

## Instant Satisfaction

My tablet begins to vibrate, and the device emits a series of chimes. TIME FOR SECOND MEAL, reads the text on the screen. I set the tablet down and jog down the stairs to alert my mother of this event, though she's probably already seen the notification flashing on the TV. Ever since my growth spurt arrived, no meal could arrive fast enough.

"Hi," I call out in the general direction of my mother. My attention is fixed on the hollowed out shelf beside our home's entrance, encapsulated by a pair of glass doors. Normally at this time of day, our nutritional pods would have arrived. During Second Meal, I normally have the choice between either chicken or vegetable flavored multivitamin solution, but the aforementioned shelf is devoid of any sustenance.

"Uhh... Mom?" I ask, "Where are the pods?" I hear my mother rise from her armchair and enter the foyer.

"What do you mean?" she replies. "They should be in the... oh, wait." Mom squats down and cranes her neck upward, trying to check if the pods got stuck in the delivery tube. "They're not in there," she confirms. She sounds uneasy.

"What are we going to do?" I ask. "We don't get anything else until Third Meal, and that's hours from now."

Mom exhales slowly, maintaining her cool, confident composure. "I'm going to call the nutritional department and ask what's wrong," she affirms. "It's probably just a slight technical difficulty."

Just as she is about to turn around to get the phone from the living room, a slip of paper shoots out of the delivery tube and into the orifice below. Its glass doors slide open, and I snatch up the paper. It is headed by the government's crest: two planets, one larger and one smaller, with interlocking rings, meant to represent the connection between the government and the people. We were taught this information in History class.

*"Federal Notice: Due to the results of a recent census, nutritional pods will no longer be delivered to Districts 31 and 32 due to insufficient population size as well as substantial distance from the FNPDC (Federal Nutritional Pod Distribution Center). Residents are encouraged to travel directly to the FNPDC to pick up their allotted Nutritional Pods quarterly. In the case of questions or concerns, please contact the FNPDC via phone, hologram, or microchip. Thank you for your cooperation,"* I read aloud. My mother's expression grows from incredulous to indignant.

"Oh my..." Mom snatches up the paper and scans it herself. She tosses it onto the ground. Her usual voice of reason has metamorphosed into one of annoyance. "We don't even *have* microchips, and holograms never transmit with the service we get in this house." She shakes her head. "They expect us to drive all the way to the F...P...-- whatever it's called-- to pick up our food? I can't *imagine* that it's anywhere close."

I nod my head in agreement and dash upstairs to grab my tablet. I open the Map application, which I rarely use, since we've already programmed our car with directions to our most frequent destinations. We have never, however, had to travel to the FNPDC. I input our

home's address as well as the address of the FNPDC. After a few seconds, the application displays a pathway. I almost drop the tablet.

"AN HOUR?" I loudly ask the tablet.

"What?" My mother replies equally as loudly from downstairs. "*An hour?*"

"Looks like it," I announce fretfully. I mess with the application, trying to input our neighbors' coordinates instead of ours and scanning my text for typos. No matter what, I can't slim down the journey any more than 59 minutes. I groan with frustration. We've never had to travel for more than fifteen minutes at a time, and even that's hard to bear. Last time we drove for fifteen minutes, I was so sick of sitting in the same place that I was ready to jump out of the moving vehicle, action-movie style.

We could technically teleport, but to do that monthly would put a massive dent in our bank account. We would never be able to afford moving into District 30 with Dad's nowhere-near-high automobile-repair salary if we teleported two people all the way from District 31 to City Center, where the FNPDC is located. Saving up for such a move requires much frugality.

I guess we have no choice other than to drive.

I grab my tablet, slip into my shoes and go downstairs, where my mother is waiting by the front door, keys in hand. We exchange vexed shakes of the head. Once the car is on, we get in, start the engine, and begin the extensive journey to City Center.

The journey is long and excruciatingly boring, despite the music and conversation that Mom and I attempt to employ in order to stave off the lingering ennui that arrived ten minutes into our drive. Finally, after fifty grueling minutes have passed, and I have taken to staring blankly into space, Mom notices a road sign to our right and jostles me.

ENTERING THE GROUNDS OF THE FEDERAL NUTRITIONAL POD DISTRIBUTION CENTER. AUTHORIZED VEHICLES ONLY.

"Our vehicle is authorized, right?" I ask mom.

"It should be," Mom replies. "You brought the note, right?"

"What note?"

"The note that we found in the delivery tube?" Mom's tone grows exasperated.

"We were supposed to bring it?" I ask frantically.

Mom drops her head onto the steering wheel, which emits a droning whine. After about ten seconds my ears will probably never recover from, she looks up. "Maybe they'll let us in without it," she hopes aloud.

"I doubt it."

"Looking on the bright side never hurt anybody," Mom cajoles me.

"Then why did they invent sunglasses?" I look out the car window. I am so hungry. The sounds that my empty stomach is beginning to emit frighteningly resemble those of a garbage disposal.

After five more minutes of driving, we arrive at a boom barrier patrolled by a bored-looking woman wearing an orange vest. She opens the window to her kiosk.

"You have reached the Federal Nutrition Pod Distribution Center," she recites. "Please state your reason for entry." I've never heard someone speak in a more monotone fashion.

"We're here from District 31," Mom replies. "We're here to pick up our nutrition pods."

“Do you have your government-issued letter?”

“We forgot to bring it,” Mom sighs, shooting a pointed glance my way.

“Unfortunately, so did everyone else.” The lady takes a piece of paper off her desk and feeds it through a machine, which emits a short beep and blinks a green light. “I’ve been feeding this one through the machine all day. At least one family remembered to bring it.” The boom barrier lifts. “Go on ahead.”

Just as Mom is about to start driving, the lady leans out of the small window carved into her kiosk and lowers her voice.

“Just between you and me, they’re getting lazier and lazier in there.” She gestures towards the concrete building which looms before us, crowned by a quintet of aluminum letters. “Do yourselves a favor and move to one of the more central districts if you can afford it, before they cut off your hologram service or at-home medical care.”

The former is getting pretty spotty in our house anyway, but mom thanks the lady, who gives a nod in reply and closes the window. Mom and I drive through the lifted boom barrier, every second growing closer to acquiring our precious food.

Once we arrive at the main building, we pull into a parking spot and enter through a set of orange double doors. We find ourselves at the back of a large crowd, stuffed into an atrium whose high glass ceiling does nothing to accommodate for the insufficient floor space hosting members of Districts 31 and 32. Residents of District 32, the district farthest from City Center, are easily recognizable by their dull clothing and gaunt frames. They typically work in the factories which manufacture our electronics and building materials, but are being rapidly being replaced by automated assembly lines, which is augmenting their poverty.

I once had a classmate from District 32. His name is Arlo. His family was better off than most in that district. However, once his father was replaced by an automated wire-ducting device, Arlo dropped out of school to accompany his father in finding odd jobs assisting those who couldn’t afford housebots.

Though we’re not rich by any standards, I’m lucky that my father at least makes enough money to keep us out of District 32.

After waiting in line for an entire seven minutes, which, though still lengthy, pales in comparison to our recent car ride, we finally receive the box of nutrition pods that will sustain our family for another three months. Mom and I return to the end of the queue and exit the same pair of doors we came in from.

“Finally,” I cry, grabbing the box and wrapping my arms around it, peering through a translucent window at the rows of nutrition pods inside. “That took *such* a long time.”

“That was crazy,” Mom agrees. “Imagine doing *that* every day!”

“No, thank you.” I wrinkle my face up. “I definitely can’t!”