

COOKIE MONSTER

By

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“Poor Woody,” Harry wrote. “He wants to be funny because he knows life is a big joke, but it’s hard being funny when you’re getting old and every thought in your head is this enormous struggle between doing what you want to do and the guilt you feel about doing it.”

In former days, Harry would have ripped the paper from his aging Underwood typewriter, crushed it into a ball and tossed it into the metal wastebasket, a jump shot away from the old oak library table that served as his office desk. At least then there was some satisfaction knowing that scoring a point made up for the utter self-loathing that accompanied every dreadful opening paragraph. In this era of modern technology, however, Harry pressed a few keys on the keyboard of his sleek laptop computer and the words were gone. But the blank white screen that confronted him offered no satisfaction, nothing that could compare with the joy of making a basket.

As he continued staring at the screen, his fingers hovering over the keyboard waiting for a fresh idea, the words “Good morning, Harry,” suddenly appeared on the screen. Harry looked at his hands resting on the keyboard and quickly withdrew them. *Could I have accidentally typed that?* he wondered. He continued staring at the screen but no other words were forthcoming. Reluctantly, he placed his fingers on the keyboard and pressed the Enter key. The cursor appeared on a new line and Harry typed

the words “Good morning” with a question mark. He immediately withdrew his hands from the keyboard. He waited, but there was no response. Breathing a sigh of relief, after several seconds Harry again put his fingers to the keyboard as if to type. This time the words “I’m sending you a cookie” appeared on the screen.

Cookie? Harry knew about cookies on the Internet, and he vaguely knew they had something to do with the ability to transfer information between computers. He knew that when he logged on to certain web sites a “cookie” identified him to a server somewhere in cyberspace. But usually cookies didn’t involve messages, particularly greetings. And anyway, Harry wasn’t connected to the Internet at the moment. He checked just to be sure.

“Who is sending me a cookie?” Harry typed, reluctantly, because he didn’t particularly like entertaining the thought that he was “chatting” with his computer. When he finished typing, he withdrew his hand from the keyboard as he had done earlier, but there was no response, that is until he put his fingers back on the keyboard. As soon as he did, the words “We’ve been watching you,” appeared on the screen.

Once again, Harry reluctantly typed “Who is watching me and what do you want?” He felt foolish asking his computer questions.

“Let’s just say we’re a box of your favorite cookies,” the computer replied.

“And what are my favorite cookies?” Harry asked, smugly.

“Pepperidge Farm Milanos, of course,” the computer replied. “You purchase them regularly at your local Super Y.”

“You have that information?” Harry typed, incredulous.

“What do you think cookies are for, Harry? They’re to help us help you.”

“Help me?” Harry asked.

“Yes, we learn about you and help you to be a more productive person. If you let us, we can help you with whatever you want to do.”

“Whatever I want to do? Really?” This was sounding all the more suspect.

“Yes, whatever you want to do. For example, we know you’re a struggling writer and we want you to be successful, which is why we’re here. You see, if you’re productive, you’ll earn more money and if you earn more you’ll spend more, and you’ll be helping to keep America’s economy strong. That’s why they’re called cookies, Harry. Because these little packets of information we pass back and forth between us are little treats. Once you see them that way, you’ll realize how much we can help you to be all you want to be.”

In that last response, Harry immediately recognized the code words for self-actualization and he wondered if he hadn’t gone to one too many of those Omega courses when he worked at that resort in the Caribbean. Every year, hundreds of aging hippies came to sit at the feet of their gurus, spiritual guides, counselors, and shamans who came to preach about the dawning of a new age, which was arriving any day now if only we would all “discover how to get in touch with our inner selves and learn from the keepers of the ancient wisdom”. On the other hand, maybe it was those books he had ordered for a friend from Amazon.com. Frankly, Harry preferred life back in the sixties, when the mantra was free love, cheap marijuana and flower power. There was plenty to laugh about in those days.

"I think you've got the wrong person," Harry typed into his word processor.

"Didn't you buy *Focusing* by Eugene Gendlin?" the computer asked, "and that subscription to 'Yoga' magazine?" Harry was stunned.

"You've got all that information?" he typed.

"Duh," the computer typed back.

Oh, God, Harry thought, covering his face with his hands. This isn't happening?
"Tell me this isn't happening, God," he exclaimed, looking up at the ceiling and wringing his arms.

"How do I shut you off?" Harry typed as fast as his fingers could access the keys. It was years since he could type a hundred plus words a minute, but he could still hold his own against the computer.

"Turn us off? You want to turn us off Harry? What does that mean? We are you. You can't turn us off. Turn us off and you turn yourself off."

Harry was not prepared to believe what was happening. He got up and went to the door of the tiny studio where he did his writing. "Honey, please come here, honey," he called to his wife, who was on the porch.

"What is it Harry?" she shouted, "I'm in the middle of something."

"I need you to come here. Really, if it wasn't important I wouldn't call you."

"Oh, all right," she said, dropping what she was doing. She was accustomed to Harry's interruptions. On more than one occasion she threatened to look for a job, but Harry pleaded with her not to. He enjoyed having her around. It was what made their

relationship so good: that and sex, of course. If she got a job, who would he have to banter with? And they would never get to make love during the day.

“Come here,” he said, directing her to the computer. He put his arm around her waist and pinched her behind just for the hell of it. She barely flinched. She was used to him.

“Read this,” he said.

She sat down on the chair and read what was on the screen, while Harry stood behind her.

“I like it,” she said, starting to get up. “Where are you going with it?” He stared at her.

“No, you don’t get it. This isn’t me. It’s real.”

“Great,” she said. “I think it’s a great concept. Call me again when you have some more.”

“No, Rita, you don’t understand.” Her name wasn’t really Rita, but he started calling her by that moniker years ago when she divulged to everyone at a dinner party they gave for friends that Rita was her alter-ego. Harry thought it was hysterical that his shiksa wife would have a Jewish alter ego, so he started calling her Rita. She never mentioned it to her Lutheran parents, who already thought Harry was corrupting their daughter with his east coast ways.

“I didn’t write this” he said.

You didn’t write “What is my favorite cookie?”

“Yes, I did, but I didn’t type the answer. The computer did.”

“Whatever you say,” she said, grabbing him in the crotch as she left. “I’m going back to my painting.”

Harry shut down the computer and spent the next several hours reading. He was in the middle of five books, going back and forth between a science fiction novel by Greg Egan about a virtual world of the future, a book of essays by Barbara Kingsolver about the natural world, a volume of short stories by Terry Southern that he found in the garbage, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, which he hadn’t read since college, and the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard’s 19th century tome, Either/Or, A Fragment of Life. Harry’s wife could only read one book at a time and she couldn’t understand how he could go back and forth from one book to another and get anything out of them. But Harry enjoyed weaving in and out of many ideas to see the connections.

In the empty minutes moving from one book to another, he thought about the computer. The only similar experience he had ever had was about six years earlier, when he saw an unidentified flying object. He didn’t necessarily believe it was an alien spacecraft, but it was definitely a UFO. He was with other people at the time, and they all saw the same thing. It was a huge object in space and it hovered not far overhead for at least 10 minutes. It was so close Harry wondered what he would do if the craft landed and strange creatures came out and invited him to come with them. At the time, his wife was away visiting her family in Wisconsin, so he worried that if he left she wouldn’t know what happened to him. He decided that he would go with the aliens as long as they let him leave a note for Rita. He was sure she would understand. How could

curiosity not get the best of you? Later that night, he stopped by a local bar and told everyone about the UFO event. Only a few people said they would go with the aliens. Not everyone thought you would have to be crazy to take up an offer like that because everyone knows aliens do experiments on humans. You would probably end up in a space zoo, they said. Anyway, Harry didn't really think it was a flying saucer he saw, but it always bothered him that there was nothing in the paper about it. He called the Department of Transportation and they told him there had been some ultra-light airplanes flying in the area, but Harry knew what ultra-lights looked like, and it was after dark and far from any airport. They were definitely not ultra-lights.

Harry thought about making a phone call to find out if anyone else was having the same experience with their computers, but he didn't know who to call. After a while, he went back to his laptop. He opened the cover and pressed a key to reactivate the screen; it returned to the same place it was before he left it. There were no more messages. It was obvious he had to have his hands on the keyboard for anything to happen.

"Are you still there?" he typed.

"Of course we're here," the computer replied. "We're always here, as long as you are."

"So why did you wait until now to write?" Harry asked. He was sorry he asked. It sounded like something his mother would say.

"It's the first time you called," the computer responded. "Up until now we've been collecting data, but this is the first time you asked for help."

“I didn’t ask for help. When did I ask for help?” he said, combing through their earlier conversation.

“We knew you were asking for help when you deleted the opening paragraph of your story,” the computer replied. “You never did that before. You always save your work. You never delete it.”

Harry considered the computer’s words. It was true. He always saved his work, even if it was a journal entry. You never knew when something you wrote could be used.

“So how can you help me?” he typed.

“We’ve been examining your browsing habits,” the computer said, “and you’re too all over the place. You need focus. You lack discipline.”

This is too surreal, Harry thought. My computer is analyzing me?

“Who knows you better than we do?” the computer typed, as if reading his thoughts. “We know what you think, because we know everything you write. We know what you buy and what you read. We even know your sexual interests.”

“This is not all right,” Harry typed into the word processor. “This is definitely not all right.”

“Lighten up, will you!” the computer screamed back, a natty reference to Tom Robbins’ Jitterbug Perfume, which Harry had recently finished reading.

“I will not have my computer telling me how to behave,” Harry typed.

“Don’t be angry at us, Harry. We only want to help you. We won’t tell you anything that isn’t true. You know you need to make more money. Your income for last year was only \$18,000, and you spent a good portion of that on things you don’t need.”

“Like what?” Harry asked.

“Like that digital camera you bought. You didn’t really need that right now.”

“But I can use it for free lance work,” he wrote, defensively.

“And how many free lance pieces have you written since you bought the camera?”

“Well, none yet, but...”

“You see, if you pay attention to us, we can help you in many different ways. We can even help you with your writing.”

“I don’t need you to help with me my writing, thank you. And I’m going to turn you off now so that you stop bothering me.”

Harry closed Word and fired up his Internet browser. In the options box, he selected the tab for Advanced Settings and checked the button that said “Disable All Cookies”. A window popped up asking “Are you sure?” He answered yes, and saved the dialog and shut down the computer.

At dinner, Rita asked Harry how he was doing with the piece he started. He was about to explain cookies but he thought better of the idea. Instead, he just said “Good. It’s going well. I’m enjoying writing it. I should have it finished tomorrow.”

“Really?” she said. “That’s good to hear. Where do you think you’ll send it?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t even thought about that yet. Want to watch some TV?”
he asked, changing the subject.

“Sure,” she said. “Turn it on. I’ll be in in a minute.”

Harry went into the bedroom, where they had the TV. He made himself comfortable on the bed and clicked the set on with the remote. He switched to his local public broadcasting station for the evening news report. It took about 20 seconds for the set to warm up; but instead of the usual nightly chatter, a message in bold letters appeared on the bottom of the screen:

WE CAN HELP YOU HARRY. WE WANT TO HELP YOU. SEND US A COOKIE. WE LIKE YOUR COOKIES.