

**You're Allowed to Order Takeout**  
**By**  
**Joseph Devon**

“So,” Neil said to his son, Illiam. “I think that’s about it.” Neil was bent over, arms folded on his kitchen counter as he read a stained and flour-dusted piece of paper. Neil’s clothes were casual, almost threateningly so, the kind of lounge-about clothes that someone accumulates who almost never has the chance to lounge about, the taut seams of his jeans and bright, just out of the store, colors on his shirt showed no wear.

Illiam, eight years old and standing on a chair to occupy his own piece of counter facing his dad, was the opposite image. Pants torn at the cuff with the feint aura of grass stains on the knees that can’t quite be washed out. He was staring up at his dad with the expectant eyes of an eight year old son whose dad is about to do something wondrous.

Neil was looking back and forth from the recipe coated with dried flour paste to the imposing collection of ingredients he and his son had slowly dredged up from all corners of their kitchen over the past half hour. He picked up a box of baking soda and held it close to his nose, reading the fine print on the side where it explained how to get your whites whiter. “This is the same as baking powder, right?” He squinted as he read, his confidence fading. “Why would anyone eat something that you can use to clean bathroom tiles with?”

“I could go ask mom,” Illiam said, his voice was high, no trace of bass in it, and as he spoke he sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

“Your mother isn’t to be disturbed,” Neil said, pulling his glasses down off his head and settling them on his nose as he reread the side of the bright orange box. “She needs to sleep when the baby sleeps.”

“Jessica,” Illiam said.

“Huh?” Neil grunted, shaking his head and putting the box back down on the counter.

“Jessica. Mom isn’t to be disturbed when *Jessica* is sleeping.”

“Yes,” Neil answered, a little unsure of what he had said and why it needed correcting. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them back and forth briskly in a gesture that was intended to somehow instill excitement into the proceedings for his son but only conveyed an on-edge nervousness. “Well then, let’s put these muffins together, shall we?”

Illiam smiled a tight smile that made the corners of his mouth dimple and nodded wide-eyed, doing his part to keep the excitement going. Although Illiam was starting to get confused as to why these muffins were so important to his father.

“Right then, measuring spoons?”

Illiam scooped up a ring of stainless steel spoons, handing them to his dad. One by one Neil flipped through the spoons, his lips moving as he silently read the letters engraved on each handle. He separated two out. “Which one’s the tablespoon?”

“The big one,” Illiam answered.

Neil looked again, wanting further confirmation before trusting his son’s choice. Something flashed in his eyes as he read that seemed to agree with Illiam. “Right.” He began measuring out ingredients, the baking soda first, pouring it into a large plastic bowl. He let Illiam crack the eggs next and pour them over top. Neither noticed the bits of shell that went into the bowl. Neil dipped a pyrex liquid measuring cup into a bag of flour, careful to set it down on the counter and tap it until it was level so he could get an accurate measurement. Spices went in, then some confectioner’s sugar. After every addition Neil let Illiam whisk the batter until it was smooth, the little boy’s whole arm wrapping around the

rim of the bowl to keep it steady as his fist held the shiny whisk handle and worked it through the ever thickening mass. By the end most of the batter was trapped between the tines of the whisk, a giant sticky ball encased in a stainless steel cage. Their work had been sloppy and the proceedings had bordered on grueling for Illiam with his dad making constant checks and rechecks of the ingredients and measurements, one second okaying a spoonful of something only to stop short and, with a panic in his voice, decide to check once again that it was right.

After freeing their batter the two spooned lumps of it into muffin tins, slid them into a preheated oven, set their timer, and left them alone. A dollop of batter that had been dangling off the side of the muffin tin fell off when Neil put it into the oven and the dollop landed with a splat on the oven floor where it began to burn.

Twenty minutes later when Neil opened the oven door and plucked out one of the tins, a tea towel protecting his hands, a thin blue smoke began to fill the kitchen. It was thin enough that Neil blinked a few times, staring at the wooden counter, the white refrigerator, then up at the lights, trying to verify what he was seeing. By the time he was sure of what he was seeing the heat from the muffin tin had bled through the thin layer of tea towel protecting his hand. There was noise simultaneously from all areas as Neil dropped the tin, the metal banging hard against the floor, the smoke alarm went off shrieking its high pitched yell, and Neil swore a guttural obscenity that froze Illiam in place.

Illiam stared, blue eyes wide on his open face, as his father rested a hand on the counter and put his burnt fingers into his mouth, his eyes squeezed shut tight. Neil's stillness was momentary and as the noise from the smoke alarm registered in his brain he became frantic energy again and began opening windows and fanning the air around the alarm with his tea towel. The smoke alarm eventually stopped its piercing chirp. The sound of a baby crying echoed through the house.

"You okay?" Neil's wife, Julia, called out, her voice floating down the stairs, a mixture of concern and confusion.

"Fine," Neil yelled, "it's fine. Just a little mix up." He smiled willfully at Illiam. "I guess I'll get this cleaned up then," he said, but the boy didn't respond. He was still too frightened.

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Neil woke up that night with a mouse crawling over his naked back. He could feel its damp clammy paws and the slightest hint of pinprick claws traveling up his spine. He could smell the reek of its damp fur. He jumped out of bed and stood up but the mouse wasn't on his back anymore. It was near the pillow, or under the blanket, and he was swatting at the bed, throwing pillows off into the corner of the room, his hands constantly smoothing down lumps in the sheets, trying to find it, except he wasn't so sure anymore what he had felt, and as he began to wake up he remembered that he was thirty-eight years old and in the bedroom he shared with his wife and he had been in *college* when a mouse had run over him while he was sleeping and he had probably been dreaming except his heart would not slow down and his eyes continued to dart into the corners to make sure no mice were hiding there.

He began to calm down and sat down on the edge of the bed. His eyes were itchy with exhaustion and he wanted sleep so bad he was about to start whimpering when he realized that his wife wasn't in the room with him. He glanced around one more time, some internal mechanism in his head still insisting he needed to be on the lookout for mice, then got up and left the bedroom. He walked down the carpeted hallway. He left behind the light from

his room and walked in darkness past Illiam's room, then entered into the patch of light coming from the room at the end of the hall. He eased the door open and stepped inside.

His wife was sitting in a rocking chair next to a crib. She was asleep, her head tilted back and her mouth open, a light semblance of snoring coming from her with each inhalation. Neil walked over to the crib and looked down at his new daughter, also asleep. His hands were tense on the crib railing. With an oceanic sensation that sloshed deep inside of him the need for sleep returned and he stepped back, eyelids heavy, and sat down on a threadbare couch that was posed as an afterthought along the opposite wall. Instead of sleep coming over him, though, there were only the mice. They were nosing into the hair on the back of his head and he would snap awake, his hand frantically brushing at the back of his head only to find nothing there. Then he would settle back, then there'd be something rustling up his sleeve and he would be wide awake swatting at nothing on his arm.

During one of his brief bouts of sleep his wife woke up and when he snapped to attention and began desperately brushing off the back of his head she called out his name and he knew where he was more clearly than he had in hours.

"The mice again?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, then he nodded towards the crib. "How is she?"

"She's good," his wife said, smiling, finding her husband's question to be cute, as if he believed his daughter was capable of a rough day at school when she was only a few weeks old.

The lack of sleep between them made conversation strained and Julia quietly rocked in her chair while Neil alternated between staring at the crib and staring at the white oval of the street light visible outside the window.

"I made a mess of things," Neil said. "When I was trying to make muffins this morning. I swore at Illiam. Or near him. I didn't mean to. Everything just went wrong."

The level of worry in his voice concerned his wife. "It was just a tin of muffins. I don't even know why you were bothering," she said, yawning.

"Because your mother isn't here any more and I thought I could start helping out. It just seemed like the least I could...we might run out of leftovers...it's not the muffins," Neil said, running a hand over his face, his palm lingering over his eyes as if he could force them to stay shut. "It's everything. What if I'm doing everything wrong?" his hand drifted and his eyes leaked out from behind his fingers to look with worry at the crib.

Julia was already drifting back to sleep, she had gone so far as to turn and make an attempt at the fetal position where she sat. "You're allowed to order takeout, dear," she said. Then she was asleep.

Neil took in those words, and the tone they were spoken in, he remembered that his wife had been without proper sleep longer than he had, and he remembered how Illiam had first looked at him when he suggested they make muffins, how his son had been excited by the project itself. And he stared at the streetlight and noticed that it was starting to rain outside, and that fine droplets were beginning to pool and run down the storm window, making the streetlight look blurry, and he wondered at how it must be miserable outside but he was comfortable where he sat. And he wondered what time it was, and wondered who else was awake, and wondered what kept the world going at this hour, and wondered if the bagel store down the street made good coffee, and wondered that his new daughter would someday be able to talk to him like Illiam and he wondered if she knew he was here worrying about her in the middle of the night. He lay down on the couch so his head was near the crib and rested a hand on one of the wooden slats, the physical nearness of her a

comfort to him, and in a few minutes he fell asleep, his body relaxing deeper and deeper as the rain softly pelted the windows.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at [www.JosephDevon.com](http://www.JosephDevon.com). You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.



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