Cookies or Vegetables?
Whitney Robbins

"That’s the last straw!” my mother yelled.
Sure it was the last straw. Though I couldn’t see it, I was absolutely convinced my mother had a whole pile of straw at her disposal, each and every piece willing and ready to be the last. No, this wasn’t the last straw; there would always be more. But I knew at the precise moment she called me “James Henry” that I was really in for it.

Today was pretty much like any other day, except it was the beginning of the weekend, and on the weekend I did chores. After school, I came straight home and started to clean my mess of a room, well, after my mom harped on me for the fifth time. By the time dinner was ready, my room was neat and tidy, I’d taken out the trash and fed the four-month-old Huskies, Samson and Delilah, that I shared with my little sister Anna. Anna and I always had to sit at the kitchen table for dinner, while our parents ate in the living room together, watching T.V.

“You’ll just get distracted, the both of you, and never finish your dinner,” my mom would tell me in response to my complaints.

Come on! I’m almost thirteen. Well, I’ll be thirteen in eleven months, but still, it was almost worse than having to sit at the orange plastic kids table at Grandma’s for Thanksgiving, with a bunch of obnoxious five through eight-year-olds.

Tonight, my mom made teriyaki chicken, rice pilaf, and a medley of cooked vegetables. Of everything on my plate, I did not touch the vegetables. I hated all of them; zucchini, onions, carrots, and cauliflower. They all made me gag. The smell alone was repelling, but I knew if I was going to have any sort of dessert tonight, I had to eat every last bite. I scooped up a little heap on my fork, plugged my nose, closed my eyes tight, and counted to three. Inside my mouth, I tried to chew the food as quickly as possible without letting it touch my tongue. Unfortunately, I didn’t calculate how long I would have to chew the portion I had taken. I soon found the bland and slimy flavor of the warm vegetables coating my tongue. Instantaneously, my gag reflex kicked in. I
chewed faster, and then swallowed. My face squinted into plain disgust.

Of course, Anna had practically licked every vegetable off her plate, like it was candy, and was now enjoying a moist, chocolate chip cookie from the fresh batch my mom had made today. My mouth watered in agony, longing for just one little bite of the sweet, rich cookie that was swiftly disappearing with every happy nibble. When Anna was done with her cookie, she gulped down an entire cup of chilled creamy milk, dragging in little breaths here and there as if for emphasis. Anna was pleased as punch; her little legs were swinging underneath the table. When she finished, she hopped off the chair, placed her cup in the sink, and skipped out of the room, no doubt, to play with her Barbie dolls.

My mother came into the kitchen afterwards, empty dishes in hand. Quickly, I took my napkin and covered up my vegetables. I let my fork clink on the plate then made a noise close to a grunt, but it sounded more like a sigh.

“Mom, can I have a cookie please?”

She walked over to me, really to look at my plate. “Sure,” she said with a smile. I smiled too, but cringed when she lifted the napkin from my plate. “After you finish your vegetables, James. You know the rules; if you don’t eat your dinner, you don’t get dessert.” I moaned. “But mom, you know how they make me gag.” I thought it was a fair complaint, though she looked at me in a way that said I shouldn’t test her on it anymore.

About five minutes went past and all I managed was to shove my vegetables around the plate, full circle. I couldn’t do it. One measly cookie wasn’t worth it. Well, maybe it was, but I was not going to shove even a sliver of a vegetable in my mouth, not after my first gagging session.

“Mom,” I called out. “I don’t want to eat the vegetables.”

She and my dad were devotedly watching Wheel of Fortune and cuddling on the couch. Gross.

“Alright, but no dessert,” she replied.

My face turned into a bowl of sour grapes as I walked over to the trash and dumped the rest of my dinner into the monster that would eat anything and never complain. After another five minutes, I was beginning to crave that cookie. I had just started to work on some homework behind the couch my parents were sitting on. The kitchen faced me, and through the doorway I
could see the cookie jar on the counter, beckoning to me.

As a plan began formulating in my head, a crooked smile crossed my face. I was completely delighted with the idea of sneaking a cookie. Maybe two. The idea was a little childish, but highly entertaining; even a little dangerous with my parents sitting right behind me. Slowly, I began to crawl across the carpet, moving one limb at a time. I had to be completely silent, appear as though I was still diligently working on my homework behind the couch. Every movement could be a sudden death trap. My mom or dad could turn around in an instant. I would feel stupid in this position if they caught me, but I had to cast the worry away and focus. The pounding of my heart beat sure and strong, the steady rhythm of a warrior's drum.

Once in the kitchen, I had to make sure I stepped in the correct spots, or else I would make the floorboards creak. I'd had plenty of practice with this, a few years back. When I turned nine, I convinced my mom to let me take Tae Kwon Do lessons, in order to hone in on what I thought was my natural ability. I only lasted about a week, but I still loved to pretend I was the stealthiest martial artist in the world. I would map out my entire home as though it were my next hit. I taught myself to walk through the living room completely blindfolded. But when I accidentally broke one of my mom's blue vases, from making a wrong turn, I moved my exercises to the kitchen. I memorized every inch of the floor that squeaked, until I could walk through the kitchen without making a sound. My ninja training definitely came in handy at this moment. I crossed the kitchen in a blurred haze, making it to the cookie jar in complete silence. The warrior kept pounding on my heart.

When I lifted the lid, it made an awful scraping sound. My whole body went rigid. I was a statue. I wasn't breathing. One one-thousand. Two one-thousand. Three one-thousand. Four...I counted to 15. Everything was still around me. All I heard was the clicking of the wheel on the television. The fresh smell of warm cookie dough and chocolate chips overpowered my senses. I plucked two cookies from the jar with greedy fingers and decided not to eat them until I was safely behind the couch, even though my mouth watered inconsolably. I quickly replaced the lid on the cookie jar and spun around. My mother was staring at me with cold steel behind her eyes.

"James Henry! That's the last straw!"

The warrior stopped pounding. In fact, I couldn't feel my heart beating
at all.

“What do you think you’re doing? I told you no dessert.” She crossed the short distance to take the cookies and replace them in the jar. Fear hung heavy over my shoulders while embarrassment colored my cheekbones and tinged the rest of my face in white heat.

“Maybe if you didn’t give me those gross vegetables, I would have finished my dinner.” Chagrin now replaced embarrassment. Did I just say that? I looked at my mom, her face shocked. Yes, apparently I did. This was it. The end. No more cookies for life.

For at least a minute, my mother looked as though she were contemplating something, my punishment maybe? Whatever it was, was surely taking a long time for her to figure out. A minute in complete silence had me cringing. Maybe she was putting me through this agony so I could “see the error in my ways” and apologize.

“Allen,” she called to my dad. “Would you come in here please?” She looked down at me, “I want you to go to your room.” I could feel the heat from my face sidle back onto the tips of my ears. This was bad.

I passed my dad on the way to my room. He smiled at me and rubbed my head. “You in trouble?” he whispered.

I nodded, completely solemn.

I knew what to expect: punishment. I didn’t know what form it would come in though. Grounded, No T.V., No dessert forever, all of the above? I was torn between feeling guilty and still wanting those two cookies. It made my head hurt, so I laid down on my bed. A few minutes went by, and then my door opened. No knock. No courtesy. Whatever. My parents stood in the doorway. My mom held a plate in her hand and a glass of milk in the other. On the plate were two cookies. I thought I was dreaming, but I never fall asleep quickly. It takes me at least a half hour and I had only been in my room for maybe ten minutes.

“James,” my father called to me. I sat up. “Your mother and I have decided that if you want to have cookies, instead of eating what you’re supposed to, then...you can have them.”

I jumped to my feet, ready to pounce; my mouth watered with confused excitement. Before I could take the cookies, my mom held the plate and milk just out of my reach. “But,” she said with one stern eyebrow raised high,
“You can’t have anything else. If you want these cookies, that’s all you get. Got it?”

“You mean… I can have cookies for breakfast, lunch…and dinner?” My eyes widened.

“Yes,” they responded together. She lowered the plate, offering the gift. For a brief moment, nothing to mull over, I wondered if this were some kind of trick, but I quickly dismissed the thought and grabbed both cookies. I shoved the first into my mouth. They tasted just as good as they smelled. The flavors of chocolate and cookie dough melted together perfectly as I chewed. Another bite and then I grabbed the milk. If I had been sitting down, my legs would have swung back and forth like Anna’s had a while ago, at the dinner table.

The next morning, I woke to the smell of hot cookies by my bedside, a glass of milk and a note next to it. The note read, “Remember, nothing else. Love you. Mom and Dad.” Cool! I couldn’t wait to boast this in front of Anna and my friends at school. I ate the cookies slowly this time, savoring each bite.

I got up and went straight to the kitchen. From the hallway, I smelled a fresh batch of cookies coming from the oven. My mom had made peanut butter and white chocolate macadamia cookies. This was truly heaven.

Over the course of the weekend, I ate cookies morning, noon and night. Anna complained on the first day, but after my mom had a “chat” with her, she kept her mouth shut. It was a little odd, but I dismissed that too. Monday came, and for lunch I pulled out my bag of cookies proudly. My mom made oatmeal and chocolate cookies that morning. Greg and Adam, my two best friends were awestruck at the bargain I made with my parents. They sulked while eating identical tuna sandwiches.

Tuesday. Grandma’s twist cookies.
Wednesday. Gingerbread cookies.
Thursday. Snicker doodles.
Friday. Molasses cookies with frosting.

To be completely honest, by Tuesday I started to feel a little sick, but my mom kept baking me new cookies everyday and I couldn’t refuse. They smelled so good, until Wednesday night. After eating the three gingerbread cookies my mom generously offered for dessert, I excused myself and went to bed early with an upset stomach. Thursday morning, Anna sat at the kitchen
table eating a bowl of Cheerios. On impulse, I asked her for a bite, but she horded her bowl as far away as she could. It kept getting worse after that. At school on Friday, I asked Greg if he wanted to switch lunches, but he said he wouldn’t give up the sandwich his mom made him with smoked cheddar, his absolute favorite. Also, he didn’t like molasses cookies. Adam just stared at me when I held out the bag toward him, then he plopped a grape in his mouth. I was starving, but I didn’t want to eat anymore cookies, so I hid them in my backpack, unable to throw them away without feeling guilty. I decided to “save them for later” even though my empty stomach growled in protest.

When I came home after school, my mother greeted me with a smile and another fresh batch of cookies she had just pulled from the oven. I never thought I’d want to gag at the sight of sugar cookies. The smell alone was repugnant. She offered me one, but I told her I needed to get a head start on a project for school and tried to make a bee-line for my room. She stepped in the way. The hot tray in between us kept me easily at bay.

“Did you like your molasses cookies today?” she asked.

“Ummm…” What was I going to say? If I lied, guilt would eat me alive. Well, this was an opportunity to be truthful, and my ticket to eat regular food again. Humility was never a strong point for me, so I hung my head in shame. I slipped my backpack off my shoulders, unzipped the bag and reached in for the cookies I’d stashed earlier. I held the bag out to her while staring at the floor, too embarrassed to look into her green eyes.

“James…why didn’t you eat your cookies?” Her question didn’t have a whisper of doubt that she already knew the answer.

“Because I… I’m sick of eating cookies,” I replied, mostly under my breath.

“You’re what?”

“I said I’m… I’m sick of eating cookies. I just want to have normal meals again mom. You can give me vegetables every night for the rest of my life. I won’t complain anymore. And I’m sorry I acted so rudely and said mean things to you. Please! I should have asked you sooner, cause I started feeling sick on Tuesday, but I was too embarrassed to say anything. Please mom, don’t make me eat cookies anymore!” The words spilled out of my mouth. About halfway through my speech, my mother set down the hot tray of cookies. The more I confessed, the more emotional I felt, and so I welcomed the salty tears
as they began to pour down my cheeks.

“You don’t have to eat cookies anymore James. Your father and I let you do this on purpose, because we wanted you to understand the importance of getting nutrition from all kinds of foods, whether you like them or not. I’m sorry to have put you through this sweetheart. How about tonight I make you fried chicken and mashed potatoes?”

I gasped and almost choked, startled by the offer to have a real dinner. I ran straight into my mother’s arms and cried harder. She began to stroke my hair and kiss my head. After the tears stopped, I asked her if I could have vegetables for dinner too. The echo of her sweet laugh filled my ears with joy and I sighed in her embrace.