

Science On a Budget

By Bill Wolfe

In order to use the low-bid, third-rate teleporter towers, they required a supply depot that was surrounded by nearly-empty countryside. It also needed an astonishing variety of the sampling devices to use as replacements. In the end, there was only one choice.

The sampling devices would be teleported to the ship, altered, and then dispersed to every consumption establishment in the world. This way, if the device didn't exactly match the other cutlery, it was unlikely to be noticed. Of course, because the survey was underfunded, they could only process about fifteen million of them per orbit around the system's Primary. The comprehensive survey would take nearly twenty orbits, which—entirely by coincidence—was just short of where the contract's overtime clause would kick-in.

Of course, there were always individuals who never visited consumption establishments, so samplers were dispersed to individual households on a case-by-case basis. One device could sample as many as one thousand individuals, so once the entire household was sampled, the device was retrieved, immediately. The data was read and the device sent somewhere where it may sample as many as twenty individuals in a single day.

Martha closed her eyes as she stepped-up on the scale. She was standing in her too-bright bathroom, completely naked. She took a deep breath as she listened for the electronic beep which meant that the red LED readout had stabilized. She knew from long experience that she could easily discern it over the sound of the toilet tank, refilling. "No use weighing the contents of a full bladder," she whispered to herself. It was one of the many mantras that had helped her through these last, tortuous few months.

Aboard the Galactic Survey Ship, Subassistant-Second-Class FrdBXX, was watching the scene with such concentration that—due to lack of attention—two of his/her eyestalks lay flaccid against his/her cephalic node. He/She had just been assigned this being who hadn't yet been sampled for the Genetic Database. The creature simply never seemed to use a sampling device..

Martha opened her eyes. "DammitDammitDammitDAMMIT!" She stomped off the scale, scrupulously avoiding so much as a glance in the large bathroom mirror. "How can I possibly weigh a pound more than yesterday? How?" She continued her solitary tirade as she yanked-open drawers and slammed them shut after rifling the contents.

"Six months of rice cakes and raw vegetables and fruit and popcorn-without-butter and black coffee in the morning. . .AND FOR WHAT? At this rate, I'll never loose weight!"

FrdBXX had always had doubts about the cheap translators they were using on this survey, and the recalcitrant being's last statement only added to them. Was this creature attempting to nullify gravity by consuming certain foodstuffs? He/She knew of at least three ways to achieve

antigravity using a domestic animal, ventilation conduit repair adhesive, and a plasma torch. But trying to do so using organic foodstuffs just sounded silly. He/She decided to query the linguistic database for an explanation.

As he/she read the true meaning of the words, an idea dawned. Perhaps a little more research was required. He/She wouldn't want to take too much. Their internet supplied bounteous ideal templates.

On Saturday morning, Martha woke-up two hours late, and thin. She bounded-out of the bed with an energy she hadn't felt in years. And then stood astonished, staring downward as her pajama bottoms fell about her ankles.

In low-earth orbit, NOBODY noticed when fifty-three pounds of human adipose tissue and extra skin briefly flared, as it was burned-up upon reentry to the atmosphere.

For the first time in a decade, Martha stood staring at her naked body in the bathroom mirror. It was a miracle, at least. She'd never heard of anything like it. She glanced at the scale, and decided it didn't matter what the damn numbers had to say. What she was looking at said it all. "I think I deserve a treat."

Her hand shook so badly as she reached for the dusty-topped sugar bowl, she had to put her steaming cup of coffee on the counter. It had been a long time since she had even allowed herself to look at the thing. "A spoon-full of sugar helps the medicine, go down." She sang softly to herself as she opened her cutlery drawer. She was a little embarrassed to realize that her mouth was watering. Like anyone, she took the first offered from the slot. Had she noticed that it felt unfamiliar in her hand, no doubt she would have chalked-it-up to the fact that she hadn't touched one in months.

It took her two tries to break through the semisolid crust. "Humid here," she mused. The chunky white crystals piled much higher than normal. She considered dumping it back into the bowl and then decided that it would do. It was still much less than her pre-diet, six-per-cup.

She kerplopped the overladen spoon into the black liquid and slowly stirred, savoring the slow, circular motion and the diminishing gritty scraping she felt at each revolution. With careful deliberation, she raised the spoon to her mouth and sensuously placed the warm metal to her tongue. The bittersweet combination momentarily overwhelmed her near-atrophied taste buds. The slight tingle she felt melded with the rapturous flood of sweet, satisfying sensation.

She placed the spoon down and—using two hands—embraced the warm mug. Her ears registered the slight pop as the spoon was teleported out, but her mind was focused elsewhere.

A rough translation would be: "Got'cha!", if FrdBXX spoke any language even vaguely resembling English, that is. But for now, he/she dutifully logged the data from the sampling device, placed it in the redistribution queue, and turned to his/her next assignment.

This one had lost its upper appendages, and—though it seemed impressively dexterous with its feet—obviously wasn't quite steady enough to use a sampler. He/She watched its frustrated

efforts to consume dead animal broth, and wondered if it would cause too much consternation if it grew two new arms, overnight.

The End