

## Cookie Jar

Kevin drove spaced-out down the lightly populated freeway. His arm dangled out of the window, riding the natural current of the air, while his teeth clenched hard enough to bulge his temples out. Kevin's mind was stuck on the extra hours he had decided—actually, had been convinced—to stay at work. He didn't think it would be too bad, but he also didn't expect to run into as many issues with his reports as he did.

It wasn't that the reports were difficult—they were mind-numbingly easy—but in the middle of the first report, Kevin's computer needed to update and restart. Then, because he couldn't get the graph-image exactly where he needed it, the formatting was completely thrown off; and when he finally did get everything just right, three hours later, the mouse cursor began to spin and bounce wildly across the screen, closing everything with no chance to save. The mouse had also opened up five other programs during its freak out. It took Kevin about forty-five minutes to shut them all down, but he was good about keeping his cool: at least while he was at work.

Kevin's relaxation techniques and willpower were stronger at work for two reasons: one, he didn't want his colleges to realize how obnoxious and vulgar he really was; and two, Kevin was so infatuated with his boss, that he put his life-being into always working hard to somehow impress her into wanting him. The mouse incident had nearly ruined that facade though.

The situation taxed his breathing and positive-affirmation techniques beyond their limits. He needed to leave his office wearing a forced, full-tooth smile, with his hands clasped together, just so he wouldn't criticize and punch himself in front of the remaining staff. It wasn't the work he'd lost that made him agitated—a draft from an hour prior had been saved automatically—it was that he stayed in the first place.

Kevin wanted to get an early Friday in and suspected his boss would want him to stay and help pick up some slack, so he rehearsed a "sorry I can't stay speech;" but the boss had her ways.

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Kevin had started to pack up to leave when the boss came over and sat on his desk. Her black-and-white pin-striped dress hugged her thick, athletic curves. She pulled her full, red lips back into a warm smile and looked him straight in the eyes. Then she crossed her arms underneath her chest, pulled up *ever so slightly*, and made friendly conversation. Kevin instantly forgot his speech and was completely vulnerable. Five minutes later, he was working those extra hours: *sucker*.

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Remembering it all made Kevin want to punch the roof of his car, but in addition to breathing techniques, grinding his teeth, and positive thoughts of home, his agitation was being held back by the thought of his favorite vanilla wafer cookies. The round, golden, crispiness of those cookies was more than just condensed sugar for Kevin. When he ate them, his problems disappeared and fun, forgotten memories of childhood took their place. They made everything in life alright and knowing he was going to experience that kept Kevin's emotions in check.

Kevin pulled into the driveway and turned off his car but didn't immediately get out. Instead, he sat with both hands squeezing on the steering wheel. His agitation had grown like a microwaved marshmallow, hot, thick, and sticky. The feeling started in Kevin's chest, expanded up into his throat, and now felt like it was wriggling its way into his limbs. It felt like some other soul was growing inside of him and trying to take control of his body.

Every beat of Kevin's heart thumped him forward, while his brain repeated the word "none" in perfect unison.

*None. None. None.*

He closed his eyes, took a huge, lung-filling breath, and exhaled forcefully to push out the negative thoughts and feelings. If Kevin let them expand unchecked, he knew he would lose control and act like a complete asshole.

After another few, quiet seconds, Kevin slapped both sides of his face and opened his eyes. A fresh smile appeared, and the suffocating, marshmallow feeling had shrunken away. He laughed and slapped the dashboard before getting out.

Kevin slammed the door, stretched his arms out wide, and let the warm, summer air wash over his body. The deep-purple blackness of the night was spreading and rapidly consuming what was left of the magenta-orange sky. Kevin followed the remaining daylight colors to his left, where the sun was now setting more than half-way below the mountains in the distance.

Experiencing this exact moment brought an even larger smile to Kevin's face. Not only did he love everything about the sky, from all of its colors to all of its mysteries, but the sun now reminded him of his wonderful wafer cookies.

Kevin dropped his arms and headed toward the front door. As soon as the key slid inside the doorknob, the marshmallow feeling from before began to expand inside of his stomach, and the word "none" *exploded* in his mind.

Kevin staggered back while holding onto his stomach. He almost let himself punch the wall, but he suppressed the gooey negativity and shook his head clear. Taking in a fresh new breath, Kevin finally made his way inside of the house.

He shut the door hurriedly and raced into the kitchen. Kevin flicked the lights on, and his heart began to throb as he neared his cookie jar. He placed a hand upon its cool, blue, bald, ceramic head. The jar was shaped like a blue, earless, anime cat-character. The ceramic figure's arms were extended out to the side in joy and laying on top of those never dropping arms was the bright red collar, which was where the head came off at.

Kevin removed the head and smiled back at the ceramic-cats permanently painted on smile. He placed the head down on the counter and pulled the rest of its body toward him. Kevin closed his eyes and stuck his hand down into the ceramic body, but what he felt made his eyebrows furrow and his lip sneer sharply.

He pulled his hand out and examined the foreign object in between his pinched fingers. It wasn't the round, crispy, vanilla wafer cookie he was expecting. Instead, it was a long, yellow-white rectangle made of layers.

Kevin squeezed the cookie until it exploded into dust and let it fall to the floor. He reached back into the cookie jar and snatched out a handful of cookies. His eyes widened with fury at the sight of his full fist. His grip was full of rectangular, vanilla, shit.

As he stared unblinkingly at the imposter-wafers, his breathing slowed and became long draws. Each deep exhale expanded the dark, sludgy, marshmallow feeling throughout his body. Before he could stop himself, Kevin crushed the handful of cookies and tossed them all across the floor. Then he punched the refrigerator, which caused a few magnets to drop, and yelled up toward the ceiling, "Who stole the cookies from my cookie jar!"

Kevin tucked the ceramic body under his arm, flicked the kitchen lights off, and speed-walked to his roommate Sarah's door which was next to the staircase. He flicked his knuckles against the door a few times and tried half-heartedly to control his breathing while he waited.

He knocked once more, “Hey Sarah, you in there?”

He waited a few more seconds but could hear nothing on the other side. Kevin glared at the door, and then made his way up the stairs, two at a time. A dangling, lantern-shaped light lit the upper hallway.

Kevin made a quick right at the top of the stairs and ended up next to his roommate Jeff’s door. He banged on the door with his free hand, “Jeff, I know you’re in there you greasy, chicken nugget-looking mother fucker! Pause the porn and open up.”

Quick stomps could be heard on the other side of the door before it cracked open. Jeff squeezed his round, pasty face from out of his room, “What’s goin’ on Kevin?” His eyebrows were high with curiosity.

“Did you take the cookies from my cookie jar?”

“Huh?”

Kevin shoved open the door and scanned the room, “What’re you doing in here, having a threesome with your sex dolls?”

“What? Why would I waste money on more than o—,” Jeff stopped himself abruptly.

Kevin’s head snapped toward Jeff, “Look, Jeff, I don’t give a shit about what you spend your money on. Did you take the cookies from my cookie jar?”

Jeff pointed at himself, “Who me?”

“Yes, you!” Kevin barked.

“Couldn’t be,” Jeff spit back.

Kevin shoved the jar of cookies into Jeff’s face, “Then what the fuck is this, Jeff?”

Jeff turned his head back and opened his eyes to peer down into the jar. “Looks like there are cookies in there.”

Kevin's frustration took over as he slapped Jeff on the side of the head. "Give the man a prize, but why are *these* cookies in my jar, Jeff?"

Jeff rubbed the side of his head, "What's your problem? I don't know how those got in there. I've been up here all afternoon painting my GigaAxe figures."

Kevin closed his eyes and began to fake laugh, "Jeff, you and I both know these aren't the kind of wafers I eat." When Kevin re-opened his eyes, the fake laugh, fake smile, and any trace of "fake niceness" were gone. His glare burned through Jeff, "You and I also know, these are *your* favorite kind of cookies!"

Jeff's eyes darted to the floor as he pulled his arms behind his back, "It's not what it looks like."

Kevin spoke in a slow, deep tone, "Jeff, I'm gonna give you one chance before I dump these on your floor and grind them into the carpet."

Jeff looked back up at Kevin and could see no sign of joking, "Okay, look, yeah those are my favorite kind of cookies, guilty, but like I said, I've been up here painting figures all day. Why would I put the wrong kind of cookies in your jar instead of just bringing them up with me?"

Kevin remained silent.

Jeff crossed his arms and tilted his head, "Besides, If I were to take your cookies, which is against your number one rule, don't you think I'd replace them with the same kind of cookie?"

Kevin hugged the jar to his chest, "Yeah, I guess I should give you some credit."

Jeff sucked his teeth loudly in annoyance. Then he reached into the jar and pulled out a cookie. He talked while he chewed, "Hmm, these don't taste like the regular ones."

Kevin leaned forward, "What do you mean?"

Jeff's tongue was in between his lips and gums, "It tasted more like the sugar-free kind."

Kevin nodded but didn't know exactly what to make of the new information. Jeff noticed the reaction and connected the dots for his friend, "Well if these were mine, and they're not, I wouldn't buy the sugar-free ones, but last time I checked, Tim was trying to cut back on his sugar."

Kevin snapped his fingers and pointed at Jeff, "Of course!"

He turned right, away from Jeff, and made his way a few feet down the hall. He knocked on the first door he came across, "Hey Timbo, you in there?"

Kevin waited a few seconds, and then put his ear against the door. He thought he heard something, so he knocked again. A muffled yell came from the other side, "Yeah, yeah..."

The door pulled completely open, and a draft of hot, stale, body odor washed over Kevin's face. Tim had terrible hygiene and was bone-thin because he had terrible eating habits too. Tim crossed his arms and beamed a wide, open, innocent smile because he couldn't smell himself and failed to realize why Kevin, or anyone else, looked at him with initial disgust. "How's it goin' Kev-o?"

Kevin was about to speak but had to literally bite his tongue before he burst out with something too hurtful. Tim was a young guy—about five years younger than anyone else in the house—who had a terrible past but still managed to stay optimistic about everything. He was also extremely lazy most of the time, which were the thoughts currently racing through Kevin's mind.

Kevin closed his eyes and cleared his throat, "Tim, did you take the cookies from my cookie jar?"

"Did I what?"

Kevin opened his eyes and saw Tim's smile had disappeared. "Did you take the cookies, from my cookie jar?"

"Who, me?"

"Yeah, you."

"Couldn't be. You know I'm trying to cut back on my sugar."

Kevin smiled and drew out one of the rectangular cookies, "Oh, really? Then what's this?" He put it closer to Tim's face.

Tim pulled back a couple of steps and laughed nervously, "Looks like a wafer cookie, Kev."

"Yeah, it does. A *sugar-free* wafer cookie."

Tim's knees slacked at the sound of "sugar-free." His nervous laughter increased, "Well, you know those still have sugar in them, don't you?"

Kevin's eyebrows furrowed. The angry marshmallow feeling inside of him had turned into curiosity, "Really?"

Tim's scared demeanor immediately changed into relaxed confidence as he whipped his phone from out of his pocket. "Oh yeah, I'm sure of it." A few quiet seconds went by as they both waited for the search to load. "Yep, right here, three of 'em: malted barley flour, maltodextrin, and cornstarch."

Tim turned the phone in Kevin's direction for him to check out. Kevin read the ingredients and began nodding his head. The new information had turned the evil marshmallow feeling into amazement.

Tim pulled the phone back and put it in his pocket. "I also wouldn't take your cookies because you turn into a huge asshole. I learned my lesson last Girl Scout cookie season."



Kevin was still distracted and nodding about the three sugars in the ingredients of the “sugar-free cookies.” His anger was cooling off and shrinking back toward his gut. Upon hearing “Girl Scout season,” Kevin remembered back to the thin-mint fiasco of last year and *knew* Tim had learned his lesson. He was instantly convinced that it couldn’t have been Tim.

“Alright dude, I’m so—”

Kevin tilted his head and looked past Tim. He saw a familiar lime-green can with red print. “What’s that?” Kevin thrust his chin toward the can.

Tim followed Kevin’s stare, and when he saw the can, he yelped and tried closing the door. His nervousness returned ten-fold, “K-Kevin, l-listen to me, man. I’m only cutting back on sugar so I can drink soda without feeling guilty.”

That explanation meant nothing to Kevin. The gooey-rage had erupted from his gut and began to fill his body with a heavy darkness.

Tim could see his time was running short. If he was going to convince Kevin, it had to be now. He grabbed desperately onto Kevin’s shirt, “Why would I fill it up with the wrong cookies, huh Kevin?” Tim pleaded. He was almost on the verge of tears, “Come on, why would I get the wrong cookies, Kevin? I’m lazy, not stupid!”

Kevin’s right brow arched up slowly. There was that obvious realization again: why would Tim or Jeff fill the jar up with the wrong kind of wafers?

Kevin squeezed his jaw shut to hold back the many comments he had waiting for Tim. He stared hard into Tim’s water dripping eyes, but he and his gooey-rage both knew it couldn’t have been Tim. He scoffed and turned back toward the stairs, “At least open up a window, it smells like hot piss in there.”

As Kevin descended the stairs, each step cooled and hardened his anger. It didn't really matter who took his cookies anymore. This was a shitty day, and he just made it worse by acting like a huge douche bag.

Kevin thought about how typical this was and wondered why he always got so worked up about everything: *over some cookies, come on*. He frowned and shook his head slowly.

Kevin dragged his feet all the way to the kitchen and stopped when he got to the entrance. He flipped the kitchen lights back on, and the crushed wafer cookies from earlier still lay scattered all over the floor. The sight of them prodded the anger still lingering inside of Kevin, but he couldn't muster up enough willpower to ignite the small ember of rage.

He walked over and placed the headless cookie jar on the counter. The crumby floor had Kevin entranced. *How's a twenty-nine-year-old man gonna get upset over some cookies and then make a mess like this?*

Kevin reached mindlessly into the jar. He knew it wasn't going to be his type of wafer entering his mouth, but Kevin was going to man up and enjoy the cookie anyway. He placed the cookie halfway into his mouth and let the vanilla wafer skin sit on his lower lip and teeth. He lowered his top teeth down into the first layer and continued crushing through the next four layers until his teeth met.

Kevin's mouth twitched back as the bitten-piece floated toward his back molars. The vanilla layers had been a bit stiff, and the crème layers tasted too sugary, Kevin was convinced layers of enamel were being stripped away.

His molars crushed the piece apart, and each new crunch made Kevin's lips tighten in disgust. The vanilla layers had been totally stale and were now stuck to the roof of his mouth and also gunked up within his teeth's crevasses. The crème layers dissolved and left a waxy film all

over his teeth. Kevin shook his head violently and spit the disgusting, stale-layered sandwich all over the floor with the rest of the crumbs.

He chucked the remaining half onto the floor and grabbed his cookie jar. Kevin flipped it over and dumped the remaining wafers onto the floor. That stale cookie-half didn't just reignite the rage-flame inside of Kevin, he could feel the heat radiating out of himself.

He began to yell and stomp his feet down on the cookies. After there was no more crunching, Kevin kicked wildly at the floor and sent crumbs flying all over.

He didn't know how long he stomped back and forth through the kitchen while grunting and speaking condescendingly to himself, or how long Sarah and her boyfriend had been watching him; but when he finally noticed them, Kevin's brain erased everything prior to him turning the kitchen lights on, and his anger balled up and exploded into embarrassment.

Kevin's brain finally managed an awkward wave and said, "Hello."

Sarah's boyfriend scanned the kitchen floor, "Jeez babe, you weren't kidding."

She walked toward Kevin with a pouting frown and her arm extended out, "Oh my gosh, Kevin, I am so sorry."

Kevin backed up and bumped into the sink. He looked back at it, and then back at Sarah and laughed. Kevin didn't know why Sarah should be apologizing to him. "What're you talking about?"

"I ate the cookies from your cookie jar."

Kevin's jaw dropped

Sarah reached into a grayish-black grocery bag, but before she could pull anything out, Kevin lunged at her. He snatched the bag from her hands and threw it to the floor.

He got in her face and yelled, "*You* ate the cookies from my cookie jar!?"

She shrank away from him, and before Kevin could get any closer, her boyfriend, Gavin, darted in between them. "Alright dude, you need to chill."

The two men strained their eyes staring at each other.

Kevin's voice graveled through his sneered lip, "What're you gonna do about it?"

"I practice martial arts, and I'll break your fuckin' arms."

Kevin used his eyes peripheral vision to examine Gavin. His Tribulation shirt fit snugly around his muscled chest, he was a few inches taller, and he had a thick, brown mane of hair touching his shoulders. He also wore a small, shark tooth necklace.

Kevin raised his arms up and backed away. "Alright, alright. I was about to say some stupid things. You're wearing some stupid things."

"What's that?" Gavin stepped toward Kevin.

Kevin side-stepped and crushed whatever was in the grayish-black bag. His head snapped down and then back to Gavin. "We can talk this out, can't we?" Kevin asked sheepishly.

Gavin raised his fists and blew into them, "Mic check."

Before Gavin could throw any punches, Sarah came around and pushed his fists down. "Knock it off Gavin."

She bent down and picked up the grocery bag. She reached in and pulled out a mashed-up, yellow box with shining, wrinkled, red lettering. Kevin became totally entranced at the sight of it. She grimaced at the condition of the box, but when she looked at Kevin's face, he didn't seem to care.

"I know it's against your number one rule, but I was hoping to make it back before you found out." She explained as she handed over the crushed box to Kevin.

He stared in awe at the box while Sarah continued explaining. “I was just craving some sweets and had a few cookies here-and-there, and before I realized it, they were all gone.”

Kevin barely listened as he wrestled the inner-plastic bag open.

“Then Gavin was coming over, so I texted him to grab some on his way over.”

“It just said vanilla wafers,” Gavin interjected. His crossed arms bulged, “I didn’t expect the wrong cookie to cause a meltdown.” He scoffed.

The bag tore open and cookie-pieces exploded everywhere. A large bubble of hate grew inside of Kevin’s stomach as he looked over at Gavin with his lip curled up.

Gavin held his arms out to the side, “What, are you gonna start bawling again?”

“Gavin!” Sarah turned back and pinched a huge wad of his shoulder.

He yelped, and the couple started bickering. A sweet, vanilla scent pulled Kevin’s attention back down to the mess of cardboard, plastic, and cookies in his hands. The bubble exploded, but it was joy that burst out instead.

Right on top, in the center of all the destruction, was one, unbroken, circular, slightly-domed, golden-brown, wafer cookie. Kevin plucked-up the cookie and tossed it into his mouth.

The sweet taste brought back an old, obscure memory of Kevin sharing his vanilla wafers with a girl at school. They were both in first grade and had the same teacher. They would hold hands at recess, and she even kissed him on the cheek once. She moved away that weekend, and that was the last time he saw her. Kevin was sad at first, but when he realized that meant more cookies for himself, he shrugged and forgot all about the girl.

After the memory passed, Kevin felt cleansed. His eyes opened, and his mouth pulled back into a smile that showed all of his teeth.

Sarah tilted her head toward Kevin, “Well?”

“Well, what?” Kevin asked dreamily.

“Do you want me to help you clean this up?”

Kevin looked down at the huge mess of crumbs littered on the floor. “No, don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure? I mean I did break rule numb—”

Kevin waved her away, “Don’t worry about it, Sarah. This is my mess. Go do whatever you and *Gavin* were gonna do.” He glared over at Gavin.

“You sure?”

Kevin turned back to Sarah with a warm smile, “Yeah, it’s not that big of a deal.”

Sarah shuffled over and kissed Kevin on the cheek. Then she raced back, grabbed Gavin, and headed for her room.

Kevin waited until the blushing subsided before he grabbed the broom and dustpan. As he swept the floor, Kevin felt light with relief and smiled with satisfaction. The mystery of “who stole the cookies from the cookie jar” had been solved and turned his shitty day into a fantastic one.

He’d apologize and make everyone a big breakfast the next morning. Things would be fine. They always were with vanilla wafers.

Once Kevin finished sweeping, he headed upstairs to his room. He thought back on all the hectic events of the day and tucked the memories away somewhere in his brain. When he made it into his room, Kevin fell back onto his bed and smiled at the ceiling. He was giddy at the thought of the sweet, vanilla wafers pulling out those memories in the future and reminding him of how ridiculous he could be sometimes.

Kevin closed his eyes and laughed: *completely ridiculous*.