinguished, that of a man who knew where he was going in life. An image of the older man, in his promising youth, receding into the snow storm raging outside the overhang. The square, broad shoulders and confident strides. It was as a visage. The older man watched him, contemplative and grave. He had piqued his curiosity; he was attracted.

"Wait," asked the older man. "Who do you think you are?"

The stranger turned.

"Green," he replied. "Dmitri Green."

The older man could have guffawed. Now that was a man who was definitely going places! That was a man who knew how to introduce himself. The confidence, the professionalism. This was a business man, no doubt. He had an intelligent, stately feel to him. A rare catch.

"Green, hm?" The older man ran the name through his head. Like the mysterious face, it was familiar, though he did not know it. The stranger nodded.

"And you must be Mr. Walker B. Gifre, chairman, president and CEO of Libom-Noxxe Oil." The stranger held out his hand, and the older man took it. The handshake was firm. Meaningful. "I have seen your face on the cover of TIME."

"Oh, have you? Which issue?"

"The November issue, the one that lists you as the nation's highest paid businessman, after the untimely deaths of five executives, that is." The doorman was holding open the door, waiting patiently for someone to enter. Mr. Gifre ignored him. "I have to say, I have kept a close eye on you ever since that ordeal with the EPA eight years past. Then that Greenpeace lawsuit just last year. Wonderful, how you beat them down. There was an excerpt from your rebuttal in the New York Times, recently."

Mr. Gifre laughed.

"What was it that I said, again?" Mr. Gifre asked, knowing very well what it was he had said. He had a precise memory, capable of conglomerating all the figures in the world that he might spit them back to prove his point. But that did not mean that he did not enjoy hearing them told back to him.

"'We are a multi-million dollar corporation.', " began the stranger, proudly, " 'We have been in this business since the 1870s - almost one hundred and thirty years - descendants of the Reg Oil legacy. Are we not the paragon of capitalism? Are we not simple working men? All we are trying to do is make a living, and to provide a living for our fellow Americans. Therefore, these accusations are not only slanderous against our name. They are slanderous against the American way.' "

"Ah, I remember. The key is to play on their patriotism." Mr. Gifre smiled, and winked. Here before him was a prodigious lad, who knew his facts, and who, if nothing else, was entertaining. Saying hardly anything, he had held the interest of one who spared no one a moment of his time if he did not want to. "So you are a fan of big business, I take it?"

"You might say that," the stranger shrugged. "You might say that I myself am in the business of running things. On a global basis."

"Hmm! I have never heard your name."

"You would not have. I am more at the grassroots level. At the basis, is what I mean. The first rung of the ladder, so to speak. Though I do have quite a few connections. I am, in fact, starting to take matters into my own hands."

"Well, you must start at the bottom, of course," said Mr. Gifre. Still, this young man was just the sort of person that could be taken under his wing. Just the sort of relatable person that any large corporation could use. Besides that, he had tickled his fancy. There was something incredibly appealing about him. Mr. Gifre gave him an approving, definitive nod, and marched into the door. He had decided.

"Would you like to see how we do things at the highest rung, Mr. Green?"

Dimitri Green raised his brows, brushing the snow from his shoulders. It seemed almost a great gust of wind preceded his answer.

"Why, Mr. Gifre, that would be an honor."

The doorman had long ago grown tired of waiting for them, so Dimitri held open the door for Mr. Gifre, and followed him into the lobby. The doorman, from behind a desk, watched them oddly as they walked to the elevator, chatting idly.

They zoomed to the topmost level. The young man did not gawk at the elegance of the elevator, the spaciousness, the myriad of orange and white glowing buttons. Neither did he gush at the extravagance of the eightieth floor. He quietly and composedly observed. Mr. Gifre was growing to like him more and more. He took him into his meeting, his associates watching peculiarly. Mr. Gifre had never before brought an underling into the boardroom; he watched their surprise with satisfaction.

Uninvited, the young man joined into the discussions. Passionate, though all the time refined. What audacity! He was wonderful. How fortunate to have snatched him up from the city streets, to have brought him here into the real business world, and plucked him out of the drabness of all the normal people - ants, even, as they appeared - strolling mindlessly eighty stories below. How fortunate to bring him into their dark, prestigious circle.

He decided, at that moment, that he would hire him.

The meeting adjourned, the members filing out. Mr. Gifre led his new find into his office. He sat him down in the chair across from his desk, then sat down in his own, looking at him seriously, the yellow light throwing half his face into shadow.

"How did it feel in there?" Mr. Gifre asked, folding his hands.

"Wonderful, sir. I always enjoy a good, heated, discussion." He crossed his legs, glancing at Mr. Gifre with his head turned slightly to the side. "Though I must say - and I hope you do not mind me saying it - that your co-workers are nothing but sycophants."

Mr. Gifre slapped the table, a roar of laughter issuing from his throat.

"Ahaha," he stood, throwing back his head, and walking to the huge glass window. As he calmed, he crossed his arms behind his back. "I agree, I agree!" He wiped an errant tear from his eye. "They will do anything I say. They are baboons!"

"Well, all men do possess a certain apelike quality."

"Even I?" asked Mr. Gifre, testing him.

"Yes, sir. Even you," said the young man, unflinchingly. The older man chuckled, coming to sit down once more. He rolled his chair close to the desk, leaning over it seriously.

"You are right. These men of mine, they are flatterers. They lack your boldness." He raised a thick brow, drawing a cigar from his top drawer and lighting it. "That is why I am offering you their job." He took a puff, letting it out in a long exhale, whose smoky image looked all too much like a reaper, or some other deathly specter. "Now, will you take it?"

The young man was silent, contemplative. Excellent! He was not the hasty type to jump unthinkingly, desperately, at such an offer. He had class, and he knew a thing or two about timing. He looked up suddenly from his brooding, with a gleam in his eyes.

"Mr. Gifre, I will take the job, on one condition. After all, I am not entirely sure I wish to abandon my own enterprise."

"What is your condition?"

"That you would come on a weekend retreat with me to my newly furnished lodge, to watch the sunrise." Mr. Gifre raised his brows. "I realize that it is not your typical request. But, then again, this is not a typical situation we are in, is it, Mr. Gifre?" he paused, with a gracious grin. "It is the only way I can think to thank you. There, you can tell me more about the position, in the privacy of my wooded estate. Then I will give you my answer."

This young man certainly knew how to build tension. For a moment, Mr. Gifre had thought that the other would outright decline the opportunity. And what an opportunity it was! It was not everyday that a man was exalted to such a powerful level, right off the streets. It was not everyday that a man was privileged to see these highest offices, these windows that looked down upon the entire city as the watchful eyes of heaven, but with the perversion of a devil. Only a fool would decline such an opportunity.

Mr. Grife held out his hand.

"Agreed." He chortled once more. "That is not so unpleasant a condition. Welcome to the business, my boy."

The young man took his hand, giving it a firm shake.

"Thank you, sir. I look forward to seeing you next Saturday."

"I look forward to seeing this lodge of yours."

"Oh yes, you should. Everyone who visits it has a life-changing experience. It really is a paradise. They can hardly leave, afterwards."

The two chattered briefly about their plans. The young man, Dmitri, provided his new boss with his credentials - quite spectacular, as Mr. Gifre noted - and with his contact information.

"The lodge is just an hour and a half outside the city. It is in a patch of woods you would never know existed, right off of highway 422, north. You will see a sign at the drive. You can't miss it."

The door clicked shut behind him. Mr. Gifre watched, through the thick blinds of his office, as the young man ghosted through a sea of monotonous black and white suits, and how he so fantastically stood out as their superior. They walked in a mindless fashion, yet he, he walked with purpose. Mr. Gifre rubbed his hands together, sitting, as if on some malicious thrown, and observing the ants scurry so far below. He puffed at his cigar.

He pressed a button on his telephone.

"How can I help you, sir?" came a woman's voice from its speakers.

"Tell the board I will be taking a vacation this weekend."

"But, Mr. Gifre, it's Wednesday. That is too short of notice. We can't postpone this meeting; it's been scheduled for months -"

"Cancel it. Something came up. Tell them my brother died. Make something up." He hung up the phone and watched, with a gruesome satisfaction, as his secretary hurried

from her desk and down the hall. He flicked shut the blinds.

Normally, he might have been more cautious about accepting the offer of a stranger. Normally, he might have had his secretary do a background check. But with this young man, this Dmitri Green, he found it completely unnecessary. This was the sort of man who, when he said he had a lodge, there could be no doubt that it existed. In short, he was spellbound.

The week passed, and Dmitri Green continued to charm him. He could do no wrong. Mr. Gifre's co-workers began to whisper in wonder.

He drove home that day, the snow having turned already into slush, and informed his wife that he would be leaving early the next morning.

He made the trip in precisely one hour and thirty minutes, exactly as the young man had said. He smiled, his lips too sharp an upturn, knowing that the man must share his tendency to speed, as the lodge was in fact some hundred eighty miles out of the city.

The driveway was long, with towering pines on either side. It was a forest that he drove into. The snow clung tight to the needly boughs. It was silent, the only sound the rumbling of his car. The trees seemed to watch him - to follow him with eyes unseen - as sentinels, emanating a rigid warning. They brimmed with unmasked disgust for the vehicle in which he traveled, its noisiness, its unnaturalness, its disruption. Its threat to their quietude. He watched them back, uneasily.

Quickly he realized the absurdity of the situation, and, ignoring the solemn trunks, he turned on the radio. Their cool contemplation, as if of an intruder, continued; he no longer took any notice.

There were no tire tracks to follow, yet, as he pulled up to the front of the lodge, there stood - rather, it seemed, appeared - the young man at its steps, a beacon of city life in the midst of the serenity of their surroundings. Still, as Mr. Gifre stared, it seemed to him that the man's hair was the color of bark, and that his eyes matched the glimmers of sky above, the grey-blue anticipation before a snowfall. That his calm stare matched those of the silent pines. And he seemed less an embodiment of city life.

"Mr. Gifre, I'm so glad you could make it," said the young man, with a smile. He opened the older man's car door for him. "Let me help you with your things."

"I won't be staying long, you know," said Mr. Gifre, walking next to the other, towards the door of the lodge. He was, after all, a very busy man. He could not spend his entire weekend in the woods, as charismatic as his protégée was. Time was money. The sleek car chirruped behind them. "I can only stay the night."

"I understand completely." Dmitri opened the front door, and glided gracefully inside.

The interior was breathtaking. There was a high ceiling, and giant logs - larger than any Mr. Gifre had ever seen. A swirling spiral staircase descended from the loft, and a magnificent window overlooked a river, some ways off in the forest. The furnishings were all wood, undoubtedly handmade. There was not one sign of the modern world, save, on the tables, there were some photographs of the young man with various celebrities of business. Sipping coffee, laughing. They had all been taken in the lodge.

The young man placed the suitcases down on the couch.

"Mr. Gifre, do you plan to leave early tomorrow?"

"Yes, by eight thirty."

"That is a good time," said Mr. Green, with a nod. He glanced at the other, with a twinkle in his eye. "Nonetheless, would you be averse to taking a stroll with me, at dawn, before you left?"

"Why so incredibly early?"

"Well, you see, when the sun rises over the river, it is the most magnificent sight you will ever see. I would not want you to miss it." The young man noticed the way Mr. Gifre studied the photographs. "As I said, I do have a few connections, here and there. Mr. Johnston, there, he particularly enjoyed the sunrise."

"I suppose if all of them enjoyed it so much," Mr. Gifre gestured to the men in the photographs, "it must be worth waking up at the crack of dawn to see."

"Oh, well worth it, I think." The young man took the other's coat for him, hanging it in the closet. "Until then, can I interest you in a crackling hearth, and a drink? I was hoping we might further discuss your ideas for me, that I might gain a clearer picture of what exactly you would like me to do for you."

Straight to the point. Mr. Gifre grinned again at the fortuity of having spotted such a promising fellow out of the mire of mediocrity. He also commended his taste in liquor. They talked easily for a number of hours, discussing past accomplishments in the language of two cunning entrepreneurs. They talked stocks, they talked trade, they talked tricks. Mr. Gifre revealed his hopes for the young man's future. He told him that he possessed just the sort of machiavellian shrewdness that his associates lacked. They were too soft, too foolish. And one did not become the president of a multi-billion dollar corporation through soft-heartedness.

Before the sun sank behind the treetops, the young man insisted on showing his guest the grounds. He did so with an enthusiasm, with a hopefulness, that perhaps he could inspire the older man into some form of admiration for the pristine wildness he was divulging. But to no avail. Should the young man remark as to the grandeur of a tree, his wily companion would ask him if he had considered development of the acreage. Should they



see an inquisitive buck, Mr. Gifre would bemoan the lack of a rifle.

The orange and purple sphere glinted off the fresh blanket of snow, and the pines cast long shadows as they strolled. They did not go to see the river, however.

"That is a sight for the sunrise," had said the young man, adamantly, and with an excited spark. Yet at the same time there was a new grimness to his mien. "I always save that for last."

"The sunrise is no different from the sunset," replied Mr. Gifre, curious now about the river. "Let us see it now."

"No, no, Mr. Gifre. The sunset colors are too passionately painted; that is the end, but I would show you the beginning. Symbolically, it would be all wrong. And this trip is to celebrate a new beginning, is it not?" The young man kindly took his guest by the arm, leading him away. "Come, that place is best hued in blue. Trust me."

So Mr. Gifre followed the young man back inside the lodge, where he was more properly shown about. It was grander than he had first thought - though hardly competition against his many houses - it was a work of art. Clearly, cost had not been an issue. The walls were decorated with specimens from all across the world, pottery from Africa, wall scrolls from Asia, Persian rugs, painted hides from the Dakotas. Any culture, any region, some token of its uniqueness decked the walls.

"Where did you acquire all these curiosities?" asked Mr. Gifre, bulbous nose inches from a statuette.

"Oh, I am quite the traveler," said the youthful Mr. Green, with a gleam, and a mysterious smile, as if fondly reminiscing of days long past. "These are just a few souvenirs to remind me."

"Hm," said Mr. Gifre, the statuette losing his interest. "Reminds me of the bullshit these environmental organizations send to me."

"That one was a gift, actually. Made specially for me, many years ago." He shrugged. "No one would know anything about it, nowadays."

"It's a wonder how anyone ever fell for that crap," said Mr. Gifre, relaxing into a chair.

"Yes, a wonder," replied the young man. He was silent and thoughtful. "But they fall for new kinds of 'crap' now."

The older man boomed with laughter, as he had in his office, slapping his thigh. That wit, that wit was exactly what had drawn him in in the first place. That wit, and that confidence. Who else would respond so candidly? Who else had the guts?

The two talked a few hours more, the young man listening keenly as Mr. Gifre recounted another of his dark deeds; his scheme to run a pipeline through a preserve, or another to loophole his way into drilling on a reservation; he had the state's governor at his beck and call. "I ring the bell," had said Mr. Gifre, "and he will salivate."

The fire died down to a low glow. Mr. Gifre's cell phone rang periodically, and he would answer, slipping away to an empty room to orchestrate some clever trade or other devilment, until, at long last, the two went to bed.

A wolf howled in the distance. Another responded. They were speaking to each other -anxious, excited - about something secret. The young man stood at the window, watching the darkness as if he could see much more than the dim outlines of trees. As if there was no pane between him and the cold; as if they were one and the same. And his eyes, what a depth there was to them! Endless seas; to look into them, was to see all the ages of time; to see the universe captured in two inky pupils. Still, they were sad, they were pensive, they were patient.

Mr. Gifre's sleep was inexplicably haunted by images of a frigid forest floor. Though the bed was soft and expensive, it felt as if his back were tingling with the sharp burn of snow, and the mean prick of needles. Thus, he dreamt of the pines, hovering above him, surrounding him, and of laying defenseless and shuddering at their feet. Then he awoke, in a sweat, to the scream of his phone. When he drifted back into slumber, he dreamt once more of dollar signs.

He dressed in his usual suit, slipping on his polished shoes, and black tie. At first, stepping into the main room, he could not find the other.

"Mr. Gifre," said a voice behind him. The older man spun around, surprised. "Good morning. Care for some breakfast? I am myself quite fond of pancakes. I might whip up a batch, if you so liked."

"No. But I would like to know your decision." The older man picked up his briefcase and suitcase. "Will you take the job?"

"Mr. Gifre, you have not yet seen the river. If we do not hurry, you will miss it. Let me tell you at its banks," said the young man, retrieving the dark trench coat from the closet and handing it to its owner. "Besides, I am sure you have already guessed my answer."

The older man was growing irritated. Nonetheless, it seemed impossible for this lad to do anything to displease him. The brown-haired man beckoned him out the door.

"You can leave your belongings there, inside" said the young man, "it will be a hassle for you to drag them all the way to the river and back."

They walked quietly, save for the crunch of snow underfoot. It was still dark, a hesitant blue glow just tinting the skyline. Their black suits and black trenches stood out oddly

against the white snow, and emerald evergreens. By the time they reached the banks, the morning was making itself known. The young man stepped out onto the ice, and Mr. Gifre followed. The two ambled slower and slower, into the center of the snaking river, until they came to a place where the sun would shine through the thick boughs.

As they went, a strange smile began to ghost across the young man's face, hardly noticeable, but growing, spreading. There was a ripple of anxiousness that ran through his limbs, that permeated his skin. And as the furious ball of light peeked over the horizon, the crown of its glowing head barely testing the skies, there followed a quiet crack. Imperceptible, at first. Serpentine, silent, it fissured at the heels of Mr. Gifre. It followed his step, trailing behind, stealthily. The older man did not notice.

He had grown irritated with the long walk, impatient with the sluggishness of the rising sun. Yet just as he meant to raise his voice, to demand that this fellow give him his answer - he was a busy man, he had no time for sunrises! - the youth turned.

There was none of the erstwhile warmth, only a coldness, like the wintry landscape around them. Only an old wisdom, and a strange vigor that juxtaposed the collectedness of his features. The older man's eyes widened in shock and in fear.

"Mr. Gifre," said the young man, with the sun rising, furious, behind him, his eyes flaming and tempestuous. "I decline."

There was a great, thunderous crack and the ice broke around the older man's feet. Walker B. Gifre plunged into the freezing waters.

"What - !" Mr. Gifre gasped, the shock of the cold piercing through him, stealing painfully the breath from his lungs.

The young man folded his hands behind his back, his cheeks hued with the red hot fire of the sun, and the cold unfeeling of the snow's reflection. His face was as a storm, as a blizzard, as a hurricane, as some other deadly force - beautiful and magnificent and terrible.

Mr. Gifre splashed in the water that licked at his person, pulled him down, fiercely consumed him. The ice around him broke more even as he grasped at it. His trench coat wrapped around his legs, a black swathe devouring him.

"Help, Dmitri!" he cried, pitiful, panting. "Help, pull me out, Dmitri!" He felt himself sinking. But the young man would not help him. Only he watched him, coolly. Calmly.

"That is not my name," he said simply, gazing intently back at the other.

"Who! Who are you!?" screamed Mr. Gifre, his fat limbs tiring, his eyes bulging madly, his coat dragging him downwards. The young man locked eyes with Mr. Gifre. For a moment, he ceased to struggle, floating, caught in the steady gaze of the cerulean depths,

in whose pupils flashed a universe. Then, suddenly, impossibly, the older man knew. He knew who it was, standing mercilessly, above him. He knew who it was that had led him here. And it was an executioner more horrific than any devil.

His mind flashed, pale with terror, to the photographs on the tabletops. Those men were all dead. All of them. Mysteriously deceased. Something compelled him to reach inside his pocket, to seek an ultimate truth to his demise. There, crumpled, wet, dissolving, he found the letter. In streaming black ink it was signed, one Dmitri Green.

The young man smiled - solemn, grim - reading the revelation written across Mr. Gifre's straining face. Then he turned his back on the drowning man. Listening to him splutter, listening to him slow, listening to him shout, until he made no more sound. Until he sank beneath the ice, and it hardened above him, closing up, and encasing its victim within.

Then the young man was gone, as if he had never been, and yet always was. And all that remained was the black mass beneath the ice.

The pines did not shift. The wind did not blow. The wolves did not howl.

And all the while the sun steadily rose.