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A High Crime Area

It's pretty fucking funny sometimes to see what goes on with these guys. I mean, this is a federal prison, in a district that is world famous for its hot and heavy drug action, so you've got to remember that the inmates here were players.

Some dumpy looking little guy with a ponytail and bad skin will turn out to be "El Jefe" over a whole crew of big-time international cocaine smugglers. Probably worth a zillion dollars in his day, until the feds took it all and gave him a life bit which he gave up his family to get out of and still got twenty years. It's amazing how far you can fall.

So instead of driving a brand new Jag with a duffle bag full of kilos in the trunk, doing the speed limit up I-95 on the way to Charlotte or Atlanta or Chicago or wherever, he's got—the same guy this is—a dozen frozen, breaded chicken wings stuffed down his balls, trying to make it from food service over to "G" unit. Like they say: "Once a smuggler, always a smuggler." And hey, those wings go for fifty cents apiece!

After a few years in the joint, after your brother robs your stash and your old lady runs off with the postman, after your mom, dad and dog are all dead and gone, a man has to assess his limited options in life and move on. Chicken wings be good business.

That's what Oscar and Mario had figured out and they had the joint wired for action. I was just a rookie then, with a welfare check still coming in from home, so I figured hustling was for everybody else and I just did my bit easy. I worked in food service because they made me, took home my lousy twenty dollars a month and was happy enough. We had all the food right there at work so it wasn't like anyone wearing kitchen whites was going hungry. For the rest of the poor slobs in the joint, eating off the mainline, pickings were not quite as good.

On chicken night they issued four tiny wing sections per man. About a third of a small order at Hooters and that was it, with a pile of greasy potatoes and whatever you could scrounge off the self-service hot-bar thrown in for fodder. Safe to say, we all ate a lot of beans.

But convicts go crazy over chicken, so back at all the cellblocks the bootleggers were making a killing. Every block, or unit, had a microwave oven. One

microwave for a hundred guys and the cooks were lined up four deep all day and night waiting to boil up concoctions of tuna and rice mixed with contraband vegetables and the bootleg wings. It wasn't just wings being smuggled out of food service either, though they were the hottest item. Tomatoes, bell peppers, onions, broccoli, were all big movers in the prison underworld. I'm serious!

In this altered reality, stuff you buy at the supermarket without thinking twice was locked up in the vegetable storage room, guarded 'round the clock by a federal employee trained in Tae Kwon Do. It took some slick moves to get anything out of there.

That's where Oscar and Mario excelled. They took the same street smarts that had made them both millionaires in the coke trade by age twenty-three and cheerfully skipped on ahead through their rudely adjusted lives with the new product possession. Oscar moved so fast he should have worn a tin helmet with little wings on it. The guy on the Mercury dime.

Tuesday night was the big move, when the commissary opened for shopping. It was our privilege to stand in line there for two hours once a week to buy clothing and cosmetics, sneakers and foodstuffs, all handed out through a slot in the wall like you're copping rocks at a South Bronx crack house.

It was situated right next to the chow hall, which meant a long line of convicts holding brown paper bags and standing forty feet from the cyclone fence around the back side of food service on most weeknights. Call this a design flaw. Food service workers put their trashcans out the back door in a corral that doubled as a smoking area for the cooks.

So I'm out there on a Tuesday night, crouched next to a fetid garbage can and burning a stogie after the evening rush was over. I'm sitting on a milk crate puffing on a "Madura Throw-Out." Those are the fine cigars they sell in the commissary here. I guess they come from Madura, wherever that is, and they would have been thrown out if somebody didn't have the bright idea of selling them to convicts for half a buck. Everybody's got a hustle. That doesn't change on either side of the fence.

So I'm puffing away on this rancid thing and watching the almost tropical sunset glinting off the coils of razor wire and lighting the power lines in the distance with an eerie orange glow. Oscar comes zooming out the back door looking all wild-eyed and smiley and he heaves this huge bag—it could have been a bale of pot, it was that big—over the eight foot cyclone fence. It landed with a splat on the pavement. On cue, Mario darts out of the commissary and picks up the bag like Barry Sanders scooping up a punt return. He slips back into the crowd of shoppers and is quickly gone.

I'm thinking, "Man, that was easy." They're making a hundred a week with this shit. I mean it's not like they're throwing duffle bags of coke out of airplanes anymore, but for jail money, it ain't bad. Believe me, you get used to

grading on a curve around here. I used to go out on the weekend with \$400 in my pocket and be mad if I didn't get to spend it all. Right now that's about two years wages.

So I'm watching these kids and I'm going, "Hmmm..." Oscar knows I'm no snitch so he doesn't care if I see them. He passed me heading back into the kitchen and flashed a devilish grin. "Careful Rick. This is a high-crime area!"

I got to thinking, you know, maybe I can bring home a little something for myself one day. Not to sell, well maybe a little to my friends, but not a big deal. A loaf of whole wheat bread would be nice. We can buy all the peanut butter and irradiated strawberry jam we want. But spreading it on "Aunt Gilda's Melba Toast" gets a little old after a while. The shit breaks and you get jelly all over the floor but that's all they sell besides saltines. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich. That's all I really wanted.

I recruited this little Columbian guy, another veteran smuggler, to help me. It's Friday night and we're all looking forward to a big weekend. There's a movie coming on TV. Time to lounge around the unit in my sweat suit for a change. Escape from the infernal racket of the chow hall. It's like walking into a hive of angry bees there. Makes you want to scream sometimes, though nobody would ever hear you.

My Columbian friend, Jairo, agrees to chuck the loaf of bread over Oscar and Mario's favorite fence out back by the garbage cans and I'll make the move from there. No commissary on Friday though. That's where I fucked up. No crowd to blend in with. No rush hour traffic to hide that Dade county tag as you're cruising up the New Jersey Turnpike, knockout loaded.

I was on my own, with the bread then, walking with the smuggler's studied nonchalance across the compound in my hot-as-a-pistol kitchen whites, jacket draped over my arm with the product concealed as an unidentified mass underneath.

I'm almost to the door of the "B" unit where I live, and I can see the dead-bolt in the grille is already thrown back so I'm home free, just a few more paces when Haggerty, fucking Haggerty, the cop working "A" unit next door, standing out front smoking, another fearless guardian of the public safety, beer gut hanging over his belt, cigarette glued to a shiny lower lip, pulls me over. "Hey, inmate!" I try to shine him on but he's got me. "Whaddayah got there?"

"Bread, sir."

And he grabs it. "Whole wheat, huh? Alright, you go to the lieutenant's office." And so it goes. Another tally in his confiscation ledger. Another demerit for our favorite convict.

And I'm off to the lieutenant's office—the Principals Office—with guilty loaf of bread under my arm, to meet the arbitrator of my fate. And there he is, Lieutenant Dolt. That's his real name, Dolt. We call him "The Incredible Dolt." A hillbilly cracker who can barely write his freaking name and he's a fed-

eral officer in charge of intercepting contraband among other supremely important duties involving national security.

There I am, dead in the water with my loaf of bread, twenty peanut butter and jelly sandwich addicts waiting at the cellblock for the load to come through. Prison is an incredibly accurate microcosm of the real world. I'm the smuggler caught with a boutique load of organically grown Jamaican "Sensi." Dolt is the DEA agent putting the full press on me in the interrogation room. "Okay, Graves, who's got the meat?"

"Meat? What meat?"

"The meat. When one inmate's got the bread, another has the turkey-ham." He stared at me with his squinty little banjo-picking Deliverance eyes.

I said, "Look, I wouldn't eat that shit if you paid me. I'm strictly into P.B. & J. All I wanted to do was go up to my cell and have a sandwich. I'm not in business. I got no partners. There is no meat."

Dolt wasn't going to give up easy. "Look, we got you on tape with the bread. You wanna see it? Now you're lying to an officer. That's another charge. You wanna go to D.H.O. (Disciplinary Hearing Officer)?"

And I'm trying not to laugh at this motherfucker. This toy soldier, patent leather shoe wearing fool, with his keys, his radio, and his neo-fascist uniform of the empire. A loaf of bread.

I sighed and looked up at the assortment of commemorative plaques on the wall of his cube. Lacquered woodcut things cut in the familiar shapes of state borders. Mementos of the federal gulag showing aerial photos of dreary concrete sprawl.

Dolt shifted gears suddenly, adopting a more conciliatory tone. "Listen, I'm sending you back to the unit."

"No indictment?"

"No. I'm gonna let you go this time." Lieutenant Dolt wasn't such a bad guy. "But look, remember this, inmate Graves. It's just not worth it."

"Yeah, yeah, you're right. It's not worth it."

And I had to admit, for a peanut and jelly sandwich, it wasn't. I only wish the U.S. attorney had been so kind when he nailed me with half a ton of hash. Wish I didn't know now, what I didn't know then. It's just not worth it.