

Tasting The Waves

The sky was thick with heavy, leaden clouds which constantly threatened rain, but seldom did they deliver. The beach, normally a bustling ribbon of gold curving elegantly around the inside of the shallow bay, was all but deserted: only a handful of furs remained, all of them the dedicated core of the local surfing community who rode the lonely swells as they surged towards the shore.

A head emerges from the surf, shaking suitably aquatic-coloured hair from over his eyes. Cowabunga, his name another very fitting aspect of his being, bobbed in the water for a few moments, his arms resting atop his board which had so recently bucked its rider off; surfing was his life, his ultimate passion, yet recently even it had started to lose some of its glory.

Sighing, he yelled out to his nearest fellows, "I'm gonna call it there, guys. Got stuff to do." This was, sadly, a small untruth: these days he rarely had anywhere he had to be, anything he had to do, anyone he had to see; he had simply grown weary of riding the waves and felt the need to mope, and the beach was not the best place for that. He paddled to the shallows, waded to shore, towelled himself down briefly, then made for where he had left his car.

Winter had struck early and hard that year. The normally subtropical climate meant that summer usually never ended here and was the go-to retreat for those seeking a warm, sunny, palm-filled sanctuary from the bleak chill suffered by many other parts of the country. This time around, however, the clouds had rolled in, the mercury had plunged, and the tourists had stayed away. The town was as dead as even the older folks had ever seen it and the locals, though largely glad to have their town to themselves for once, were suffering as a result.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to lay you off for a while," the normally kindly, generous otter had said when he'd called Cowabunga into the back office of the small tourist shop he ran, "At least until town gets busy again."

The fox had visibly drooped at this news, his eyes wide and dismayed. "But...please, Mister Luther, this is my only income."

"I know," Mister Luther had said, patting Cowabunga's shoulder understandingly, "but it's much the same for me and the wife. There's so little business around at the moment that we're making virtually nothing. And if we're not making money, there's none to give to you."

"Listen. You're a great kid, you always do a great job here. I'll put in a good word for you with some people I know and I'm sure one of them should have at least a little work for you. Just...You just need to tough it out for the winter and then we'll be back in business. Things will be back to normal before you know it, you'll see."

But no calls ever came. Cowabunga knew that Mister Luther wouldn't have given him false hope, knew that he really did try to find him temporary work elsewhere, but there just wasn't any work to be found: all over town the establishments that survived solely on the tourist dollar were shutting their doors, laying off even their best staff. Those places that remained open had already hired on as many workers as they could, stretching their margins to breaking point to keep people afloat, and the fox happened to be one of many who had missed out on one of these lifelines.

And so Cowabunga had begun what he had hoped would be a short vacation of his own. For the first week or so he had spent nearly every day braving the unusual cold down at the beach, taming the waves with as much gusto as ever he had done. When he had expended his energy in the surf, he would go for aimless, leisurely road trips around the surrounding area, the smooth, relaxing

sounds of vaporwave accompanying every mile. When night set in, it was back home to chill out in front of the TV, normally with a movie or the next part of a boxset.

But the vacation hadn't ended and his enjoyment of the pursuits that required his energy steadily diminished, his bank account doing much the same. He had begun scouring newspapers and job agencies, both local and online, for work; all the positions on offer were either in far-flung corners of the country or required qualifications and skills he simply didn't have.

And so his money continued to dwindle. He had done a reasonably good job of saving until this downturn had hit, so he did at least have something of a buffer to keep him afloat for a time, but the bottom of the barrel was bracing for a scraping.

He increasingly spent his time at home now, only venturing to the beach once or twice a week, and his car was reserved for journeys of necessity only: gas was a luxury he didn't dare try to afford any more. But now he had watched the majority of his movies and shows, his Netflix subscription had lapsed, leaving him with only what the networks saw fit to broadcast.

Arriving home that evening, damp, cold, with misery creeping up on him, Cowabunga could not summon the effort to do more than shower, chuck a ready meal in the microwave, then collapse onto the couch with six-pack of beers. He ate slowly and listlessly, merely dropping the empty container to the floor when he had eaten his fill, immediately cracking open the first bottle that came to hand.

The next morning he would be found slumped against the arm of the couch, mouth wide open and snoring at considerable volume, with only one unopened bottle remaining in its cardboard holder. With the widest of yawns, he raised his head and dragged himself to his feet to stumble to the kitchen; the faint outline of the seam in the couch cover was still imprinted in his cheek fur.

After a lazy breakfast of cereal in front of the TV, the fox reluctantly abandoned his more leisurely pursuits in favour of sitting down at the computer in his bedroom to start trawling the job sites in the vague hope of finding something suitable. As had often come to be the case, very little jumped out at him no matter how many different websites he visited. He was just about to give up and resign himself to at least one more day of unemployment when he finally spotted something: 'TESTERS WANTED'. Clicking the link, he read on.

'Looking for a little extra cash to supplement your income? Need something to help you scrape by? Being a food tester could be right for you!

Here at Fantasy Foods Ltd., we create delicious, unique, and innovative snacks day and night; that kind of productivity doesn't leave us much time for the most fun part: eating our scrummy creations! That's why we need YOU to do that for us!

Our requirements for the position are simple: that you have a functioning sense of taste and the ability to communicate your thoughts on our products through short written reports; that's it!

Each month we'll send you a box of tasty treats and all we ask is that you try all of them and email your reports to us by the time the next one arrives. You'll get to be one of the first people on the planet to try them, you'll be a key part in deciding if what we've come up with is worthy of being on a store shelf!

So, what are you waiting for? Apply now and get your feed on!'

Cowabunga sat there at his desk with a slightly furrowed brow: the money being offered wasn't exactly going to make him rich, but it would at least help him navigate life until the tourists returned, and it hardly seemed an onerous job. With a little nod to himself, he filled out the application form; now all he could do was wait.

Little changed in the week that followed: winter persisted, the tourists stayed away, and there was no word from either Mister Luther or his contacts; thus Cowabunga answered the postie's persistent ringing of the doorbell dressed in nothing more than his boxers and rubbing sleep from his eyes at being awoken prior to lunchtime. He perked up when he realised the reason for the intrusion, gladly accepting the weighty package and hurrying back to the couch to investigate its contents.

The lid of the box practically flew right off the moment the fox had sliced through the tape binding it shut with a claw, its contents clearly eager to become acquainted with their recipient. Though the packaging on display was dull, uniform, and clearly a placeholder while the company's marketing team came up with more compelling designs, there was no question of the variety with which Cowabunga had been provided: bags of chips, candy bars of all shapes and sizes, cookies, mini-cakes, crackers, and who knew what else were crammed into the box.

The fox fished out a packet at random, popped it open, and took a bite out of the chocolatey goodness inside; to say that it was an understatement: the caramel, the chocolate, and the as yet illusive other components all burst with flavour, coating his tongue with deliciousness. He chewed with a blissful grin upon his face, his eyes closed to savour the tastes bouncing around his mouth as he chewed.

By the time he came to swallow that first mouthful, the confectionary's richness had made itself apparent. Huffing slightly, now aware that this seemingly innocuous snack was going to be more filling than it looked, Cowabunga raised the wrapper to his lips again, driven to finish the treat in spite of any complaints his stomach might have by the promise of another round of deliciousness.

Over the following days, Cowabunga settled into a new routine: he had counted just over twenty different snacks inside the box that now lived permanently – and rather invitingly - on his coffee table, which meant that he would have time to consume and review one each day before the next shipment would arrive. Magnificent though each product proved to be, they were all so rich and filling – each in their own particular way – that the fox would have struggled to stomach more than that; that said, however, he couldn't help but notice that each item went down just that little bit more easily than the last.

Several weeks later and all that remained of this first batch of testers were a few errant wrappers that hadn't yet made their way to the trash and the box in which they had come, still sitting upon the coffee table but now disappointingly empty. Even worse than this for Cowabunga was the knowledge that he wouldn't be receiving another shipment for the best part of a week.

After a couple of days in which he felt slightly lost without the highly enjoyable and rewarding work to which he had become so accustomed, the fox happened to drag out his bathroom scales after showering one afternoon. The numbers ticked, slowly but surely making up their mind about how great their burden was that day; Cowabunga frowned slightly when, from beneath a light layer of dust, flashed the number 163: that was six pounds greater than he remembered being the last time he had checked, and there was no question that his new job and the lethargic lifestyle he had adopted lately were to blame. This was no great concern, however, for that could easily be fixed by hitting the waves again, dreary though the weather remained.

A trail of water drips, fading quickly as they evaporated, led from the apartment complex's parking lot, into the elevator, and out into the hallway of the sixth floor: though he had dried himself and his board as thoroughly as ever, a trickle nevertheless yet ran along the edge of the latter, hurling itself to the floor drop by drop once it could fight gravity no longer.

Turning a corner, the fox came to a halt when he saw what was waiting for him outside his apartment door: the fresh box of goodies for which he had been waiting, even larger than the first it seemed, clasped in the arms of a tall, smartly dressed shark lady. By her side stood a large, dark grey suitcase of the kind with rigid sides, wheels on the bottom, and a handle with which to drag it along.

"Mister Dudes?" she asked with a professional smile, turning in his direction as she heard the squeak of his wetsuit approaching.

Cowabunga nodded, considering her with some confusion. "That's right."

Her smile grew a little wider. She shifted the box to hold it under her left arm, proffering her large, manicured right hand to him. "Carla Marrazo, research and development officer from Fantasy Foods."

Though he shook her hand, Cowabunga remained baffled by her presence. "Nice to mee you, Miss Marrazo."

"Please, call me Carla!"

"Carla, right." He glanced from her, to the box under her arm, to the suitcase. "I don't mean to be rude or anything but, umm...why are you here exactly?"

She looked surprised at this question. "Didn't you receive our email?"

"I...don't think so," the fox answered, shaking his head as he dug into his memory.

"Oh. Well, this is awkward," she said with a light laugh, "See, we've got a new initiative at Fantasy Foods, which is to send an R and D expert out to stay with all our testers in order to gather more in-depth feedback."

"Oh..."

"Yeah, but if you weren't informed it doesn't seem fair to impose on you unannounced like this." She moved the box back to grip it with both hands again, holding it out to the fox. "I'll be on my way, then."

Cowabunga hesitated for a second, his free arm half rising to take the box from her, then shook his head with a smile of his own forming on his lips. "Come on in, Carla."

She blinked. "Are you sure, Mister Dudes?"

He chuckled, digging out his keys and unlocking the door. "Yep! I could do with the company, honestly."

"Would you mind if I showered quickly before helping you settle in?" Cowabunga asked as he led the way inside, Carla trailing her suitcase behind her, "I'm still a little uhh...briny."

"Not at all! I'll just take a load off for now, if that's okay with you."

“Mi casa es su casa now.” They shared a laugh, then went their separate ways: the fox to the bathroom, picking up a change of clothes along the way, the shark flopping down on the couch, the squeaky spring making itself known on impact.

“So, Mister Dudes,” Carla said as the fox returned, joining her on the couch with fur damp from the shower rather than the ocean, “or may I call you Cowabunga?”

“By all means!”

She smiled and resumed, “Cowabunga, one of the reasons Fantasy Foods has come up with this new initiative is because we’re branching out into new areas.” She slit open the tape on the box and lifted the lid, giving Cowabunga a good eyeful of the many, many varieties of goodies squeezed tightly into it. “The ones we’re most anxious for feedback are these,” she explained, extracting several bottles of what appeared to be different kinds of soda.

“Oh, they look good!” he exclaimed, glancing at her for permission before taking the one full of a familiar brown liquid, “What varieties have we got?”

“That one you’re holding is good old cola, though our own recipe. These others are orange, lemon, cherry, and even a chocolate-flavoured one,” she answered, indicating each of the other bottles in turn.

Cowabunga licked his lips, casting an eye over the array of fizzy before him. “Think I could try them now?”

“Of course! You’re free to have anything at any time you like, all I ask is that I be around for your initial impressions,” Carla said, her eyes sparkling with an odd kind of intrigue as she regarded the fox.

Nodding enthusiastically, Cowabunga leaped to his feet and hurried into the kitchen, returning with a precarious stack of five glasses. “Don’t want any cross-contamination,” he said in complete seriousness to the shark’s inquiring expression.

Withholding a laugh, Carla duly poured out a small measure of each drink into its own glass. “If you’ll notice,” she began, picking up the unpatterned vessel containing the lemon variety and swilling it gently for Cowabunga to examine, “it’s rather thicker than most sodas, almost syrupy. We wanted to push the boat out with these, invent a really original, dense drink that’s got all the flavour of a regular bottle of soda in a single gulp.”

All the more eager for a taste at this explanation, Cowabunga accepted the glass from her and took his first sip. He allowed the thick liquid to sit on his tongue for a few seconds, immediately struck by a powerful, but far from unpleasant hit of lemon before he gulped it down.

“Well?” Carla asked expectantly, pulling a notepad and pen from her suitcase.

“That is *good*,” the fox answered with obvious sincerity, reinforced by the second swig he took, “It tastes amazing, way more lemony than any other soda I’ve tried. It’s so rich too, but somehow also really...I dunno, I just can’t help but want more.”

Carla beamed, displaying many a shiny white tooth. “Couldn’t have hoped for a better review! Onto the next, then?”

And so, over the next several weeks, a new routine was established: Cowabunga would pick out something from the bountiful box of goodies and Carla would make careful notes on his reactions, often probing him for greater detail on certain topics. The benefit of having her as a permanent fixture in his apartment was that, whenever the supply of snacks was starting to dwindle, Carla could get in touch with her employers to request another batch; not only did this mean that Cowabunga had an essentially inexhaustible supply of chocolate, candy, chips, soda, and everything else of that ilk imaginable, but he also no longer had to ration his consumption as he had done with the original box and could eat and drink with gluttonous abandon.

One thing that seemed to have escaped the fox's noticed was that each order of snacks Carla placed came sooner than the last, owing to his stomach gradually habituating itself to the richness and density of Fantasy Foods' wonderous creations: whereas his very first box had taken him the best part of a month to munch his way through, the shark was now contacting the suppliers on an almost weekly basis. Unbeknownst to Cowabunga, this had not escaped Carla's notice and it was something in which she seemed to take a great interest judging from the regular references her reports made to her subject's apparently increasing appetite.

What Cowabunga couldn't fail to miss, however, was the effect that all this comestible indulgence was having on his body. The six pound increase his scale had registered at the end of his first month as an official taste tester soon became much more than just a number, instead being a fact laid bare for all to see. Though he ventured out in it less and less – perhaps due to embarrassment, perhaps simply because of an ever-increasing lethargy – every time he came to put on his wetsuit for a dip in the waves, the fox found it more and more difficult to zip up. At first his fellow hardy surfing buddies who chose to brave the continuing dreary weather made no mention of this fact, but once a noticeable outward curve had formed in the belly area of Cowabunga's neoprene they felt bound to broach the subject.

"Oh. I hadn't really noticed, honestly," the fox had said, looking down at his tummy which he now saw was obscuring more of the board on which he sat than it ought to have, "I'll get on that soon. Go for jogs or whatever."

But no jog ever occurred. Instead, ever more hours were spent sat on the couch with some new (or not so new) variety of delicious snack food to munch his way through while his wetsuit and surfboard gathered dust.

Carla, as the fox's roomie and, increasingly, friend, had the most privileged view of his expanding waistline of all. She had watched with great interest as Cowabunga had packed on the pounds, catching occasional glimpses of him on his way to or from the bathroom for a shower or changing for a rare escapade to the waves which gave her a fleeting view of exactly how pudgy he was becoming, a transformation she secretly thought was most desirable.

Two months after the shark's arrival, Cowabunga was forced to recognise that his weight was reaching crisis point. Alarm bells had truly begun to ring earlier that week when he had conceded defeat and bought newer, considerably larger underwear; the final straw had been when he had discovered that he was now totally incapable of zipping up his wetsuit.

That night, the two of them had sat themselves down on the couch with their dinners in their laps as usual; this time, however, Carla, perceptive as ever, detected an air of anxiety surrounding the fox next to her.

"What's up?" she asked, glancing sideways at him as she stabbed a piece of potato with her fork.

"Well..." he began awkwardly, merely playing with his food while his stomach twisted itself in knots, "it's about my weight. I think maybe I should lay off the snacks. Not, like, totally, just..."

"You don't like your weight?"

"I uhh...I guess I do find it a bit embarrassing..." Cowabunga answered, going a little red in the face.

Silence floated over them for several moments, during which the shark continued to eat at a leisurely pace and the fox nudged his dinner around the plate.

Then, after a short while, Carla spoke again: "I like it."

Cowabunga blinked, looking across at her. "You...what?"

"I like it. I like you getting fatter."

"You *like* it?"

She nodded, looking entirely genuine. Her eyes flickered down to the fox's paunch briefly, a paunch which now sagged onto his lap, limiting the space he had for his plate. "It's cute. You're cute," she said, pausing before adding, "I like you."

He stared at her, completely thrown by this unexpected revelation. He made no move to resist as she lifted both their plates from their laps and set them on the coffee table before them. Then she turned to face him, twisting her body to do so, shuffling a little closer on the couch.

"You're my cute little flabby foxy boy," she whispered. She leaned in even closer, close enough that her lips pressed against his. One hand lifted to cup his cheek, the other slithered up beneath his shirt, taking hold of a portion of the adipose that had gathered there since her arrival.

Cowabunga stared at her confident, pleurably half-lidded eyes, his face burning scarlet beneath his blue fur. As moments passed, feeling her kissing him tenderly while rubbing and kneading his gut, he himself relaxed into the intimate moment, wrapping his arms around her neck.

"Now," she said as their lips parted several seconds later, surprisingly business-like, "I think you should eat your dinner, don't you?"

The fox chuckled, smiling awkwardly at her. When her gaze didn't waver, the smile slowly slid from his face and he nodded, reaching for his fork.

"Ah ah," she admonished, pushing his hand away and picking up the fork herself, "Allow me."

Cowabunga watched, confused and bemused, as she impaled a chunk of potato and lifted it towards her face. When he failed to react to this prompt, she spoke again, "Open up, tubby."

He let his jaw slacken, the potato immediately slipping between his lips and onto his tongue. He began to chew automatically, his eyes on Carla's encouraging expression.

"There's a good boy," she cooed when he swallowed at last, rewarding him with a brief kiss, another morsel in his mouth the moment it had crept open again.

Cowabunga consumed every scrap on his plate that night, followed by several of the varieties of chocolate and candy he had already reviewed, rounded off with a tall glass of orange soda. By the time his work was done 'full' would not have even started to describe how his stomach felt: he sat slumped on the couch, his belly sticking out even further than usual and quite solid beneath the layer of blubber covering it; it gurgled at regular intervals, struggling to digest the most filling meal with which it had ever been provided. The fox was barely conscious: his eyes only half-open, Carla's voice drifting into his ears as if carried by the wind across a vast ocean.

"Such a good boy. You sleep well, now. There will be lots more to eat tomorrow. *Lots more.*"

"I'm ho- what's my butterball doing up?"

"B...Bathroom..." Cowabunga wheezed.

"You should really try to hold on until I'm here to help you," Carla admonished, leaning what had once been the fox's surfboard up against the wall and hurrying forward to assist him back to the couch.

A dozen small, shuffling footsteps later, Cowabunga crashed down into the permanent and ever-growing indentation in the cushions with an alarming creaking of metal reinforcements. Though his journey had not been far at all by normal standards, the fox was panting and sweating profusely, his neck fat squashing around his jaw as he slumped back.

"There were some good waves today," the shark said casually, moving the TV remote to within easy reach of her partner's thick, stubby-looking fingers, "Almost like they'd dropped you into the bay."

Cowabunga giggled breathlessly, then blushed as his stomach growled loudly.

"Music to my ears," Carla said with a wink, "I've got a surprise for you."

She disappeared from Cowabunga's view, something which was limited by his cherubic cheeks these days. He could hear her still, however, opening the front door and picking something up from the hallway outside. Then she strolled back into sight carrying two boxes: one so vast she could barely reach both ends at the same time, another smaller one perched atop the first, both labelled with the familiar logo of Fantasy Foods.

"They've outdone themselves with this shipment, wouldn't you say?" she laughed, wedging the larger box in the space between couch and coffee table, "But this is the important part." She opened the second box, carefully lifted out its contents, then set it on the fox's gut into which it sank an inch or so. "A little reward for reaching eight hundred pounds: a ten thousand calorie cake, baked specially for you."

He beamed up at her, the corners of his mouth dimpling into his cheeks. "Thank you!"

"Don't mention it, Blubber," she said with a smile of her own, stooping to kiss him and nibble at one of his extra chins. She straightened up again, reaching back to start unzipping her wetsuit. "I want it all gone by dinner, okay? Not a crumb left."

"Yes, Carla!"

The shark's fingers trailed through his hair as she passed him on the way to the bathroom. Left to his own devices for the moment, Cowabunga did what he did nearly every moment of every day now – as evidenced by a belly that pushed out beyond his knees when sitting, sagging towards the floor – he buried his muzzle into that almost impossible rich cake and began to eat.