



(Donna Block*)

Don't Ever Let the Ice Cream Melt

by NICK MEADOR

The tale of a college student who takes a last-resort summer break job driving an ice cream truck through Detroit's northern suburbs.

Before I first applied to veterinary school, I spent my college summer breaks trying to accumulate the desired amount of hands-on animal experience. Unfortunately, no veterinarians had an excess of work to offer, so that meant taking a part-time, unpaid position following one around. Since this provided no monetary income, I had to find paid work with flexibility to fill in the rest of the weekdays. In the metro Detroit area – which was already in a drought of jobs, in addition to the lag in the national economy – this sometimes meant stooping to new lows. That's why, in the summer of 2004, I responded to an ad in a local newspaper from CK Ice Cream, a delivery and bulk sales business that was hiring truck drivers.

At first, I was hesitant. Had I descended so far that I was willing to subject myself to ridicule by suburban mothers and their grubby little children? On the other hand, the idea of the job had a sort of twisted charm to it. I thought of my childhood summers, when every sunny day over 75 degrees was spent in our backyard pool. Whenever we heard the ice cream truck jingle within a quarter mile distance, we would leave the water, grab whatever loose change we could find, and start running down the street.

It is generally assumed that ice cream men are creeps. But who cared if I got made fun of, if I knew a certain number of people would also envy me. I called the number from the ad and a young woman answered the phone. I told her I was interested in the job, and she invited me in for an interview without much questioning. It seemed like they weren't highly selective – or maybe they were desperate. I agreed to come in and learn more about the job, and see if it was right for me.

The following Monday, I drove to the shop around noon. South on I-75, then east on I-696. It was located in Center Line, an industrial wasteland on the northern border of Detroit. Approaching the building, it looked more like an auto mechanic shop than an ice cream store, and when I think back, I guess that's what it really was. They weren't an ice cream store like Dairy Queen or a custard shop. They only dealt ice cream in bulk amounts and managed the trucks. So in terms of what actually went on there, auto maintenance far outweighed anything having to do with ice cream.

A ten-foot chain link fence surrounded the entire property, which was encircled by large warehouses. Along the fence, yellow and white ice cream trucks of varying age and condition were plugged into electrical circuits. As I would later learn, this was to keep the freezers running while the engines were off.

I parked my car and walked to the door on the side of the building. The small waiting room had a few plastic chairs against the wall, and a tiny television above the counter displayed a daytime talk show. I approached the counter, behind which a short brunette stood, flipping through some papers. I figured she was the young girl who answered my call.

"Hi. I'm Ken Roberts. I'm here for the truck driving job."

"Oh yeah—Hey. Did you have trouble finding it?"

"No," I thought to myself. "I just followed my gut instinct towards hell."

Out loud, I said, "Nope, I used Mapquest."

"Well my name is Amanda."

Amanda explained that the truck drivers earn 25 percent commission of whatever they sell, and are paid the next day in cash. It would be untaxed, but there wouldn't be any guarantee of an income. She said that I



could ride with someone today, and if it seemed tolerable, they would start me on a route in a few days.

After I had waited for about a half hour, the man chosen to instruct me walked into the room. His name was Carl, a heavy, sweaty man wearing a purple basketball jersey. We introduced ourselves with a hand shake, and then he took me out to his truck. He gave a brief rundown of the multitude of ice cream products that they carry.

“The first thing you do when you come in is take an inventory,” said Carl, holding a clipboard with a yellow sheet in his hands. On the sheet was a checklist that we would use to order ice cream from the main freezer. Basically, you fill in the gaps in your truck’s stock before you go out, and then check again at night to see how much you sold.

Once you finish inventory, you turn on the truck, unplug the external electrical cord, and drive through the ice cream pick-up station. You hand the staff lady your yellow sheet, and she brings out the boxes of ice cream. Then you pull to the side of the parking lot and sort the products into their designated spots in the truck freezer.

As Carl started cutting open the boxboard containers with a razor blade, he said, “You want to hurry during this part. That’s lesson number one in the ice cream business. DON’T EVER LET THE FUCKING ICE CREAM MELT!” I tried my best to commit it to memory. I didn’t want to let sweaty Carl down. He also told me that I was allowed to sell candy, pop, or bottled water for extra profit, and I didn’t have to give anything to our boss.

Carl’s truck was one of the least attractive in a lot of really worn down vehicles. He told me that it had been converted from an old postal truck. It was painted white, unlike the standard yellow. I sat in a metal kitchen chair in the passenger spot – which, he informed me, was sometimes occupied by his girlfriend on sales routes – and we left for his route in New Baltimore, almost 25 miles northeast of Center Line. On the highway, my eyes started to burn because of all the dust and debris coming in the windows. We were, after all, going 70 miles per hour on a four-lane highway in a dilapidated, rickety truck. Plus, I wasn’t wearing a seatbelt, because – lo and behold – the kitchen chair was not equipped with one.

We exited I-94 at 23 Mile Rd, in the sprawl-iest of all Detroit’s suburban sprawl. These were the farms-turned-subdivisions filled with endless rows of identical ranch houses, purchased mostly by people who grew up between 8 and 12 Mile, in withering towns like East Detroit (now Eastpointe) and Roseville.

My trainer turned on his truck’s music speaker to signal our arrival, and it blasted the iconic Ice Cream Man song: “The Entertainer.”

“Basically you want to drive as slow as possible,” said Carl. “If you go too fast, people won’t have time to catch you, and you won’t sell any ice cream.”

It only took about six houses of driving before a young mother came out of her front door and waved us down.

“I’ll do the first one, and then you can try it out,” Carl told me before the woman reached the truck. “Just make sure you greet them and ask politely what you can get for them.”

“I’d like a Chocolate Éclair bar, please.”

“Sure, that’ll be a dollar fifty.” Carl took the woman’s money and then turned around to retrieve the ice cream bar. He reached into the freezer, and a look of dismay came over his face.

“Dammit,” he said to me under his breath. “Something’s wrong with my freezer. *The ice cream is soft*. We’re gonna have to go back.” He refunded the woman’s money and apologized for the inconvenience. I couldn’t believe that Carl broke his number one rule! As we returned to the highway exit, Carl let loose his frustrations.

“I don’t know what the fuck happened! What a waste of time. *I’m* not making any money today.”

Then a moment later, he calmed down and asked, “Do you want to drive?”

“No, that’s okay,” I replied.

“Yeah, this thing is pretty hard to handle on the highway anyways.”

We drove back to the store in Center Line, but it was already almost 3 pm and Carl didn’t know how long it would take to fix the truck. He said I could come out with him in another truck, but I declined. Amanda said that I would be sharing a truck with another part-time driver, and we decided on Tuesday and Thursday for my



route days. I would start the upcoming Thursday. Amanda said that most drivers came in around noon, left the parking lot by 1:00 pm, and stayed out until at least 9:00.

So my entire job training consisted of some preparatory work with Carl and a single incomplete ice cream sale. I hadn't even driven a truck when they sent me out alone in one. Luckily the trucks had automatic transmission, since I didn't know how to operate a manual. The truck I got to use was in better shape than Carl's, too. It was the more traditional yellow color, and didn't look at all like a postal service vehicle. Seeing all the menu images on the side of the truck instantly reminded me of when I was a child, locked in front of the dazzling board, drooling over all the possible choices.

I told my family that I had been hired, even though the nature of the hire had been so unconventional and informal. My 8-year-old sister was the most excited. She and my mom made me promise that I would come sell to them at least once, even though doing so would mean deviating at least six miles from my route in Sterling Heights.

I showed up on Thursday and Amanda gave me the keys to a truck and a map of my route. It consisted of about twelve square miles, south to 14 Mile, north to 20 Mile, west to Dequindre, and east to Mound. I completed the inventory very slowly, realizing that it would take some practice before I could do it confidently. I sorted the ice cream and turned on my truck, then waited a moment to look at the map. All the streets seemed to form an enormous maze, but with no start or finish. Because of my innate desire to apply logical reasoning, I wanted to figure out the best method of covering all the streets. "I'll start near the top," I told myself.

I left the truck lot around 1 pm and headed up Mound towards 19 Mile. I drove slowly at first, trying to get accustomed to the acceleration, brakes, and steering. The truck was noisy, and the mirrors rattled while I drove. For a while, I didn't want to go over 40 mph, fearing that the wheels would pop off or the breaks would fail. Then, sometimes, while stopped at traffic lights, I got the feeling that the engine would die and I'd be unable to start it again, but instead would have to

wait, humiliated, for a tow truck to come, while everyone shot me looks of scorn as they fought to pass on the left.

I reached a subdivision and pulled over for a moment to get my composure. "Ok," I thought. "Here we go."

I flipped on the truck's music speaker, eased the transmission into *drive*, and started idling down the street. I realized I'd have to brake even while idling, to go as slow as Carl had instructed. I had no idea at the time that I was embarking upon a long line of random encounters, awkward moments, and generally strange occurrences. For now, I was just waiting for something to happen.

Finally, after a long and torturous five minutes, two women and a few of their children emerged from a house and came down to the street. I put the truck in *park* and decreased the music volume. I didn't turn it off completely, because, as Carl had told me, you still want others to be able to hear the truck. Then I moved to the service window and waited for my customers.

"Hi, what can I get for you?"

They returned my "hi," but then didn't say anything else for a while. I waited patiently for them to make a decision, but eventually one of the moms felt bad for taking so long. "Sorry," she said. "Don't worry. We'll spend a lot of money."

I smiled and told her it was no problem. I wanted to say, "I'm just happy I found a customer," but I didn't want to seem *inexperienced*. They continued to discuss the purchase, and then the same mom relayed the choices.

"Okay, we'll have one Bomb Pop, one Screwball, one Power Puff Girl, and...I'll have an Ice Cream Sandwich."

"Sure," I said. I turned around and searched for the items in my cooler, then set the ice cream on the little shelf below the serving window. I felt a small panic when I realized I had to add up the item costs in my head. "Come on," I thought. "You can do this. You've taken Calculus." That kind of mental math might sound like a cinch, but it isn't – particularly with hungry eyes staring you down. A Bomb Pop and Screwball are \$1.50 each, Power Puff Girl is \$1.75, and an Ice Cream Sandwich is \$2.00. That makes \$6.75.



I announced the price to the mom and she handed me a ten-dollar bill. I turned to the cash box that Amanda had given me and got \$3.25 in change. The family walked away from the truck and I turned the music back up. *I had made a sale!* I would only get about \$1.50 from the sale, but at least it was something.

As they unwrapped their icy treats, the kids and adults alike noticed the trash hole on the truck's passenger door. Carl had taught me to set a cardboard box on the ground to catch the garbage, but – as I was about to learn – people always missed. It was as if they intended to drop their trash *anywhere but* the cardboard box. Naturally, I then had to grab the wrappers and insert them in the box myself, and it was for this reason primarily that I started carrying Pural antibacterial gel in the truck at all times.

I continued to wind through the streets, trying to think like a mailman. The goal was to cover as many streets as possible without traversing any space twice. But I would also come to realize that some areas were better at different times of day. Some places had more kids out playing during the early afternoon, while some only had kids at night, when families were out on walks or sitting in their front yards. Some neighborhoods were rich and willing to spend \$15 on ice cream bars, while some were less wealthy and didn't want more than a fifty-cent popsicle. I learned to use a highlighter on my map to mark the most dependable streets, but tried most of the ones on my route at least once.

The first incident that really affected me happened on my second or third outing in the truck. It was in one of the nicer neighborhoods around 19 Mile Rd. I drove into the subdivision in early afternoon and turned on the first street. A few houses down, a little girl not older than three ran down her driveway. She had blond pigtails, and a smile spanning her entire face. She wasn't accompanied by her siblings or parents, but instead approached the truck totally alone. I thought she might have been experienced at this sort of thing, so I gave her a moment to make a decision. After three or four minutes of not making an order, her mom came down the driveway with a look of slight worry on her face, as if she had no clue that her young daughter had left the house to buy ice cream from a stranger. The mother told her that she couldn't get anything, and

instantly the girl's smile melted to a frown. She let out a piercing scream and started crying as her mom picked her up and carried her inside. Her simple desire had been denied, and I felt terrible, almost like it was my fault. This would become the saddest moment of my time working on the job.

Luckily that sort of thing didn't happen every day, so I was able to keep working there without losing my mind. I quickly learned little tricks to make the day go by smoother. I brought a small radio/CD player to help liven up the high-speed drives between neighborhoods. CDs would skip in it though, so I ended up listening to the classic rock and oldies stations almost exclusively – especially oldies, since there is no better music than Motown for such an occasion. Every few hours, a track by Stevie Wonder, the Jackson 5, or the Temptations would lift my mood. And it never escaped my mind that all those wonderful songs were born in Detroit, even if it happened long before I was born. Since then, the city has seen decade after decade of disintegration and shame, brought on mostly by an automobile monoculture in conflict with the modern world, but also by a general myopia and complacency that has prevented any sort of progress. But we have the music to remind us that – deep beneath the layers of shit – Detroit has an inextinguishable heart, and its people bear a lasting hope for better days.

As summer progressed, the weather got hotter and more humid. The truck didn't have air conditioning – only a small fan above the driver seat that pointed at my face. I brought two liter-size bottles of water with me each day, and made sure that I drank them both.

I never really tried selling candy or pop, but I did bring bottled water in the truck, in a compartment that kept them cool without freezing the liquid. A package of 16 bottles of spring water only cost about four bucks, but I could sell each one for a dollar. That means I could potentially make a \$12 profit. One time a group of boys halted their basketball game and waved me down. They spent a couple minutes looking at all the ice cream choices, then one of them asked, "Do you have anything to drink?"

"I have bottled water for one dollar each."

"Could we have two of those?"



“Sure.” Those little dorks. They were buying bottled water from an ice cream truck right outside their own home. They could have simply walked inside and drank tap water. Or maybe their parents even had bottled water. What the fuck were they paying me for? I guess it’s not my place to wonder.

At least I was allowed to sell the water. It really bothered me that I was only making 25% commission on ice cream. After all, the company was making a 50% profit on all their truck sales. For example, if they buy an ice cream bar from a manufacturer at \$1 each, and I sell it for \$2, the company and I each get \$0.50 profit from the deal. But at the end of most days, I had only sold enough to make \$50 to \$80. And I was staying out from noon until at least 9 pm. That means I usually made about \$5.50 per hour – in 2004, not in 1984.

Carl had developed his own way to boost profits, but it wasn’t a method I would have chosen. Once when I entered the office to check in, I ran into Carl. He seemed to be checking in as well, when all of a sudden Mark, the owner of the ice cream business, stormed into the room with a red face.

“Carl, I told you not to sell the fucking pocket knives on the truck! Do you know what could happen to us if an adult finds out about that???”

Carl looked worried and a little bit sad, like a child being disciplined for making a mistake. The orange basketball jersey he wore bolstered his immature appearance.

“They’re only a one-inch blade,” retorted Carl. “They’re practically harmless.”

“Some kid is gonna cut their eye out. If I catch you selling them again, you’ll be fuckin’ fired.”

“Okay, okay. Fine.”

I never had an encounter like that with Mark, but that didn’t necessarily make my workdays any brighter.

However, I can’t complain about everything that the job entailed. The work definitely had its ups, from funny moments to the truly bizarre. There was one specific stretch of homes with five or six kids that didn’t speak English. Sterling Heights had become populated with many Indian and Middle Eastern families, some of whom were sharing a house with newly immigrated relatives. These kids would just stare at the menu with their mouths hanging open. When I asked them if they

wanted to buy something, they’d shake their head and then run away. Sometimes I’d laugh, but other times I just wanted to give them a good choke – not to strangle them, but only to scare them a bit. Perhaps I was expected to say, “Welcome to America. If you don’t buy something immediately, you’re of no use to us.”

Either way, it was fun to watch the kids stare at the board of choices with a glazed-over look of hope in their eyes. That ice cream menu held all the promise of America, like choosing a certain kind of ice cream could change your life or send you down a certain path. Buy a Chocolate Malt cup and you will some day be good at talking to women. Get a Tornado Twister cup, on the other hand, and you’ll have great luck on the stock market. Choose something, anything, and, if only for a moment, you’ll feel *happy*. But then again, maybe that’s why some kids just turned and ran away. Maybe they knew, deep down inside, that it was a sham – that the bars were produced in some factory in Cincinnati or Milwaukee or wherever. Or maybe they just couldn’t weasel the cash away from their parents.

As the summer passed, I got better at being an ice cream man. I became proficient at adding prices in my head. I knew almost every inventory item by name, and didn’t have to waste time searching through the cooler. It was still strange, though, when kids would order specific bars by name. They’d yell, “I want a Cosmo bar!” I had no idea what they meant, since that name wasn’t on my yellow inventory sheet. A parent had to clarify that it was from a Nickelodeon show called *The Fairly Odd Parents*. I personally had excluded television from my life, and I had forgotten that most kids were still totally brainwashed. What I really wanted to know was, what the hell happened to the Hulk Hogan bar?

I could often predict what a specific person would buy. Anyone over the age of 50 was likely to choose a Drumstick cone, that being one of the only selections that existed when they were young. Most boys between eight and 11 years old wanted a Tear Jerker Bomb Pop. I remember liking sour candy as a child too, but I have no idea why. Now I think it’s one of the first real examples of masochism in the human individual.

I grew accustomed to being alone all the time. And that took a while, even though I enjoy time by



myself and often get lost in my mind while with others. Eventually “The Entertainer” not only didn’t annoy me, but I barely even noticed the music at all. I started to develop favorite paths for each square mile of land. I divided the subdivisions based on when they were the most crowded. I really could have used the Census survey results, in order to map out the whole route by how many kids lived in each area. But except for the unbearable heat and the low pay, I didn’t really mind the job all that much. Every time I drove down a street, I had no idea who would pop out of a house to greet me. Driving through an upscale neighborhood of two story houses one afternoon, a sexy young mother came out holding a baby.

“Hi there. Could I have a Cookies and Cream cup?”

“Of course,” I responded with a grin. I couldn’t help but wonder, was this a single mother, or was her husband actually away at work for the day? What if I had offered her help around the house, and then, once the baby fell asleep for the afternoon nap, I seduced her? Would anyone have noticed the yellow truck parked in a suburban driveway for an hour or two? Maybe, I thought, I should have taken that a step further and started running a call service using the ice cream sales for a cover-up. Mark would have flipped his shit over that.

My feeling of inadequacy over not initiating this plan was lessened a week or two later, when, later in the evening, the wife *and* the husband bought some ice cream together. I’d rid myself of these thoughts and move along, focusing on whatever might come next. On one unpleasant occasion, I sold ice cream to a young girl and boy, and then parked across the street to take a short break. I saw the two children separate and walk towards neighboring houses. A few minutes later, a woman approached the truck and knocked on my window.

“You charged my daughter too much,” she complained.

I informed her that the girl and boy had both bought one ice cream bar, and I assured her that they were charged appropriately.

“She wasn’t buying his ice cream.”

“Well they ordered together,” I responded, just figuring out what had happened. “Neither of them said anything about ordering separately.”

“You owe us that money back,” she said, ignoring my statement.

“Can’t *he* just give it to you?” I pointed to the boy, who was still standing on his front lawn.

“We don’t know him. *You* have to get the money from him.”

She didn’t know him??? She lived right next door!!! I wanted to sucker punch this bitch in the face. What if I hadn’t stopped across the street, but had just driven off? Would she have called the company? I doubt it. And that little bastard, too! He walked up to the truck with no cash and let that girl buy for him without even asking. I should have shoved a popsicle in his ass to teach him a lesson.

Eventually we got the kid to run inside and get some cash, and I “refunded” this lady’s money. I never went down that street again.

Perhaps my favorite customers were the ones I could count on day in and day out. A family of four around 18 Mile and Ryan came out very consistently, as long as I passed by around 7 pm. The strange thing is that they ranged from 12 to about 22 years of age, not any young kids, so they could have driven to a store and bought buckets of ice cream to keep in their freezer. I guess that’s not as much fun though. These were some of my favorite buyers for another reason: an older daughter in the family who caught my eye. She was sort of a natural flirt, and probably didn’t mean to give me the impression that she was attracted to me. In fact, most people probably assumed that I was at least a little weird, but that thought hardly ever crossed my mind. I knew I was normal, so they could probably see it too. Couldn’t they?

I asked myself this question on various occasions. Driving down a street in a neighborhood very much like the one in which I grew up, a girl of about 17 or 18 years walked towards me. She was beautiful, with strawberry blonde hair. Coincidentally or otherwise, she ordered a Strawberry Shortcake bar. I couldn’t help but wonder what the pink and white cream would look like as it melted over her bare, youthful skin. I wanted to know how it would taste, that smooth dairy on flesh. But she



escaped with the dessert and nothing more, so I continued on.

This experience was countered by a recurring one with an older woman down near 15 Mile and Dequindre who, every time I passed her house, no matter what time of day, would buy a Strawberry Shortcake bar, unwrap it, and immediately feed it to her yellow lab. And my fantasy was ruined...

What a strange nomadic wandering I had undertaken. Despite the low pay and the relentless heat, I never felt totally dejected. Roaming around Sterling Heights, the suburb just east of my home in Troy, I think I truly loved metro Detroit for the last time. An unforgettable feeling overtook me while I drove through the curvy streets, especially on idyllic summer evenings, as the sun was setting and giving way to a seemingly never-ending twilight. The heat remained thick as darkness came on, and the humidity coated every inch of my skin.

In some places I could smell the sprinklers watering lawns, and the moisture emanating from the warm ground, preparing to leave a soft dew for the following morning once the chill midnight air sent the water molecules recoiling back to the ground. Lawnmowers provided even stronger smells of fresh-cut grass and gasoline fumes. Children played tag in front of their houses as their parents sat on the porch and shared stories of the day. But nothing equaled the occasional stop at the baseball fields on a summer evening, where I could hear the *ting* of a metal bat hitting the leather ball, as the crowds cheered in support of the young athletes, battling under the bright field lights.

I used to love suburbia for all of these things. It was a sort of romantic illusion, giving one the impression that this was the epitome of human settlements. To children, places like Troy and Sterling Heights are probably close to perfect. But there's a void behind the surface appearance, a horrible emptiness that cannot be ignored. From one perspective, these places are little more than a place to raise children, where adults subsequently hide from the world on their private, modestly sized plot of land.

I literally had to get over Troy when I left for college, so that each return didn't leave me searching for old friends and memories. My subdivision alone was

home to at least 10 boys my age, but by 2004, all of their families had moved away except for mine. The economic boom of the late '90s had ended, and the local Kmart headquarters, which had provided upper-middle class living to so many, was about to shut its doors altogether.

All throughout my time on the job, Amanda was like the anchor reminding me of the reality of the ice cream business. For Amanda, there was no romance or joy in ice cream. In her brown eyes I saw only sorrow and regret. I had to request some time off in early August during the week my family always spends in northern Michigan. Such requests were submitted to Amanda. To mine she responded, "You're so lucky. I couldn't even take time off for a honeymoon after my wedding."

I had no idea what to say to that. "Your wedding?!" I thought to myself. "But you're younger than I am." I was 21, and it was inconceivable to me that anyone in modern times would get married before the age 24. She must have been about 19 or 20. She had an adorable little daughter as well, who was often playing in the office during my check-in. I imagined that Amanda had either gotten pregnant accidentally, or had married early because she perceived her future to be hopeless. She foresaw no grand adventures or accomplishments, and so resigned herself to a position as office manager of an ice cream truck business, and repressed all wishes and desires forever. I could only hope that her husband looked upon her each night with loving eyes.

I never would have thought that delivering ice cream could get so...heavy. Most of the time it wasn't, and the days just kind of rolled on like the idling wheels of my janky truck. Far too often I found myself developing crushes on the women who bought ice cream, even if we shared no more words than were required for the purchase. The older sister at 18 and Ryan was one of these; so was the strawberry blonde who bought the shortcake bar; and the young mother holding a baby. One time it even happened with someone I never met. During a sale, a mother who noticed my MSU hoodie asked:

"Oh, you go to State?"

"Yep. I just finished my junior year."

"Well, I should introduce you to my babysitter. She also goes to MSU. She's not here today though."



I was strangely intrigued, and even thought of passing back by the house in the future to see if the babysitter was there. The crush phenomenon was probably due to the fact that, with the exception of my previous bagel shop job, this position provided more random social interactions than any other time of my life.

I definitely got a unique view of the residents of Sterling Heights – both genders and all ages – during my few months on that route. That was partly because an ice cream truck catches people by surprise and puts them in an awkward situation. I'd come along when they were busy cleaning up after dinner, loading in the car to run errands, teaching their children to ride a bike *sans* training wheels, or halfway through a driveway basketball match. One such group dropped their basketball and ran over to my truck, but none of us noticed the ball rolling down the pavement to the street. The ball lodged itself in front of my rear tire, so when I left after the sale, it exploded under the weight of the truck. I felt bad, but not accountable, yet I was surprised that they didn't try to make me pay for it.

In another subdivision – an older one probably constructed in the '50s or '60s – some kids came out with only a few pennies and asked what they could get. I sadly informed them that the cheapest item was a double popsicle for 25 cents. Later, my mother would say that I should have given them a popsicle for free – and I agreed with her, but neither of us were bred for business.

These older neighborhoods – the kind without sidewalks – reminded me of McManus Drive, where I lived from age three to 10. The children running through the ditches, riding bikes, and climbing trees – they all brought to mind my first best friend Adam. Now I've totally lost contact with him, and yet I can feel him close to me at all times.

Other than these small tragedies, the most vivid memories of the job are from the embarrassing moments. In a block of mini-mansions on the north end of my route, two salesmen were going door-to-door selling discount cards for a new local restaurant. They stopped my truck and actually attempted to sell me one. The cards cost \$20, which you supposedly would recuperate by getting various deals. Even as I agreed, I felt like an idiot. First of all, I wasn't making enough

money to buy something like that. Secondly, the restaurant was too far from my home to go there frequently. Third, the one salesman who talked had a lying stink to him, and I should have been more willing to reject his empty promises. As a feeble response, I tried to push my own product.

"Would the two of you like some bottled water? They're one dollar each." I figured they'd be thirsty walking around like fools in this sun and heat.

"Sure," the crafty one replied. "I see how it works. You buy the pack for four bucks, and then sell each bottle for a dollar. That's the way to get a profit." As if he was in a place to lecture me on consumer manipulation! That comment made me wish I was carrying a flame thrower. I wanted to burn this man's flesh and watch him writhing in agony on the ground.

There were also enemies within the industry. For a stretch of one or two weeks, I felt like a competitor's ice cream truck was following me around the subdivisions. It got to the point where he was considerably affecting my sales. I even called Amanda once about it, to find out what I should do. She said it was probably an independent truck, and that I should just try to mix up my route patterns. In my mind I imagined a film inevitably titled *Ice Cream Wars*, about warring factions of curbside dairy dealers who have violent showdowns over who owned what turf. I could see myself adorned in tattered camouflage, feeling trigger happy, ready to hoist my bazooka when another truck rounded my corner. This could definitely become a summer blockbuster.

The absurdity waned only when it rained, but that also meant no business, and I didn't get paid unless I sold ice cream. When the drawn-out storms of Michigan summertime hit, I had to decide between waiting it out and returning to the truck yard at the company depot. If I waited, it could mean many hours sitting with no sales and nothing to do, on some barren side street or in a strip mall parking lot. But I'd have to keep the engine running, because that powered the ice cream freezer, and the engine used gas. It was my responsibility to fill the tank on my way in each night, and I paid for gas with my own money.

Even when it didn't rain, I was usually the first one to return my truck at night. Many drivers didn't even



leave until 3 or 4 pm, since they could sell more ice cream in the evening. Some of them would stay out 'til 10 or 11 each night, hanging around at baseball fields and tennis courts – anywhere where crowds lingered outdoors late at night. I wasn't willing to do that, so maybe I missed out on some sales.

I never really felt like an unsuccessful ice cream man, even with the crying kids and complaining mothers and idiot salesmen and incessant heat and crappy pay. I think that's because, from my point of view, no one is really a successful ice cream man. That company probably never dealt out "Driver of the Month" awards. And my fellow drivers were likely also working at CK Ice Cream out of varying degrees of desperation.

Now a part of me is still roaming in the place where I grew up, in a truck that's about to break down, with a bin full of frozen goodies, trying to find the one bar that will fulfill its grander promise and not just provide a momentary satisfaction. I'm still searching for that figurative bar, but I never stopped loving ice cream.

One of the best feelings I had the whole summer was when I finally left my route to visit my sister and her friends. My mom had informed me that they were having a pool party, the kind I used to have when I was that age, and she insisted that it would be worth the drive. I pulled onto our street and the kids were already waiting at the end of the driveway. My sister greeted me as they began devouring the menu with their eyes. She ordered a Spongebob bar, one of the other trendy choices at the time. She was simply ecstatic to see me in the truck, and I could tell she was proud to be my sister. To her, I was practically a hero. And that kind-hearted approval of a child was enough in itself for me to feel content with the way my summer had gone.

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