

# CEREAL BOWL

---

**John Boston**

Meghan Murphy was in charge of production. She was the one in charge of this insanity. When she first heard the idea in a staff meeting, she thought it was a joke, until it wasn't. She liked the idea of it, just not the reality of making it happen. The president of the cereal company thought it was brilliant. He wasn't the one that had to make it happen.....*she was*.

Ten thousand gallons of milk in a giant metal bowl. She watched the tanker trucks back up to the set and start pumping their milk into the giant metal bowl. They dumped almost a thousand pounds of ice into the bottom of the bowl to try and keep it cold, so it didn't spoil during production. She had floating cushions cut out and painted to look like little bits of cereal. Then, of course, there were the kids.

The name of the cereal was called BAMFLAKES. To Meghan, they tasted just like every other generic, sugar- coated cereal out there, but they were hot right now and they needed an even hotter commercial to go along with their image. The morning cereal market really hadn't changed much in the last 30 years, up until now. Everyone was buying BAMFLAKES, or so it seemed.

The kids were told to put on these life preservers painted to look like BAMFLAKES. They were supposed to swim around the bowl and try to avoid the giant wooden spoon that was going to come down and scoop them up. The spoon weighed almost two hundred pounds. The entire budget for this 15-second commercial was more than most companies spend in years on advertising. She just didn't get it. She had seen a computer program of what was supposed to happen. The kids swim around the bowl, just laughing and having a good old time, then the spoon comes down and scoops them up. They aren't supposed to try and avoid the spoon, it was only big enough to hold one or two of them. Then the crunching sounds.....*of the little kiddies being eaten*. Yeah, this was going to go over like a lead balloon.

Meghan knew there were no standards left in television or the media. That much was a given, but this was just plain.....*weird*. Still, the president of the company loved the idea. He liked the idea of his company mixing things up.

"Meghan, there's no such thing as bad press. Especially not in this industry. When was the last time a cereal commercial made international headlines." he asked her on the set.

"That's the problem. Cereal commercials aren't supposed to make international headlines. They're supposed to make us want to eat cereal." she responded.

He patted her on the back and basically told her to just *shut the hell up and do what I paid you to do*, without actually saying it. Meghan couldn't stand him, or his people that were all over the set.

"We're making history here Meghan. A lot of my people want to be a part of it." the CEO told her.

"That's for sure."

"I'm leaving my protégé here to oversee production. His name is Mr. McGrath. If you have any questions, you can direct them to him."

"Does Mr. McGrath have a first name?" she asked.

"Yes." said the CEO as he left the set.

*This cereal company was on another level. What kind of cereal company has a protégé?* she thought to herself.

These people made Meghan want to vomit, but this was their show. They paid a lot of money to her production company to make it happen. She was required to have an ambulance on standby even if there was very remote risk of injury or death. That was going to run them over two thousand dollars per day. She hadn't even spoken to McGrath and already she disliked him. He was that much of an a-hole that he didn't even have to open his mouth and people disliked him. This was going to be a fun day.

Once everything was in place, they did a dry run. There were four kids wearing life jackets swimming in the gigantic bowl of milk. The bowl was only five feet deep. The extra milk was ordered in case the first batch soured and couldn't be used. The milk trucks were parked outside, just waiting for orders. The old milk was going to be sucked up and dumped somewhere. That part was not her problem, the sanitation company would take care of that. She knew she was on limited time before the milk started to spoil. McGrath came over to her and had a clipboard in his hand.

"Meghan, let's get this show on the road here. Is everything in place?"

"Yup, just let us know when you want to start rolling."

"In this heat, we have maybe two hours before the milk starts to stink. I figure we have time for two full runs. We have to make them count."

"Right. Okay, we'll start in five. Kids are in the bowl. Everyone, take your stations, we're going to start shooting in five minutes." she said over her radio.

Meghan would run the actual filming. The spoon was attached to two cables that were attached to a forklift that was never seen on camera. The kids looked to be having a good time. They were splashing milk at one. another.

"Okay everyone.....kids. Get ready. Make sure you remember not to say anything when I say action, just swim.....ready in five, four, three, two, one....action." she said over the radio.

The kids were swimming around the cereal bowl, five seconds later, the spoon was lowered and picked one of them up. The forklift operator was very careful how he raised the spoon. He lowered the kid on the platform.

He repeated the process with another kid, lifting him out of the bowl and slowly lowering him onto a platform.

"Great and cut," she said over the radio.

"Everyone, let's meet and go over the film," she said.

The production staff and everyone on set met and they watched the film. Meghan thought it was great. The pacing was spot on and came to almost exactly thirty seconds. More than enough to work with and lots of room for cutting and trimming. She looked over at McGrath. He had a scowl on his face.

"Good, but not great. We have lots of room for improvement," said McGrath.

"So, you want to do another run?" asked Meghan.

"Yes, this time, everyone will take my lead. I'll be giving instructions to the spoon. I don't want him lifted out of the bowl. I want him scooped. It has to look natural. The whole thing just looked very stiff and robotic."

"Jesus man, this isn't Shakespeare, it's a cereal commercial." said the cameraman.

McGrath walked over to him.

"Get off my set."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Get off my set.....or do I have to call your boss's boss and get him down here?"

"McGrath, he's the lead cameraman, he can't leave."

"Yes he can and I want him out of here, or I stop production. If production stops, no one gets paid."

"Whatever dude. You can run the camera," he said stepping off the platform.

Meghan walked over to McGrath. This was getting ridiculous. She needed to deflate his ego and quickly, or this day was going to turn into a nightmare.

"Look, he's the most experienced lensman and soundman we have. We can't shoot without him. He isn't going anywhere."

McGrath put his arm around Meghan. Everyone was more than just a little creeped out by this guy.

"Meghan.....you company spent how much money to put this whole operation together? I'm guessing you guys went deep into the whole to get us to bite. See, if I shut down production, you guys don't get paid. That could put a very serious hole in your operation. I'm guessing you guys had to borrow to finance this whole thing?"

There it was. In black and white. Meghan was in a losing position. McGrath was right. If production was shut down, they wouldn't get paid. They could sue the cereal company, but getting any money was very questionable. He had them by the balls and he knew it.

"I can't film without my cameraman. Get over yourself for two seconds and realize this isn't going to happen without him," she said.

"Right and just how would I look then, Meghan? I'd lose control. We're making history here, we're just filming another commercial. Now, we're going to do it again. I'm sure you know how to work the camera. You film, I direct. How's that sound."

"Whatever, it's your show. I would like to have a word with my staff.....alone," she said.

"Fine, but make it quick, the milk is already starting to turn sour."

Meghan gathered up the half dozen of her staff members and the forklift operator.

"I know this guy is obnoxious, but he's in charge. We have to play his game or we don't get paid," she told them.

"Meghan, this is ridiculous. Can we even get the kids to go in the bowl again?" asked one of her staff.

"We're going to have to. That's why I keep the parents off the set. The kids might not like it, but we only need them for a few minutes. I hope they didn't pee in the milk."

"So, we just have to do whatever this guy says? We're the film crew, he should be doing what we say."

"I know. Let's just make him happy and get this over with," she said.

"Where did the EMT's go?" asked another staffer.

"McGrath.....we lost our EMTs," she said over the radio.

"No, I told them to take a long lunch. I told them we wouldn't be filming," he said back over the radio.

"We can't film or do anything unless they're here," she said.

"Leave that up to me. Are we ready to roll?"

"Be ready in five."

"Meghan, we can't put the kids in the milk, unless they're here." said one of the staffers.

"They have life jackets on. It's not like they're going to drown."

"Something goes wrong and we're in deep shit. I should just walk away right now." said one of her staff.

They all knew they should just stop this production and tell McGrath to go to hell, but none of them did. They did the easy thing, instead of the right thing. They needed a paycheck, just like the guy next to them.

Once everyone on the set was in place. McGrath escorted the kids back to the cereal bowl. Much to Meghan's dismay, the kids weren't wearing life jackets.

"McGrath, where are their jackets?" she asked over the radio.

He didn't even respond. He lowered the ladder and the kids started swimming and wading out into the middle of the giant bowl. Meghan wasn't just nervous now, she was angry. Who the hell did this guy think he was?

"They need their life jackets on," she shouted over the radio.

"Meghan, if you would kindly just shut the hell up and do what I tell you, I'd really appreciate it. We're making a commercial that will still be shown in a hundred years in film school. I know you're used to dealing with millennials and people with green hair, but please, let the adults in the room run this." said McGrath over the radio.

"Meghan.....what the hell is this guy doing?"

"If the kids look like they're in trouble, we get them out ASAP," she said over the radio.

"We shouldn't be doing this."

"It's five feet of milk, I think they'll be ok."

"Are we ready?" asked McGrath.

"Ready when you are."

"Okay. Forklift operator, I need an arc, not just lowering the spoon, it has to look natural."

"I'm going to have to re-adjust the cables," he said over the radio.

"We don't have time for that. Just do your job, or I'll get someone who can," he said over the radio.

"He's the only one staff certified to run a forklift. Without him, we can't film."

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Ready," she said over the radio once everyone gave her a thumbs up.

"Ready in five, four, three, two, one.....action," she said.

The kids were swimming and paddling around the bowl. The forklift operator was careful to lower the spoon. He had moved the forklift and now one of the cables had tension, while the other one did not. It had the effect of making the spoon come in at a slight angle. He slowed the spoon as he got to one of the kids. Just as he was about to scoop them up, McGrath came on the radio.

"And cut. Everyone, stay exactly where you are," he said.

Everyone looked at Meghan for direction. She just shrugged her shoulders. She had no idea what this idiot was doing.

McGrath walked over to the edge of the bowl. He looked down at the children, who were beginning to struggle as they were exhausted from paddling.

"Are we done yet?" one of them asked as he headed towards the ladder.

McGrath pulled the ladder up out of the bowl. The kids just looked at him.

*What the hell is this guy doing?* is what everyone on the stage was thinking.

"McGrath.....what are you doing?" asked Meghan over the radio.

He didn't even respond. He just continued to look down at the kids.

"Can we take a break, I'm tired.....*I can't swim any longer.*" said one of the kids.

"Just a little bit longer kids. I know you're tired, but you're doing great," said McGrath.

Meghan walked over to him and stood beside him. She was beginning to get a little worried about the kids.

"What are we doing?"

McGrath said nothing and looked down at the kids swimming and flailing all over the giant metal cereal bowl.

"McGrath, what the hell are we doing? Are we filming or not?"

He just said nothing and watched the children.

"McGrath?"

"We're making art, Meghan."

"Right.....the kids looked exhausted."

"That's the point."

"I thought this was a commercial for cereal?"

"It is."

"So why aren't we filming?"

"We are."

"Do you want to run this show here? Come on kids, we're done here," she said and walked over to get the ladder so they could get out of the cereal bowl.

McGrath took the ladder out of her hands and almost pushed her away.

"They need to come out. They can barely stay afloat."

"Meghan, do you want to be responsible for your little film company going under?"

"I think we're done here," she said.

"Think very carefully about what you're doing here. Think long and hard. You don't get paid, you're finished. This is all on your shoulders." he said

"What is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me? I appreciate fine art and literature. I'm tired of seeing our culture go down the shitter. I think you feel the same way."

"I film commercials for a living. I'm not here to change the world."

*"I am my dear,"* he replied

Meghan had no idea what this whacko was trying to do. The kids were getting worried. They were just kids in a commercial. They didn't know how to tread water. She didn't want them to drown.

"So, we're just going to stand here and watch these kids drown to death?"

"Don't you see what this is?"

"No, what is it?"

"Survival. Nature in its purest element. Why do we always fight nature?"

"Mister.....I can't keep going." said one of the kids.

"Kids.....there's a few pieces of cereal there in the bowl. Three to be exact.....and there's four of you. See the problem we have here?" said McGrath.

The kids looked at one another, unsure what to do next. Two of them made their way over to the floating piece of cereal, but their combined weight made it sink.

"Three pieces of cereal, but four of you. Who's going to survive?" he asked them.

*Jesus, this guy is off the charts nuts.* she thought to herself.

"I want to get out." said one of the kids.

"You want to disappoint your mother? You get out, you're done. Show me you have what it takes to be in my commercial."

"McGrath, what the hell are you doing?"

The kids started making their way to the floating pieces of cereal. One of the girls was nearly exhausted. She wasn't going to make it.

"Come on honey. You can do it. Don't give up now!" she said, surprised at herself for getting caught up in the moment. She should be putting a stop to this insanity and here she was, caught up in it.

"I can't. I can't even swim," she said, starting to cry.

The boys were holding onto the floating pieces of cereal. If they had been any bigger, they would be going under as well.

The girl was crying now, almost hysterically. One of the boys swam over to her and pushed the floating piece of cereal to her. She grabbed on.

"Don't move. Just hold on. We can take turns." he said.

"It's fascinating," said McGrath.

"What?"

"Every kid is already programmed from the moment of conception. Every kid has their personality already ingrained into them. He's the savior of the group. The other two couldn't give a shit if she drowns, as long as they make it."

"They're just kids.....scared kids."

"Yes, but that doesn't change anything.

"Meghan, what are we doing?" asked one of her staff over the radio

"Just hold tight for a moment," she said over the radio.

"Meghan, are the kids ok?." asked another staffer over the radio.



"I'll pay each of you a thousand dollars if we finish this commercial. That's on top of what I am already paying you," said McGrath over the radio.

"Meghan?" shouted a staffer.

"I want ten thousand more for finishing this commercial. You better pay up, so help me God, if you don't," she said softly.

"Not a problem."

Meghan stood helplessly as the children fought for their lives in the giant bowl of cereal. She couldn't believe what she was doing. She should be stopping this, but she almost seemed to be encouraging it. She had been poor for so long, she forgot what it was like to have money. She was selling her soul and she didn't even care. She didn't want to be poor and unemployed.

"We need to take turns holding on. If we all take turns, we can do it." said the kid who had rescued the girl.

The other two just moved away from them. They were not going to give up their lifeline.

"Come here, son. Push yourself over to me," said McGrath.

The kid paddled his way over to them. He thought McGrath was going to lift him out of there. He reached down and extended his arm to the child. Instead of pulling him up, he grabbed the floating cushion and yanked it out from under him.

"The plot thickens," he said smiling.

The child was now helpless. He was starting to panic. He was going to drown if he didn't get it together.

"Just paddle. Like you are riding a bicycle. Make the motion with your legs. Don't use your arms. When you get tired, just lay on your back and float. If you move, you'll go under." she said.

"That a girl. You're getting into this, aren't you?"

"No, I just want my money," she said softly.

Milk is not water, but close. Thankfully, they ordered skim, because it was the cheapest. The melting ice had diluted it even more. It was very close to being nothing but water. The child did as he was instructed. He was remaining afloat, but just barely.

"I want my mother." said the girl holding onto the cushion for dear life.

"Your mother can't help you now. Only you can save yourself," said McGrath coldly.

"Mister, you're a real asshole." said one of the children.

McGrath just laughed.

"No kids, he's not an asshole. He's a psychopath. He's worse than an asshole." said Meghan.

"And just what does that make you Meghan? A whore I guess. Maybe even worse than a whore. A whore sells her body, but not her mind. You would sell me your soul for thirty pieces of silver."

In an instant, Meghan hit him as hard as she could. He stumbled back for a second, then grabbed him and pushed him into the cereal bowl with the kids. She walked over to the kids and lowered the ladder.

"Come on kids. Enough of this. We're done here." she said.

She helped the kids out of the cereal bowl and towed them off. Some of them were now crying, but happy to be out of that cereal bowl.

"You're always going to be a loser, Meghan," said McGrath

"And you'll always be a psychopath. You don't even know what it's like to be human."

"Enough. Give me the damn ladder," he said.

In an instant, Meghan knew what she had to do. She called the two truck drivers parked outside and told them to start pumping. McGrath was short. He was only about five-six. Not much bigger than the children. McGrath had this very confused look on his face as the lines above him started filling up with milk. It poured down into the cereal bowl.

"Meghan, what are you doing? Give me the ladder!" he said angrily.

All of the production crew walked over to her and watched the milk fill-up the cereal bowl. One of the staffers took the kids outside and away from this insanity. McGrath was fuming. He was now almost buried up to his neck in milk.

"Meghan.....if you don't get me out of here.....so help me God," said McGrath.

He was nervous now, watching the milk level rise. It was up to his chin. He frantically fought to climb up over the side, but he was still too short. The metal sides of the giant bowl prevented him from getting out.

"Let him swim in there for a while. Don't let him get out," she told the rest of her staffers.

Every time he tried to get out, they just kicked his hand away from the edge of the bowl.

"Oh.....oh, I see. I see what you're doing. Very funny, Meghan. You're done. You'll never work in this industry again." he snarled.

"At least I'll be alive, which is more than I can say for you."

"Knock it off Meghan, you're not going to do this."

"There are two cushions in there. Maybe they'll support your weight, maybe they won't," she said smiling.

McGrath was now bobbing and weaving under the milk. He was frantically trying to stand up.

"Meghan.....Meghan, I can't swim. Get me out of here." he said whimpering.

"Sucks to be you." said one of the staffers.

"You're all finished! I'll have your asses for this," he shouted.

"It's nature in its purest form." said one of her staffers.

"MEGHAN....MEGHAN, I REALLY CAN'T SWIM. I'LL DROWN IN HERE!" he screamed.

One of the staffers closed the valve on the tube and the milk stopped coming in. They all watched McGrath just struggle and flail in the giant mil bowl.

"I'LL KILL ALL OF YOU. DO YOU HEAR ME? YOU'RE ALL DEAD!" he shouted.

"The real beauty is watching a control freak lose control," said Meghan.

She walked over to the ladder and lowered it into the milk bowl. McGrath swam over and pulled himself out of the mil bowl. The look in his eyes was one of pure rage. He was breathing heavily. He dried himself off and looked at Meghan and her team.

"You're no better than I am," he said and turned to leave.

"You would have let those kids drown in there, wouldn't you?" Meghan asked him.

"Of course I was not going to let them drown," he replied

"I'm not so sure. I think you would have." said one of the staffers.

McGrath turned and looked at the group. His anger had vanished. He almost seemed to be glowing now. His face lit up like a Christmas tree.

*"You liked playing the game as much as I do,"* he said.

"You were never going to pay us....were you?" she asked.

"Probably not. You can sue us if you want. Good luck. You breached your contract." he said.

"I should have just left you in there," said Meghan.

"You're not a murderer Meghan. You would never let me die."

"Murder is when you kill another human being. You aren't a human being. Not like us anyway." she said back.

"I think I made my point. Thank you all for helping me. No hard feelings." said McGrath as he walked off the stage.

The group said nothing for nearly a minute. None of them were quite sure what had just happened. None of them were aware of what they had done or why they had done it.

*They just did what everyone else was doing.*

"We should have let that bastard drown in there." said the forklift operator.

"Yes, but would we have won the game, or lost it if he drowned?"

"Who cares?" said another staffer.

Meghan realized the full horror of what that man had unleashed. The full extent of what he had created. He had planted the seeds of evil in their minds and it had quickly taken root.

"What do we do now, boss?" asked one of her team.

"We're going to need more milk. We have to finish the commercial. We have to get those kids back in that bowl." she said.

"I don't think that's going to happen." said the other cameraman.

"We have to. Those kids have to go back in there. We have to finish this damn commercial once and for all."

"We're going to need some more kids."

"Well then get them," she said

"We're going to just run the commercial, we're not going to play any weird games with them, right?" asked the other cameraman.

"Of course not.....probably not. We'll see. Just get me some more kids." she said.

Meghan didn't realize it, but now she was hooked, as were all of her team. How far would she go? She didn't want to answer that question. It was just too horrible to think about.

*In just over three minutes, Mr. McGrath had transformed their lives. Three minutes is all it took. Meghan had to ask herself why she didn't stop him? She rationalized that she knew the kids were never going to drown.....right?*

*No one tried to stop him. Did they all know what he was doing? Did they know his intentions? Did they think the kids would drown? What had McGrath done? This wasn't a game. Watching children fighting for their lives isn't a game.....right?*