



Ice Cream Identity

by Mackenzie Brown

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I should be a fifth-generation ice cream maker. Not just any ice cream maker though. Not for Kemp's, Blue Bunny, Häagen-Dazs, Ben & Jerry's, Cold Stone, or Edy's, but for Brown's Velvet Ice Cream, the homegrown label and legacy my great-great-grandfather Carl Brown began in 1916. Now the abandoned creamery stands in silence, alone, rejected and reminiscing mournfully on its glory days, when it had been a welcome symbol in our town. The large brick building is eggshell white, the attached side office is your average brick color, and the roof is a dark shade of red I picked out from a swatch of colors my father brought home. "An eye sore," my mother calls it whenever we drive by.

My great-great-grandfather purchased the creamery in 1906 in my small hometown of Annandale, Minnesota. He began by making butter, but by 1916 he focused solely on making ice cream. His ice cream business began when he sculpted large ice blocks out of French Lake and stored them in chilled tree shacks. These ice blocks combined with fresh buttermilk and wild berries became the ultimate ingredient in his velvety ice cream. Ownership of the business moved down the line to the sons of each family: Carl, Oscar, Floyd, and finally to my father.

From the time my great-great-grandfather moved from Sweden and established himself in Annandale in the late 1800's, the Brown family was esteemed in the community. When my father was a child, the weekly newspaper in my town would call all of the well-known families in Annandale every Monday morning to see if they had done anything interesting over the weekend. That information would then be printed in that week's edition: "Floyd Brown family of eight visited Maxine Holmquist Brown's family in Buffalo—." My grandmother secretly called it the gossip column. I think some of the older people in my town know more about my family history than I do. My small town even has a street named after my family, Brown Avenue, that my parents lived on for a few years after they married. I was born into this legacy and I found my identity in being a Brown—I didn't know anything different.

I frequented the creamery as a child. It was the family business after all. My younger brother and I spent countless hours playing with our stuffed bears and Hot Wheels cars in the damp side rooms of the creamery, our own little sanctuary. There, the forty pound paper sacks of flour and sugar were stacked on pallets, stacks taller than my three-foot frame and perfect for pretend rooms while playing 'house.' I only passed through the eight-foot plastic flaps into the freezer when I attached myself safely to my father's side for fear I would get trapped inside and freeze to death. When I finished my homework in the exceedingly heated back office, my father would reward me with a kid-sized cup of strawberry ice cream. I watched my father inspect the ice cream with his hairnet securely wrapped around his head as he leaned over the pasteurizer where the first stage of ice cream churned. I observed my father to learn for myself what I would be doing at my first job when I became a teenager. I never questioned if my life would consist of anything different. I never questioned my future of being another Brown who resided in Annandale for her whole life. Why would I ever have to question something that seemed to be set in stone?

My future shifted in middle school. As a sixth-grader I thought I was too old to be treated like a child, but I was still too young to comprehend all the ways of the

adult world. I didn't know the course of my life took an abrupt detour when the shaft on an ammonia compressor snapped because of its age. The vital half-a-million dollar piece of equipment that created refrigeration by removing heat had exhausted its life and placed the creamery into retirement.

I think I was sad when the creamery officially closed, but I wasn't devastated, no one in my family that I can remember was completely heartbroken. Maybe they all had expected something to give sooner or later because adults knew things like that. Or maybe all of my father's siblings just didn't care anymore; after all, everyone except for my father moved away from Annandale as soon as they could. Maybe that's why my father alone bore the brunt of the failure and turned to alcohol to drown his sorrows or why his family doesn't mention Brown's Ice Cream very often. I can remember visiting the creamery for the last time, the strong musty odor of mold lingering in my nose long after I walked out the door, the smell that I used to associate with safety. I remember the ceiling in the freezer collapsing when my father turned off the freezer for the first time in over ninety-nine years.

I remember the gradual change from feeling important in my community to realizing my generation didn't really care anymore; that part of Annandale's history had finished. The familiarity and comfort I had once found in Brown's Velvet Ice Cream had ended and what I had once found my identity in no longer existed. The older generation in our town still remembers Brown's Velvet Ice Cream, but as soon as they pass away, it will just be another abandoned building to everyone else.

To be honest, the creamery overrun by weeds doesn't affect me when I drive by. I never even think about all of the memories and premonitions that took root there. To me it's just an old building in the scenery of Annandale and it isn't until I begin to dwell on the past that I am reminded of what I am missing out on. I have accepted this drastic change in my life without a fight and I wonder why. When did I make the subconscious decision that this change was not a bad thing? It may have been when I realized my future was completely my own now. Not that my future wouldn't have been entirely mine before, but I would have had certain expectations to submit to, such as living in Annandale. Now I don't even know if I want to live in Minnesota when I get older, much less my tiny hometown. Maybe I never truly cared whether or not I lived in Annandale my whole life. Or maybe I've just accepted the change to reassure myself that there are other paths my future can take now.

I will never get to say I make ice cream for a living, but I still get to say that my family used to own an ice cream business. Someday I would like to open up an ice cream parlor of my own. It won't be exactly the same as Brown's Velvet Ice Cream, but I can still tie in the history behind it. I have the freedom to establish my business wherever I want to, Minnesota or maybe even somewhere in Europe. Ironically, I don't really even like ice cream, maybe I had too much of it when I was younger, but for some reason I still like the idea of being an ice cream maker. Maybe I find comfort in the familiarity of having an ice cream business in the family. Maybe I like change, and maybe I don't. I'll probably never know which future would have been the better option because I never got the chance to choose. Perhaps no matter what happens in life there's a part of me that will always long for the creamy taste of vanilla ice cream that could only come from my great-great-grandfather's recipe.

Cedarville University. She enjoys spending time in bookstores, creative writing, and spending time with family and friends. This is her first published piece, and she hopes to publish many more pieces in the future.

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