

*Life Sucks, Death Bites*

LIFE SUCKS,  
DEATH BITES

**A Novel by Julie Kushner**

*Julie Kushner*

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Life Sucks, Death Bites: a novel / by Julie Kushner

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*Life Sucks, Death Bites*

*To my Aunt Ellen, who taught me never to shy away from all of the amazing gifts that life has to offer.*

*Julie Kushner*

Food Mart, Inc.  
2 Metro Corporate Drive  
Los Angeles, CA 90001  
Attn: Fred Thompson, CEO

Dear Mr. Thompson:

I'm not usually the type of person who writes letters like the one you are reading right now. OK, that's a lie. I'm exactly the type of person who writes these sort of letters. But that is not really the point . . .

"The point" is that my most recent experience at one of your Food Mart stores (62 Blueberry Hill, Los Angeles, CA 90015) was particularly harrowing. No, "harrowing" is not a strong enough word. "Downright terrifying" is more accurate.

It was like something out of that awful horror movie franchise. You know, the one where that crazy guy with the creepy mask, whose name I can't remember (Bulls Eye? Puzzle Piece?), makes people choose between doing something truly awful to another human being or dying an excruciatingly painful death. Of course, you couldn't pay me to watch such a movie. So, I'm afraid that I cannot be much more specific than that. But I think you catch my drift . . .

Anyway, as CEO of Food Mart, I believe that you have a right and a duty to know what is going on at your stores. Furthermore, as a consumer, I believe that *I* have a right and a duty to make *you* aware that at least one of your stores just so happens to be a toxic death trap.

This past Sunday, around 8:00 AM Pacific Time, just as your store was opening, I drove to Food Mart for my weekly purchase of groceries. Upon arrival, I exited my car, only to be attacked by a vicious shopping cart. Said shopping cart was clearly on the loose and out for revenge, against what I don't know. (Perhaps it was angered about being shackled to such a dangerous, ill-kept store).

Owing to the fact that it was a windy day (weather.com said winds could reach speeds of up to 50 mph that Sunday), and that none of your associates thought it worth their precious time to return said cart to its rightful holding pen, located mere inches away, the Errant Shopping Cart flew right into me at a frighteningly fast speed (50 mph?). By some miracle, the cart narrowly missed squashing my body into the side of my car, arms and legs akimbo, as if I were a large fly.

Have you any idea how many fatal accidents have been caused by shopping carts in the past year alone, Mr. Thompson? I'll spare you the specific statistics. But, rest assured, there were a lot . . .

You see, I am in the business of evaluating risk, so it is literally my job to know these things. If I told you what I actually did for a living I would have to kill you. OK,

that is a lie too . . . the “having to kill you” part, I mean, not the “risk evaluation” part. I just always wanted to use that cliché for some reason. But I digress. Let’s get back to the Toxic Death Trap, shall we?

Upon regaining my composure (In addition to almost dying, my morning brush with death nearly gave me a heart attack.), and selecting a shopping cart other than the one obviously intent on murdering me, I entered the store and hastened toward the vegetable aisle. You see, I’ve kind of been trying to lose a few pounds. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I’m fat or anything, just . . . plump . . . chubby . . . overweight. And, as far as risky behaviors go, being any of the three aforementioned things is probably right up there with bungee jumping, riding a motorcycle, or going hunting with Dick Cheney.

So I get to the vegetable aisle, and what do I see? This teenage girl, with long, obviously unwashed hair, is fondling the tomatoes with her unclean hands!!!! I stood watching the girl for nearly five minutes. In that time, she must have slimed every single solitary Food Mart tomato with her greasy fingertips.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, she then starts having this really loud grotesque-sounding coughing fit. So, there she is, sort of covering her mouth, but there are these little gaps between her fingers. You can actually see the phlegm and mucus escaping right through them, coating the tomatoes with a sticky layer of germs (probably the Swine Flu or the Bubonic Plague). After that, she goes back to fondling the tomatoes . . . AGAIN!

Now, to my knowledge, this woman was not an employee of Food Mart. At least, she didn’t appear to be wearing one of those red smocks they always wear (which, by the way, always give off an unlaundered look). But, nevertheless, shouldn’t there be some sort of policy against patrons of Food Mart touching unwrapped food with their bare diseased hands? Studies have shown that our hands are the dirtiest parts of our bodies. (You would think it would be our asses or our private parts, but that’s actually a common misconception . . .) If, by 8 AM, Food Mart tomatoes have already been contaminated with the plague once, lord knows what state they are in by noon, or 5 PM.

Needless to say, I avoided the vegetable aisle completely after that. I mean, I guess I could have sprung for one of those pre-packaged overpriced salad bags. But those things are so riddled with pesticides and growth hormone that you could hardly call them nutritionally sound. And my physician wonders why I can’t lose the pounds . . .

Suddenly overcome with an intense urge to wash my own hands, I finally located the “Employee Bathroom” in the corner of the store, but only after asking about five people where it was and getting no answer. (So, let me get this straight, Food Mart doesn’t have public restrooms? Better that your customers feel free to shit and vomit on the floor, after inevitably being taken ill upon eating bad tomatoes, right?)

In addition to smelling like the fetid armpit of a marathon runner, and being “unisex” (I despise unisex bathrooms because I am deathly afraid of tampons and the women who use them. I mean, really, what kind of perverted SOB would invent such a thing? A blood flotation device . . . on a string . . . *beyond* disgusting), there was so much dirt, empty rolls of toilet paper, and sanitary napkin wrappers (a bit better than tampons, but not much) on the floor that I thought I had somehow landed in the flatbed of a garbage truck instead of a non-public restroom in a very public establishment.

As I entered the bathroom, one of your employees was flushing the toilet (at least he flushed). However, when he went to wash his hands, I noticed that he turned on the cold water (not the hot water, mind you, which is necessary if you want to actually kill any germs on your hands) for only 5 seconds. FIVE SECONDS! That is barely enough time to find a working soap dispenser (2 out of the 3 in this bathroom were completely empty), let alone thoroughly clean your hands prior to the preparation and handling of food. Physicians say you should wash your hands for at least 20 seconds (roughly the length of time it takes you to sing the Happy Birthday song twice through) in order to properly cleanse your hands following a stint on the toilet. After this encounter, I knew I had to avoid, not only the vegetable aisle, but any unwrapped food prepared or handled by members of your staff.

Despite coming to Food Mart with a shopping list that was two notebook pages long, I arrived at the checkout counter with just a six-pack of Charmin Ultra Strong toilet paper (less likelihood of leakage), a tube of Crest toothpaste, and a package of pre-wrapped Hersheys miniatures: three items (eight, if you count each of the Charmin rolls separately, which, I don't). Either way, I was significantly under the 15 item limit required to use the Express Checkout Lane.

Apparently, however, I'm the only Food Mart shopper capable of counting, because the four people in line in front of me each had a shopping cart full of at least 16 items. One person had 32 items. I know because I counted them . . . twice. Instead of politely directing these cheaters to another aisle, YOUR cashier proceeded to ring each of them up . . . very . . . slowly . . . one . . . item . . . at . . . a . . . time.

To make matters worse, each of these patrons waited until the person in front of them had paid in full and exited the store to unpack their groceries onto the conveyer belt. And the person before me purchased, you guessed it, among other things, seven diseased tomatoes that she didn't even bother to put in a plastic bag prior to paying. She then spread her items out on the conveyor belt, so liberally, that there was no room for my items at all (not that I could possibly use the grotesquely tainted belt now). When it came to be my turn, I had to rush to unpack and bag my items (What? No one believes in having bag boys anymore?) so that I could be finished in time for the next person to be rung up. It was very stressful.

By the time I exited Food Mart that morning, I felt like I needed a stiff drink. But I abstained, because it was only 8:30 AM, and I am not foolhardy enough to drink and drive.

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So you see, the way things are now, I cannot possibly continue to shop at Food Mart if I wish to maintain my health and sanity.

Thank you for your attention to these matters. Hopefully, they can be dealt with in an efficient and expedient manner.

Cordially,

*Gerald Blumenstein*

*Julie Kushner*

**Chapter 1**  
**Happy Death Day to Me!**

*Risk Assessment Analysis:*

*Odds of being killed by lightning: 2,320,000 to 1*

*Odds of being killed in a plane crash: 52.6 million to 1*

*Odds of dying in your shrink's office during some ridiculous therapy session involving a vampire bat: Actually, that kind of shit tends only to happen to me . . .*

“Hey there, Mr. Blumenstein! How was your day?”

Every evening, when I return to my apartment building, the concierge, i.e. the lanky pimple-faced pubescent son of my landlord, asks me the above question, in his trademark faux – cheery, sounds like he’s been kicked in the nuts a few too many times, voice. On most days, I refuse to answer this inquiry, because, personally, I find it offensive. Now I know some of you readers out there are probably thinking I’m rude for snubbing Little Jimmy over there, who, after all, was just trying to be polite, right? Make “conversation”? Well allow me to explain myself.

On principle, I resolutely refuse to respond to any question where the asker doesn’t give two shits about my reply. Am I supposed to believe that Little Jimmy is truly concerned for my well being? That he is actually expecting me to provide him with any sort of response to his question other than “Fine and Dandy. How was yours?” Because, honestly, most of the time, my days are total and complete crap.

But does Little Jimmy want to hear about that? Does he want me to tell him all about the fact that I am nearly forty, and haven’t had sex in six years? That my boss hates me? That I’m a massive disappointment to my family? No! Little Jimmy wants me to lie, and I refuse to perjure myself for some snot-nosed kid.

And yet, on this particular day, circumstances have unfolded in such an extreme way during the past twelve or so hours, that I decide, just this once, to answer Little Jimmy. And to his inane question, instead of merely grunting or simply ignoring him, like I usually do, I respond, “Well, aside from being brutally murdered, my day was pretty fucking fabulous.”

Now, technically, this too is a lie . . . well, the part about my day being fucking fabulous, at least. My day, quite literally, sucked. Nevertheless, this was the answer I gave Little Jimmy, or whatever the twit’s actual name is, just to see how he would respond.

“Ha, ha. Good one, Mr. Blumenstein,” squeaks the boy wonder. “You have a great night,” he chirps after me, as I head across the lobby to the elevator.

See what I mean? You try to impart an important piece of personal information to someone, and all they do is laugh in your face. Sighing, I reach into my messenger bag, pull out a tissue, secure it tightly over my pointer finger with a rubber band, and enter the already open double doors of the elevator, which, thank the Lord, is empty. With my covered finger (Did you know that nearly 15% of all elevator buttons are covered with human feces?), I press the number 6, which responds to my command by lighting up. Or at least it would, if my dipshit landlord ever got around to fixing the elevator. Instead, the elevator door closes and I ride in utter and complete darkness for six floors, which I mind less today than I would under normal circumstances.

By the time I enter my apartment, I am *dead* tired (har de har, har). Upon removing the tissue from my finger, triple locking my door, and fastening the chain across it, I then bend down to put my “doorstop” (a six by four inch cement block) in

front of it. Seem a bit excessive to you? Did you know that the odds of having your apartment broken into by a gang of hoodlums are as small as one in 1,000? And if that was to happen to me, who do you think would come to my rescue? My 84-year old neighbor, Ms. Tingle? My dipshit landlord? Little Jimmy? I'd rather take my chances throwing out my back (which I've done about five times since I moved in) with the cement block. Thank you very much.

My apartment safely secured, I slouch dejectedly in front of the full-length mirror situated in my entrance foyer. Staring back at me is a pasty, prematurely bald (although, I gather, once you pass thirty the "premature" label is debatable) paunchy loser in an ill-fitting suit. "Still ugly," I mutter under my breath at my mirror image, who, having taken offense to my comment, glares back at me as if to say "Pot calling kettle . . ." or, whatever the heck that saying is supposed to be.

For the record, all those movies and books that would lead you to believe that people who turn into . . . what I turned into . . . suddenly become all "Brad Pitt" in the looks department are a crock of shit. That is unless, of course, you *are* Brad Pitt, in which case, more fucking power to you, I guess . . .

Without passing Go or collecting 200 dollars, I head directly to my bed and flop down on my mattress fully dressed. But I can't sleep, because my head is spinning and the wooden headboard hovering over me makes me feel as though I am sleeping in a coffin, which, while apropos of the situation, disturbs me greatly. Thirsty, I head to my fridge, and take a swig of milk straight from the carton (which is actually statistically shown to be more germ free than glassware, especially if you live alone like me). Even though the expiration date on the carton is still over a week away, the milk tastes rancid,

so I spit it out and spill the contents of the carton into the sink. I then pop open a can of *non-name brand* soda (I'll be damned if I have to pay over a dollar for a can of pop when the fifty cent cans are just as good), but it tastes terrible too.

Resolved to my fate, I reach into my messenger bag and remove a bulky mason jar I received earlier that evening from Dr. Freenly. Taking a deep breath, I open the jar, close my eyes, and pour its entire contents down my throat. The red liquid is warm and thick, but it feels good going down. So good, that I don't even mind it when some of the liquid trickles down my chin and chunky globule lands on and ruins my brand new shirt.

Once I have finished, I forlornly rinse out the empty jar and place it with the rest of the recycling. To my relief, I recall that Dr. Freenly has placed two more jars of the stuff in my bag. I extract them and place them on my counter, staring at them in confusion.

*Am I supposed to refrigerate these?* I think to myself. **Do NOT Refrigerate!** reads a handwritten label hastily secured on one of the jars. After putting the two jars away in a nearby cabinet, I slump down into a chair in front of my kitchen table and begin to ponder my last hours among the living . . .