

The Snack Market

THE SNACK MARKET ONCE started not long after dawn. I would get in early and hear the wheeze of the buses pulling up and the rising clamor of voices in Spanish and English. I would hear feet pattering and doors creaking open at the far end of campus as the sun expanded over the courtyard littered with white plastic tables and tilted umbrellas. A girl had two track bags, one stuffed with Nikes and a change of clothes, the other rustling with small bags of Fritos, Doritos, Takis, and Munchies. Students would approach her perch on a bench and gesture at what they wanted. A boy would drop a canvas cooler bag at the center of the courtyard. He sold bottles of Gatorade he'd freeze the night before in his uncle's basement icebox. Another boy would stake out the basketball courts, his backpack half-open to reveal its extraterrestrial-colored guts: Twizzlers, Dum-Dums, Life Savers Gummies, and the kinds of assorted hard candies grandmas supposedly keep in glass jars.

The snack market constituted a rich campus subculture at my school in Inglewood. Students who live in proximity to 99 Cent stores and big-box establishments came to school with cut-rate goods. They charged 50 cents or a dollar or even more above what they paid for each item. Candy wrappers littered the ground in those days. Plastic bottles piled up in the trash cans. Hoodies bore the telltale orange powdery traces of artificial cheese. Over the course of the first month of my third year of teaching at my school, I became obsessed with the snack market. I started wondering if students couldn't learn something real about economics and workers' rights from their participation in it.

The administration doesn't permit students to sell anything at school. Students receive a pallid lunch daily – a symphony of tans in the form of chicken patty sandwiches and limp burritos. They also have access to one vending machine containing “healthy” options that, in those days, given the snack market's cornucopia, they had no reason not to ignore.

The snack market had unspoken rules. Because one guy sold Gatorade, it was understood that others would not. Chip Girl knew no competition. Candy Man only occasionally

fended off a rival – usually a trifling ninth grader. A dozen other students peddled something edible, but feuds were non-existent. Sometimes the school sold ice cream or cookies as a fundraiser, and I often noted on those days that the fundraisers' lack of success was a function of the swift sales enjoyed by the illicit student vendors who brought the junkiest foods kids really wanted and charged the low prices they preferred paying. There was no contest between a \$3 plate of hastily prepared nachos and a \$1 brace of corn chips already dusted with salt, cheese, maltodextrin, whey, monosodium glutamate, buttermilk solids, onion powder, partially hydrogenated soybean and cottonseed oil, corn flour, disodium phosphate, lactose, dextrose, tomato powder, spices, Yellow 6, Yellow 5, Red 40, citric acid, sugar, garlic powder, red and green bell pepper powder, nonfat milk solids, and corn syrup solids. The nachos sold well enough. The Doritos sold out.

On each occasion a bake sale floundered, and faculty advisors sadly shook their heads, befuddled as to why red velvet cupcakes couldn't entice the masses, the student vendors still climbed back aboard the buses with their backpacks lighter and wads of crumpled dollars puffing out the spaces once filled with bags of snacks. Crowing to other students, they pretended to fan out bills like rappers at a strip club. Teens may be hopelessly addicted to cheap, processed, unhealthy foods, but they can be better problem-solvers than teachers think. They stop at nothing to satisfy their addictions. The entrepreneurial among them realize this. They cooperate without claiming to do so and create a diversified, affordable supply to meet robust demand.

One afternoon at the beginning of my last 12th-grade literature class of the day, Gatorade Boy – a sweet, outgoing football player who'd recently made great academic improvements – whipped out his wallet.

“It's fat,” he announced, displaying the gray-green cross-section of bills sandwiched between its leather halves. He pretended to wipe sweat off his forehead and pointed at his canvas cooler, once full, now deflated. “Kenneth helped me carry it to school,” he said. “All the way from La Cienega. Two miles.”

"Did you pay him?" I asked.

"No," Gatorade Boy replied, looking confused as to why I'd even ask. "I had my football bag and my backpack."

I turned to Kenneth, who was fumbling with his journal notebook.

"You were okay with this, Kenneth? You carried the cooler for two miles and he made all the money?"

Kenneth shrugged and smiled.

I turned back to Gatorade Boy. "Truckers who drive vegetables to the grocery store get paid. You used Kenneth as a trucker. He should get paid."

I spent the next five minutes of class not diving into the narrative essay we were supposed to analyze, but instead polling the rest of class: Should Kenneth be paid for his transportation services?

The two friends hadn't drawn up a contract, most of the class agreed, but it wasn't fair for someone to make money with another person's help and then not compensate that person – especially when friendship was involved. One student raised his hand and volunteered that if Kenneth wasn't smart enough to ask for money, then it was okay for Gatorade Boy to rip him off. The rest of class agreed that Kenneth hadn't thought the situation through but that it was the greater community's responsibility to inform Kenneth of his right to compensation and pressure Gatorade Boy to do the right thing.

Gatorade Boy begrudgingly slid a few bills from the overstuffed wallet and with great ceremony waved them at Kenneth, who smiled wider. After class, I explained to Gatorade Boy that he had forged a real partnership. He needed a mule because he needed to bring more Gatorade to school so he could make more money. The profit incentive had to outweigh his irritation. I told him that, once paid, Kenneth would be a more cheerful employee. Gatorade Boy immediately made plans to wrangle a second cooler for Kenneth to haul.

The scene in my classroom that afternoon inspired me to wade into the snack market myself. I'd be able to teach the vendors more if I got directly involved.

On Friday, the morning of a football game, I loaded a large picnic cooler into the trunk of my car and stopped by CVS on my way to school. I purchased twenty 32 oz. bottles of Gatorade in Lemon-Lime and Glacier Freeze flavors (to reflect school colors). I paid 88 cents per Gatorade, more than Gatorade Boy – \$17.60 in all. I would sell my Gatorade for \$1.50 apiece, undercutting Gatorade Boy's prices by 50 cents and yielding a return of \$30. I would not sell the Gatorade myself but instead "hire" Kenneth, Gatorade Boy's soft-spoken stooge, to do the hawking. I would pay

Kenneth 50 cents for every Gatorade sold and use my profit – \$2.40 – to purchase a threadbare copy of *If He Hollers Let Him Go* on Amazon for my class library. Kenneth would make \$10 for doing the work. If business had been my primary motive, it would have been a bad business plan. That morning, Kenneth made \$10 before the bell for first period rang.

Gatorade Boy still sold his bottles, but more slowly than usual. He was frustrated at lunch, actually sweating as he paced around my room and rattled off the problems his business now faced because of my interfering. Kenneth had informed him that he had a new gig and couldn't haul Gatorade any longer. What's more, I'd quietly told him during a break between second and third periods about a second larger cooler I'd found in my garage. With the help of my 2002 Corolla, I could bring 75 bottles of Gatorade to school each day. Without transportation help, Gatorade Boy could bring no more than 15. The next week, I told him with a grin, I planned to sell my wares for \$1.25 apiece. The price drop wouldn't dramatically affect my business. I'd pay Kenneth a generous flat fee of \$25 and buy another book for my class library after paying myself back for the \$66 initial investment. By prioritizing widespread hydration for the school's thirsty athletes and providing a well-paying job for Kenneth, I'd shortchange my own profits. But I'd feel good doing it.

"I'm working for the greater good," I said to Gatorade Boy. "Not to make money off teenagers addicted to sugar and food coloring."

Gatorade Boy groaned. He'd be out of business in no time, he said.

"Figure out a plan," I said. "I've given you a new problem – now solve it."

With Gatorade Boy still pacing around the center of my room, I decided that, if he lowered his prices to match mine, next I would buy all his Gatorades at the beginning of the day. Then I'd raise the price by 50 cents and resell them once my wares were gone. With no other options in sight, students wouldn't mind forking over extra.

"Why me?" Gatorade Boy asked, as if he could read my thoughts. He knew I was having fun. He was sort of smiling too, in on the joke and yet aware that he was its butt.

"Think on it," I advised.

Gatorade Boy grimaced and grinned simultaneously and dashed out to catch the bus to practice, his blue football bag slung across his back.

Of course, my intention was not to ruin Gatorade Boy's day. I wanted to push him to come up with a new business plan that accounted for what I brought to the table – more capital for product and the ability to efficiently transport large quantities. Once he reacted, I'd move on to Chip Girl and

Candy Man. I'd give all the major players a challenge. My plan was to retire from the game as soon as they figured out a way to adapt to my presence.

I never got a chance to find out if they could.

The following Wednesday, administration cracked down with draconian force. Chip Girl, Candy Man, Gatorade Boy, and the other vendors were summoned to the office shortly after second period. Their remaining wares were confiscated. Their families were called. They were told in no uncertain terms that future attempts to sell unhealthy food on campus would result in suspension.

My involvement wasn't the catalyst. For that, oversaturation was to blame. Too many students were selling too much stuff for the administration not to take notice. Because the student body ardently consumed everything fellow students sold, more students had seen fit to sell. Soon, everyone seemed to be selling – Cokes, donuts, chocolate bars – even Taco Bell tacos purchased before school and squeezed tightly into grease-stained paper bags. They were selling before school, during school, and after school. They were selling in the dark and in the full-on blinding daylight of the L.A. afternoon. Overexposure was unavoidable. One day, the snack market was Hamsterdam. The next, it was a memory.

I was out of the game before I'd had a chance to really turn it upside-down. I'd entered the snack market to challenge students who participated in it to apply the critical thinking good teachers try to teach. I'd wanted my participation to spark a life skills lesson, to encourage young entrepreneurs to demonstrate perseverance, creativity, and poise in the face of competition. I'd wanted to show them that making money was harder when others were grabbing for the same pieces of the same pie. I'd wanted Gatorade Boy to realize that treating employees well could go a long way. I'd accomplished that goal, but I had also upset him. I came to realize in the first few days of that week, before the bust, as Gatorade Boy anticipated the crippling blow that seventy-five \$1.25 Gatorade bottles would do to his business, that he was truly anxious, not merely flummoxed. Gatorade Boy told other students that I was stealing his business. He asked the physics TA for advice. The physics TA told me this with a smirk as he filled his water bottle from the cooler. Mr. Good, the history department head, told me that Gatorade Boy had come to him looking for money. Genial, square Mr. Good said that Gatorade Boy wanted him to front \$60 for Gatorade so he could compete with me.

"I declined to invest," said Mr. Good.

He described Gatorade Boy's demeanor during his sixth-period government class. The kid had suddenly become more fidgety, forgetful, and withdrawn. He asked to leave the room

twice a class period to get water and stretch. He stopped raising his hand. Mr. Good got the point of my lesson but he wondered if the Gatorade War had discombobulated the boy.

At first, I thought Mr. Good was out of his mind. I was offended. It was Gatorade. It was a \$2.40 profit for me and a few fast-food meals for Kenneth. Gatorade Boy only made \$20 or \$30 a day. Why was he despondent? I wasn't trying to steal his money. I was trying to push him to greater heights. I was the spark. I was a force for good. He'd be more confident once he bested me in our duel. He'd apply that confidence to the next venture – maybe a start-up.

My rationale was wild and self-aggrandizing, I realized. The epiphany came as most do – alongside a cocktail consumed on my concrete balcony later that day. I'd become arrogant, I decided. My experiment loomed larger to me in abstract than it really was in the moment. In the moment, a 17-year-old kid from truly rugged life circumstances was worried he'd be out \$30 a day. Gatorade Boy was doing okay this year, living with a college-educated uncle who ran a tight ship and worked hard to help him make up for a lot of lost time academically. For a broke kid like Gatorade Boy though, a kid with the kind of history he had, selling at school meant independence. Those Gatorade bottles translated to money to spend on movies and dates with girls, good times with friends, and the chance to feel normal. While he'd still eat well at his uncle's home, the prospect of losing that cash stream unsettled him dramatically. More importantly the experience of floundering in the wake of my entrance into the market triggered memories of what it had felt like to be helpless, to eat only boxed ramen, to have one pair of pants, to wear shoes until they, caked with layers of mud, finally split at the seams, practically sole-less. Having never known helplessness, in my privilege, I'd looked right past that in the name of an intellectual exercise. Gatorade Boy wouldn't go hungry without his corner of the snack market, but he'd feel like he was starving.

Four weeks later, I sat in the courtyard on a bench next to Candy Man, the basketball team's slope-shouldered gentle giant of a center. Gatorade Boy walked by with Kenneth and the latest girl Kenneth was ineffectually wooing. With ironic formality, Gatorade Boy bowed stiffly in my direction. He and I were cool. We always had been. I was writing him a college recommendation letter.

"It was so good then," Candy Man said suddenly, kind of smacking his lips, as if an ethereal trail of Smarties had just snaked past them enticingly.

"What was good?" I asked, knowing exactly what he was talking about.

"Selling," he said. "I was pulling \$40 some days."

"Is it hard not having that money?" I asked.

"The money, yeah," he said with an intake of breath, looking at the stucco wall outside my classroom with unusual intensity. "But selling was fun too."

"It'll get back to where it was though," he said, starting to smile. "As soon as everything calms down."

He unzipped his backpack casually until it was just a few inches open. I peered down to see a few sprigs of Twizzlers sheathed in their plastic wrappers. Candy Man was selling again. He'd start slowly, I knew. He'd sling enough to make pocket change, but not enough to draw heat. He'd play it smarter this time. He'd deal only in the dark, before school started. He'd sell out of bathroom stalls. He'd hand off his goods less brazenly. The snack market was back and Candy Man would be just fine. The market would convulse and seemingly die and then rebuild itself all year. The cycle couldn't really be broken; the market would always bounce

back. The appeal was too great – making money but also possessing the strut of self-reliance, basking in the straightforward reassurance of cold cash, feeling power over something small but real. The administration might crack down, but I couldn't. I had to let the market be free. The students got more from participating in it and exercising control over a segment of their lives than they ever would from lessons I could teach through my meddling or the administration could via its hardline stance on their brand of illicit entrepreneurship. My foray into the snack market had taught me that.

Candy Man hopped up and slid on his headphones. He sauntered through the open door of my classroom and nonchalantly dropped a day-late paper into the plastic tray I reserve for ungraded work.

"I'll be back," he said before I could remind him that I didn't accept late work, and he disappeared into the courtyard crowd, his head and headphones bobbing. 🍷