

13 Chains: Modern Debtors' Prison: Child Support Trap

Chapter 1 Cereal Killers: Breakfast Behind Bars

There I was, locked up for the thirteenth time, facing off against a prosecutor since I couldn't hire a child support lawyer. Perhaps my situation seemed doomed, yet I stood no shot at defending myself in family court.

I steeled my mind for the road ahead - enduring the intake process, taking on a job inside, and falling into a steady rhythm that carried me through each endless day. Things could have turned uglier; I might have ended up on the medical unit, where those jailed for unpaid child support are housed to keep them protected.

The day should have started like any other in the workers' tier but I was on high alert. My cellmate Diggs and I were woken at 4:00 a.m. by Corrections Officer Rodriguez for Diggs's insulin shot. Diggs had enough of a severe case of diabetes that demanded daily injections - you'd think that would land him in the medical tier, not among the workers.

Whatever the reason, my sleep got interrupted every morning at that ungodly hour, and again thirty minutes later when he returned. By 6:25 a.m., I dragged myself awake to start my shift in Receiving, where my glamorous duties included handing out sandwiches and drinks to newly arriving inmates, cleaning the holding pens, and tackling whatever paperwork the sergeant tossed my way.

I'd been locked up almost six weeks this time, all for non-payment of child support. How the hell do they expect me to pay when I'm rotting in here? If I'd had a steady 9-to-5 and an apartment, this arrest would've stripped me of both, leaving me homeless and jobless - on top of owing \$800 a week in child support arrears. And get this: the future payments don't budge. So yeah, there's no light at the end of this tunnel, especially when facing child support issues and wondering what to do if you can't pay child support.

Enough self-pity. I just wanted out of this endless loop. This was my thirteenth arrest in less than 5 years, and I saw no end in sight. How did I get here? That's a tale for another chapter.

I kicked off my shift prepping sandwiches and juices for inmates heading to court, but Officer Jones interrupted: "Drop what you're doing, Bulka, and head to Holding Pen 150. Hand out cereal and milk to the 75 guys going out to court." What could be simpler?

I positioned myself strategically in a chair in the hallway outside the pen, with a box of cereals and milks wedged between my legs. One by one, I handed each inmate a carton of milk and a single-serve cereal box. They'd shuffle into the pen to eat before court.

CEREAL KILLERS



13 Chains • Breakfast Behind Bars

To avoid any accusations of favoritism, I kept things discreet - turning my head away from each approaching inmate. Hand off made, I'd grab the next set without glancing back.

I'd just passed out the last breakfast when a voice erupted: "Yo, white boy, why you give that cracker Cocoa Pebbles and I get Fruity Pebbles? I know—take care of the white man and fuck us nigg***, right?" It was a dreadlocked guy, seething with rage. I ignored him. So did most in the bullpen; their subtle head shakes spoke volumes, dismissing his outburst.

For Christ's sake, I'd handed out whatever was next in the box - no agenda. But situations like this flared up on a weekly basis, usually from the same characters. Inmates would pull any card, including race, to snag an edge.

He amped up the volume: "I wanted Cocoa Pebbles, and I want it now!"

I didn't say a word and avoided eye contact. The others seemed entertained by his little tantrum but CO Jones, standing down the hall, heard the commotion and barked, "What's going on over there, Bulka?"

The accuser cuts me off before I can answer. "That motherfucker's a racist! He did it on purpose! I wanted Cocoa Pebbles and he gave me Fruity Pebbles!"

"So you think he did it on purpose?" Jones shot back. "Look, the man wasn't even facing you when he handed it over. You know what? This ain't your first stunt, and it's gonna be your last."

Jones wheeled on the crowd: "Who has Cocoa Pebbles? Bring it up here and toss it in the garbage - now!"

Groans erupted. One inmate yelled mockingly, "Shoulda gotten Fruity Pebbles!"

Jones's face twisted in disbelief. "Okay, fine. Everyone with Fruity Pebbles, bring 'em up and trash 'em too. You all have these two idiots to thank."

Chaos ensued - inmates screaming at the pair - as the commotion drew the sergeant. "Quiet down, all of you!"

An inmate piped up: "Yo, the CO (Corrections Officer) took our breakfast!"

"I'm sure there was a good reason," the sergeant snapped. "Now sit down and get ready - we're calling names soon."

"Fuck, what is with some people?" I muttered to myself.

Officer Jones approached me: "Don't sweat it, Bulka. You did nothing wrong. Go load the bus with sandwiches."