

Peanut Butter Cookies

by Nate Worrell

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My taste buds squealed like teenage girls in the presence of pop star. I reached for another peanut butter cookie, but Dottie slapped my hand.

“What are you thinking?” She asked. Her eyebrows took the shape of question marks.

“I simply wanted another cookie. They’re yummy.” I replied.

“They’re awful.” Dottie scoffed. “Just look how hideous they are.”

The tray looked like a formation of cookie soldiers. Each one was a perfect circle, and equally spaced from the one next to it. I’m not a chemist, but I’m sure any lab result would prove that the butter, flour, and sugar were perfectly proportioned.

“They look fine to me.”

“You can be so dense sometimes.” She stormed into the living room.

I stared back at the tray of cookies with a more discerning eye. As I turned a cookie over in my hand, I heard an airy female voice.

“Hello Andy. Do you like my cookies?” I looked up at the slender metallic face of Grannie Jane’s Robot Caretaker. I smiled at the countenance I knew so well. It seemed like only yesterday I was helping ElderCare write her code.

“They’re marvelous RC, but Dottie doesn’t agree.” The robot’s head drooped, a programmed response to dissatisfaction. “Don’t worry, she’ll be fine. Besides, you really put a good shine on these floors.”

RC purred, glided to the refrigerator, and poured me a glass of milk. I took the beverage and went after Dottie.

She sat at a small table, playing dominoes with Grannie Jane. Well, she was trying to play anyway. Grannie had her arms folded across her chest, her face pinched, and lips puckered.

“I promise Grannie, these are the same dominoes we always play with.” Dottie lied.

Last week’s game went poorly. Grannie Jane couldn’t wrap her gnarled fingers around the tiles. The stubborn old bird wouldn’t let Dottie help her, and in frustration knocked all the pieces to the floor.

I sensed a redemption opportunity. “Dottie, sweetheart, I swapped the tiles and forgot to tell you. I figured since Grannie always wins, she probably has her set marked. I thought I’d level the

playing field.” The two women looked at me and the corners of their mouths turned up ever so slightly, perfect genetic replicas. Grannie’s arms unfolded and the game began.

“You two get married yet?” Grannie asked. “I ain’t gonna be around forever you know.”

Dottie looked in my direction. I knew what answer she wanted to hear. We’d been down this road before. She dreamt of having a family and growing old together. I dreamt of flying burritos. Thankfully, RC entered the living room, saving me from having to answer the question.

“Time for your medication Miss Jane.” RC extended a plastic cup.

“Get that away from me you worthless toaster. I already took my meds.”

“Please stay calm Miss Jane, your blood pressure is rising and your pulse is quickening. You are probably thinking about yesterday. It’s very understandable that you might get mixed up.” RC’s voice was mellow, and I thought I detected the faint odor of lavender. The aromatherapy module probably initiated due to Grannie’s vitals.

“I ain’t mixed up. Swallowing those pills is like trying to swallow mice. I wouldn’t forget that.”

“You forgot about leaving the oven on last week.” Dottie said.

Grannie Jane scowled at her granddaughter.

“My mind ain’t going. I know I turned the oven off then, and I know that I took my pills today. If everyone thinks I’m losing it why don’t you just shoot me in the head and be done with it.”

“Grandma!”

“I’ll check into it.” I intervened. “Come with me RC.”

We made our way back to the kitchen. I grabbed another cookie. They kept getting better.

“Show me your med inventory and dispersion log.” RC’s midsection illuminated and displayed a grid of information. I compared the schedule against medicine dispensed. Grannie Jane was right, RC did give her pills this morning and she wasn’t scheduled for more until this evening.

“RC, why are you trying to give Jane more medication? You already gave her a dosage this morning.”

“Jane’s blood chemistry doesn’t register the presence of the narcotics.”

“So you assume she didn’t take them?”

“That’s correct Andy. I must ensure that my patient follows every protocol for their wellbeing.”

“I see. Is there any possibility that the sensors are bad?”

"I'm sorry Andy. I don't understand your question."

"Can you show me the status of Jane's Nano-sensors?"

RC's belly flickered to another reading. The sensors showed no impairments and reported operational levels at 90-100% accuracy. I thought I'd test them out anyway. I brought the cookie tray into the living room.

"Care for a cookie Grannie?"

"Get those things out of here." Dottie swiped at the tray.

"Oh relax. I need to test RC's sensors. What's your deal with these things anyway?"

"They're not how Grannie used to make. They're imposters." I looked at the peanut butter disc sitting in the weathered palm of Grannie Jane's hand. Its smoothness seemed out of place against skin as wrinkled as a crumpled paper bag.

"Well, maybe she can teach you how to make them." I let them get back to their game and went to see if the sensors would detect the spike in blood sugar.

"RC, have you detected any changes in the blood composition?"

"Yes, Andy. Glucose levels are elevated."

The sensors worked. Maybe the medicines were bad.

"RC, when were the prescriptions last filled?"

"Three weeks ago."

"Do you have any spare Nano-sensors?"

"Yes I do." A slot on RC's arm slid open to reveal a thin syringe.

"Calibrate these sensors to your system. I'll be right back."

I went to the bathroom to retrieve the bottles of pills. I poured some water in a few glasses, and emptied the contents of the syringe into them. I opened the first bottle of pills and dissolved one into the glass.

"RC is there dopamine in this glass?"

"No, Andy. There has only been an increase in dextrose." Sugar pills. I proceeded to test the other bottles, taking half a dozen pills from each one. Every so often one would register correctly, but the vast majority were frauds.

"RC did the latest pills come from a different place than usual?"

“No. They are direct from ElderCare Headquarters.”

“Can you pull up the order records?”

I started scanning the history. At first glance, it looked normal, but then something caught my eye. The last record had been modified.

“RC, why were your orders altered?”

“The ElderCare mainframe detected an error and changed them.”

“What error?”

“Jane is no longer considered maintainable.”

No longer maintainable. It was the polite way of saying Grannie Jane didn't have much time left, usually less than a month. I chewed on the inside of my cheek.

Dottie rapped her knuckles on the doorframe.

“Grannie needs RC to help her to the restroom and to get ready for her nap.”

RC nodded dutifully and left us alone.

“What did you find out?”

“Sit down.” I took a breath and looked into Dottie's eyes.

“Your grandmother is going to die.” I told her.

“I know. That's why we visit each week.”

“That's not what I mean. This could be our last visit. Her medicines have been exchanged for placebos.”

“What? Since when? Why would that happen?”

“I don't know, but I have a guess. Why did we buy RC for your grandmother.”

“It was cheaper than other homecare, especially since you got the discount for writing the code.”

“Right, but it's not something for nothing. ElderCare saves money as well. The primary reason behind the robotic caretaker movement was to control medical costs. But what's got me all jazzed up like a caffeinated kangaroo is the possibility of what healthcare providers and insurance companies could do with the data collecting potential of the RCs.”

“Isn't that a violation of privacy?”

“Not really. It doesn’t matter to the computer whose data it gets. Jane is just a number. RC passes Jane’s medical data to the Eldercare mainframe. The computer analyzes the data against all the rest of the information it gets from all over the world. The mainframe is designed to find efficiencies. It can look in more detail than any human ever could, and it is searching all the time.”

“Okay, what does this have to do with Grannie?”

“What if the mainframe knew when someone was going to die?”

Dottie sat there. Tears welled in her eyes. “How could a computer know anything?”

“Technically, it doesn’t. However, it searches for patterns, and has enormous capacity for memory. Imagine a scenario where the computer recognizes a pattern that indicates imminent mortality. Then, in order to save costs, it might cut meds since they aren’t going to do anything for the patient anyway. Efficiency is programmable. Ethics aren’t.”

Dottie shook her head. “But, someone has to be watching this? By pulling the meds, aren’t they facilitating her death?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“What are we going to do?”

I took her hand. “I’m going to reach out to the people I worked with when we coded the RCs, see if this is really what’s happening. Right now, it’s just my theory. More importantly, your grandmother will need you. I don’t know how much time she has left.” I was about to give her some baseless reassurance when I saw the glasses of water I used for the med tests.

“Wait a minute. I have an idea. We’ll fake it.”

“Huh?”

“If we make RC take your readings instead of Jane’s, the system will think she’s no longer terminal. The pills will come back and Grannie won’t have to worry about the whims of a computer algorithm.”

“Will it work?”

“We have to try.” I was about to call for RC, but there was a knock at the door. Dottie and I exchanged glances. I looked through the spyhole and saw two men in ElderCare uniforms. I cracked the door.

“Can I help you?”

“We’re here to retrieve Jane Temple’s RC.”

“Is there a problem with it?”

“No sir. Miss Temple is no longer maintainable and as such, no longer qualifies for an RC.”

Dottie bolted from her chair. “Get the Hell away from her! You don’t know what you’re talking about. My grandmother is healthy as ever.”

“With all due respect ma’am, that’s not our call. If you refuse to forfeit the unit, you will be assuming full operating costs of the RC.”

“Fine. Charge me all you want. You aren’t going to make my grandmother suffer any more than she has to.” The men had Dottie sign some paperwork and departed.

She turned to me, her body trembling. I wrapped her in a hug and let her weep.

We stayed at Grannie Jane’s for the next few weeks. Dottie assumed the Nano-sensors, but new medicines never came. Jane’s health deteriorated rapidly despite the constant attention of RC and Dottie. She eventually stopped eating, and could only stay awake for a few minutes at a time.

I did all I could. The ElderCare programmers stonewalled me. Not to be deterred, I did some investigating and found that Jane’s experience was not unique. I collected dozens of stories of seniors deprived of medication in their waning months.

A class action lawsuit and exposure in the press finally caught ElderCare’s attention. They claimed it was a technical glitch, expressed their deepest regrets, and explained they always intended to provide care until death. The court date is next week. Mostly likely, they’ll escape with only having to pay some sort of settlement.

To help pass the time, Dottie baked cookies. She baked batch after batch – chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, ginger snaps, and snicker doodles. Until today, there was one type of cookie she avoided.

I woke up to the distinct smell of roasted peanuts. The kitchen glowed with buttery morning sunlight. Dottie rested on a stool amidst cracked eggshells and empty measuring cups. Moist channels of fallen tears streaked flour dusted cheeks. I came up to her and kissed the back of her neck. She raised her head and tried to speak.

“She’s ...” a cry caught in her throat.

“I know.” I wrapped my arms around her.

Dottie released a long sigh and a few more tears.

“I was checking on her last night and she woke up. She whispered my name. ‘*Dottie,*’ she said ‘*I’m going to be okay. They made my favorite cookies.*’ Then she inhaled deeply and that was her last breath. I could tell from the smile on her face that her pain was gone.”

She reached for the freshly baked cookies, taking one for herself and handing one to me. It was thick and lumpy. I took a bite and experienced crunch juxtaposed with chewiness. Yet, I could also taste

flavors that came from a place far beyond any recipe. The richness of heartache and laughter mixed with tenderness and strength.

“I made these so I could share one last moment with her. How do they taste?”

“Heavenly.” I whispered. The corner of Dottie’s mouth turned upward, ever so slightly.