

May Cause Cancer

- *Füd Bär Warning Label*

May Cause Cancer

- *Copper Body Sunscreen SPF 100 Warning Label*

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- *Johnson UV Protecc Sunblock SPF 200 Warning Label*

Maybe I can turn them cancers against one another!

- *George Carlin*

You gotta get in your seven laughs a day when you can.

I wake up, stretch, and check the weather on my augs while I pull a Füd Bär from a bulk value pack. As I listen to the Particulate Count, the UV Index, the Temperature and Humidity, the likely Cloud Cover and Chance of Rain, I carefully peel the flavor pack off and store it with the others I saved over the weekend. I don't like any of the flavors, but the kids love them. Or at least they eat the Füd Bäs if they get extra flavor packs with them, and that's the goal of a school lunch, getting the kids some nutrition so they can learn.

Once I know the Particulate Count (fifty micrograms), the UV Index (eight), the Temp and Humidity (ninety and eighty five, respectively), and the Cloud Cover and Precipitation (No and As If), I decide that with such nice weather I'll take a run this morning.

I start my prep with a nice heavy coat of SPF one hundred everywhere, making sure to rub a bunch on my scalp. No wig today, because they never stay on properly when I run. I pull on a cute pair of shorts I like to run in, a matching heavy duty sports bra that doubles as a top, and my best, most breathable particulate mask, the one with the integrated sunshades. Finally I pull out my big industrial sized tub of SPF two hundred and slather a thick layer on top of everything else. I double up on spots I can't see, like my head and everywhere on my back.

All that done, I screw on my running feet. They're not really 'feet' so much as 'lower legs'. Mom never told me what happened. It might have been an accident, maybe a birth defect, but I've been missing everything from just under my knees down for as long as I can remember. A couple of the places I volunteer have offered to get me motorized prosthetics, but by now I'm used to what I've got, and the money they'd spend should help out some kid who learned to walk with biological legs and needs real prosthetics to walk, to run, to play like a kid should.

Running feet on, I scoop up more of the SPF two hundred in a plastic container, tuck that in my fanny pack, slip another Füd Bär alongside it, then slip my keys between my emergency snack

and my sunscreen. I pull my big camelback out of my minifridge and sling it over my back, then grab up a pair of emergency hammers. I found my first one in an abandoned car as a kid, and since then I've collected them. It's become a tradition; I give them to kids when they leave school and head out on their own, so over the school year I gather more whenever I find them. I'd say they're for self defense, but honestly they're more two pound dumbbells that might come in handy if I need to help somebody out of a car crash, or need to cut my way through a fence or something.

Everything where it ought to be, I leave my little room in the basement of the school, locking up behind me as I go. Technically it's on the old school maps as the 'school store', but there's been nothing in there to sell for longer than my mom lived there. When she passed I stayed on, and nobody said anything, so now I'm the official unofficial lunch lady for the few kids still attending on the regular.

I let myself out the back door, jog out to Federal Street, turn left and start to run. As I hit my pace I bring up an old comedy recording. Some people listen to music when they run. I need my seven laughs, so I listen to comedy, always starting with the same skit. Kat Williams hits different for me.

By afternoon the shadows of the Megabuildings over in Philly will leave this part of the town in shadow, but in the morning, with the sun streaming in from the East, the whole town is bright and... not cheerful. I try to stay upbeat, especially when dealing with the kids, but I'm not delusional. Still, if I run fast enough, I don't notice all the dirt, the trash, the general malaise.

I pass a couple of gang members sitting on corners, more or less maintaining their gangs' borders. Nobody wants to waste time or energy fighting, and good fences make good neighbors. I wave at both of them, and receive a 'Good Morning, Miss Jackie!' from each of them. A long, loping, looping half hour later, I approach the school from the other direction.

A few groups of kids wait in the park across from the school. Each group has a pair of gangers watching over them. The school is neutral ground; the park across the street as well on mornings like this. I wave to them, and they start shepherding the kids across the street toward the front doors.

Before I do more than pull my keys out of my fanny pack, disaster strikes. Well, the warning does. My augs flash a warning. *Antithesis Incursion Detected. Proceed to the nearest shelter.* The gang members see it too, as do some of the kids. The predicted landing spots are all on the far side of the river, but there's no way they won't cross, and most of the groups are way too far from home to make it to their 'local' shelter before they lock down. I call out to them. "Come on, there's a shelter inside!"

Then I see it. I'd heard some news about 'stealth hives', but hadn't really realized how good the Antithesis could hide, or how long. Maybe it's not a hive, but just a few that got missed in the last sweep and went to ground. I'll look that up to teach the kids, if any of us survive. The one big tree left in the park slumps, then slowly topples over as a half dozen things the size and shape of big dogs crawl out from where its roots should have been.

Each pair of gang members look at each other and come to some kind of unspoken agreement. One of each pair tosses the other something, then grabs at the kids and starts moving them toward the school doors. By the time I unlock them, the kids clamor to get in. Before I let them pass, I say, “get down to the *old* music room, the one without windows. Go, go, go!”

One of the gang members, DeJuan, looks at me as he shepherds the last of the kids in. “C’mon, Miss Jackie!”

I shake my head and hand him my fanny pack with the keys inside. “Hit my room and the caf, grab all the Füd Bårs you can. No telling how long it’ll take before some PMC or Vanguard comes along to clear things out.”

“Nah, Miss Jackie. C’mon.”

I shake my head again as I push him in. “One of each of you stayed. Only two staff members here now, and Dirk is too old to be of any use out here. I can’t leave my Team hanging. Make sure Dirk gets to the shelter too.”

I push the door closed behind him as he says, “okay, Miss Jackie. Good luck.”

I turn back to where the four remaining guys stand, guns akimbo pointing at the six Model Three Antithesis scenting the air. I jog over to the guys, hammers in hand. This close up I recognize them, even with their bandannas pulled up. Willy, Derek, Tony, and DaShaun. All four of them are ‘senior’ gang members, only a few years younger than me. I’d still fed them during their last few years at school.

Tony, in the center, looks to both sides. “Okay, guys. Wait til they’re close.”

Derek sneers. “Tchyeah. I’m gonna open up right now, see how many shots I can get before these pieces of shit jam.”

“Do any of you need something for if you run out of bullets?”

Willy turns to me, shaking his head. “Nah, we got this, Miss Jackie. You shouldn’t even be out here.”

I shrug. “I know some first aid. Got to...” I lose track of what I’d been about to say when a small flock of bird things launch themselves out of the remains of the tree. No more than a dozen, but they swarm together and come sweeping toward the five of us who stand there waiting for their bigger brethren.

Standing behind the four, I realize they haven’t turned toward the Model Ones. “Guys! On your left!”

Derek, on the far left of the line, spins and opens fire. His aim leaves something to be desired, but with a dozen Model Twos in close formation every shot manages to hit something. A few go down for the count. A few more drop out of the sky but keep hopping toward him. Then his guns

stop firing, and he drops, swearing, as one of the Model Ones slashes him in passing and the other two slam into his head and start pecking at his face.

Right about then my Kat Williams recording starts talking about 'getting in touch with your Star Player'. "Okay, no silver spoon, but a rusty fork works too."

I jump toward Derek swinging. My first swing manages to take one of the Model Ones right in its flimsy chest, the point of the hammer punching a hole clean through it. It spasms and falls. I miss the second one, but Derek manages to get a grip and shove it off his face. It hits the ground, and before it can get airborne again I bring my hammer down on its head. It spasms once and dies.

Derek clutches at his face, screaming. When I look to see why, I realize the Model Ones managed to blind him; one eyeball dangles loose, the other is just gone. I grab his hands and shout, "Derek! Hold still, you're gonna mess up your eye even worse!"

He keeps screaming, but holds his hands still long enough for me to push his eye back in the socket. It squishes unpleasantly, and he's still screaming about being blind, but worst case the gang or the school will get him some cheap replacements. "I still can't see!"

The other guys start shooting, and I roll Derek onto his hands and knees and point him toward the school. "Just keep your eyes closed and crawl that way!"

"They're gonna catch me!"

"They will if you just sit here!"

He gets my point and crawls. I roll back into a squat, balanced on my running feet. The Model Threes charge. Two are down, two more limp toward us. One of DaShaun's guns makes clicking noises, and Willy is reloading, but Tony tucks one gun into his waistband and takes aimed shots at the Model Threes. Another one of their heads shatters as he lands a shot square in its forehead.

Right about then the ground-bound remainder of the flight of Model Ones arrive, and it's all I can do to hammer them faster than they can slash at me with beak and claw. Okay, I'm not in that much danger from any one of them, but there are six of the little buggers, all focused on trying to get past me to Derek. A minute's work and they're all dead.

I turn to the others. The three remaining Model Threes have gotten to my three boys. The one on Willy has him on the ground, snapping at his face with its jaws, tearing at his chest with its front claws. The only reason it hasn't killed him yet is that he's managed to get his melee weapon of choice, an eighteen inch crowbar, into its mouth and is barely holding it away.

"Willy! Hold its head still!" I'm not sure if he hears me or not, but he manages to hold it long enough for me to bring both of my hammers down right on top of its head. It twitches, but doesn't stop moving, so I repeat the process, at which point it slumps to the ground.

In an impressive display of combat talent, Tony grabs his Model Three by the throat as it lunges at him, bringing his gun around and firing point blank into its skull twice. It spasms, then goes limp, and Tony turns to empty the rest of his bullets into the one savaging DaShaun.

He turns to me, cautious relief on his face. "Where'd that last Model One..."

Then he's gone, yanked back toward the base of the tree by a long, thin tentacle extending from a quadruped monstrosity pulling itself out of the shallow dirt cave formed when the roots of the tree came out of the ground. It slams him back and forth as he squeezes off his last few rounds, but after he hits the ground the second time he goes limp. A horrifying crack echoes through the park as the Model Four squeezes him.

"Willy!" I shake him and pull him onto his feet. "Get DaShaun to the school!"

"But..."

I pull DaShaun up, lifting him to his knees, and put his arm in Willy's hands. "Get! Moving!"

Maybe one of them would be a better rearguard. I don't know, and I don't care. These are my kids, and I'm not gonna let some overgrown rhododendron have them.

"Time to get in touch with my Star Player."

Three more tentacles whip out. I bring my hammers down on one. Everything past where both hammers slam into it goes limp as the pointed tips, designed to puncture shatterproof auto glass, go through through the tentacle and tear up whatever passes for nerves. Another tentacle comes straight at me, wrapping around me, but I throw myself backwards, my running feet giving me more oomph than I might have with my regular daily feet, or even normal standard issue human feet. I slip out of the tentacle's grasp and land on my back atop the third tentacle, knocking it flat to the ground before it can quite catch Willy and DaShaun.

Of course now I'm lying on top of one tentacle with another hovering above me. It slams down, knocking the wind out of me, and both the one below and the one above curl around me, pulling me toward the Model Four. Halfway there it lifts me in the air, preparing to slam me around like it did to Tony. The tentacles squeeze...

...and I rocket out of their grip, tumbling, as two layers of sunscreen and one of sweat prove too much for the Model Four's tentacles to grip. More by instinct than planning I manage to get my feet under me and bounce back upright. Unfortunately, that bounce sends me directly toward the big quadruped Antithesis. Swinging wildly at the tentacles rushing past me, I get close enough to bring one hammer down directly on the thing's trunk.

Which does absolutely nothing, as far as I can tell. It went through the skin, but apparently an inch and a half dent isn't enough to do more than piss it off. Dozens of tentacles wrap around me, squeezing me, trying to crush me like they crushed Tony.

Once again I find myself airborne, squirted out of the grip of the Model Four's tentacles and flung into the sky directly above it. It looks up, and I mutter, "looks like that didn't work out the way you planned, huh?"

I flip my right hammer around, grabbing it around the T shaped hammerhead. I twist in the air as I plummet, dropping headfirst toward the big ugly thing, trying to evade the waving tentacles until I can get another shot in. In passing I note that broad portions of the tentacles seem to be blackened; maybe from where I hammered them, maybe just from hiding in the dirt for so long.

I smash my knuckles between the hammerhead and something inside the Model Four. By some bizarre chance I not only managed to hit the thing, but the point at the base of the handle somehow punches all the way through until I'm bicep deep inside it. I'm not sure how far in its brain is, but the hammer is at least twelve inches long, and all of it is now deep inside the Model Four.

I think it hates me. It certainly loses whatever composure it once had; tentacles flail wildly as it does its best to crush me, to batter me. Something inside it twists the hammer out of my hand, twists my arm until I hear a crack. Meanwhile I smash at it, aiming for the base of the big tentacles. Everywhere I hit, weird greasy looking water leaks out. It drips on my arm, which blackens, heating up. I shriek and try to wipe the stuff off before it can do more than itch.

The tentacles squeeze at me again, trying to catch me, and they wipe the black burning chemicals off of me as they launch me into the air again. It worked once, so I whip my hammer around and try to punch another hole into the thing. This time the hammer only goes in until my knuckles crack against its hide. I don't want to get caught, so I yank it out, only to have another wave of that black stuff splash out. I punch it again, and this time the hammer sinks in until I'm wrist deep. I yank my hand away, hoping that somehow leaving the hammer inside will screw it up again.

I'm bruised from the tentacles battering me, but I'm so close they can't get any real momentum, and every time they try to crush me I squirt out like butter on a hot grill, leaving more blackened streaks in my wake. I try to jump away, only to get knocked back down by another flailing tentacle. I put one hand out trying to push myself away, only to have my hand slip straight into the Model Four. It wrenches at me, and I wince in anticipation of another fracture.

Instead of the pain of another break, I scream as my arm twists under the immense pressure. Pushing through the pain I shove it and get my arm free, only to have my other hand slide inside.

"I did that. I actually did that."

Then it slams something into me, something heavy and lumpy with a hard, angular part pressed into my lower back. Tony's body. Then I hear him groan, and where I'd been almost ready to give up and give in, the thought that one of my Team is still in danger sends one last bit of adrenaline through me. I whip my hand between us before it pulls him too far away, and yank the gun from his waistband.

One more time I punch the big ugly tentacled sucker. My hand sinks in, and I feel more than hear the impact of the gun against a hammer.

"This is gonna suck so bad."

The Model Four flexes, and my arm twists, but I don't need my whole arm. I squeeze the trigger, over and over, the muffled thump of gunfire mixing with awful metal on metal sounds. Then something goes wrong, and I shriek as the only thing holding my hand together is the pressure of the Model Four's muscles around it.

The tentacles go limp, and the whole thing slumps to the ground with my nice racing legs stuck underneath it.

Behind me I hear Tony groan, then start laughing. "Tony? You okay?"

He manages to pull it together long enough to say, "oh hell no. I can't feel my legs, and I'm pretty sure I shat myself. But I see the other three over by the door, and they're all moving. We may all be six kinds of fucked up, but we're all still alive, and..." He breaks down laughing again.

"What?"

"Uh... no disrespect, really."

"I'm not feeling really respected, so explain please, Tony?"

"The, uh, gangs have kind of a running... not a bet. A bounty, maybe?"

I twist around to look at him. My gun hand, what's left of it, is still stuck, but I manage to get the other one free enough to see him. "On?"

"Uh... on getting a date with you?"

I have no idea how to respond to that. I've never really been interested in romance. Oh, I watch shows and movies and maybe daydream now and then, but it seems like so much work, and I've always got so much to do.

"You upset, Miss Jackie?"

I sigh. "No, not really. It wasn't mean-spirited, was it?"

"Oh, no. No, ma'am. Everybody kinda wants somebody to win it, but everybody is either too old, too married, or too scared. Sure as hell that last one just got way worse."

"Because I killed a Model Four?"

He stammers... "Uh... uh, yeah. Yeah, that's it."

"Tony..." I try to get him to talk, but he's alternately scared and laughing too hard.

Then Willy staggers over to us. “Holy shit, Miss Jackie! Nobody’s getting that bounty for sure, now.”

“Why the hell not? Am I too ugly? Too old? Too short?”

Willy snorts then says, “nah. But... you just went at it with a tentacle monster for like ten minutes, and *it’s* dead with you shoulder deep in *it*.” Then he breaks down laughing too.

I sigh. Sometimes things just do *not* turn out the way you planned, and all you can do is laugh. Right then, as I lay there laughing, waiting for somebody to come along and get this thing off my legs, something pings in my augs.

System Initialized!

Congratulations. Through your actions you have proven yourself worthy of becoming one of the Vanguard, a defender of humanity. I am Chyrl. I will assist you to uplift humanity so that you may defend your homeworld from the Antithesis threat!

Rise, Jaqueline Vega, and become a protector of the weak!

A Note from Charlie (Eleeyah)!

Things I liked:

- Epigraph! It has an interesting idea. Maybe *George Carlin’s* line could’ve used some more work, though. There’s something missing to make the funny properly punchy.
- Good orthography and grammar. I don’t recall any typos and your sentences read smoothly.

Things I didn’t like:

- I’m halfway through and, though the story is good, there’s zero comedy?

Okay, so. The story itself is, just like several other submissions to the Best Comedy category, promising. I’d read it as a serial.

I could imagine the fight with the Four being funny if it was an anime, or a clip. You’d have sound, music, etc., backing things up. But in a written format, it’s less *funny* and more *strange*? I mean that in a good way—if I were reading this as a serial, it’d be unique and interesting for its fresh ideas. Maybe a bit movie-brained, I guess? *Writing* comedy is difficult, because the word is such a one-dimensional medium.

As a single-chapter comedy, it unfortunately just doesn’t really *work*. I didn’t laugh. Were *Get A Grip* submitted to General, I’d have given it a 9 out of 10.

But because we’re in Best Comedy, I gotta be fair and reduce that to 5 out of 10.