

Spilling Over

John T. was a friend of a friend. A roommate of a friend, but we occasionally hung out together on bike rides. He was the type to always record his bike ride on an app, letting the world know that he, in fact, just biked 0.4 miles to the grocery store and back, and that it was “pretty hot.”

And we were having dinner. The dinner was Korean food, since his roommate, or rather, my friend Libby, was part Korean. The two of us had made a trip to H Mart so that we could cook soft tofu stew at home. She did most of the cooking. We also got Pocky sticks and Sapporo beer. I did most of the drinking.

While Libby cooked up a storm, I played John T. in chess.

“You ever watch chess tutorials?” he asked me.

Why would I do that? I thought. My ex had almost ruined chess for me, and I never wanted to be obsessive about it like he had been. It had only been two months since our breakup.

“I watched a show about chess, sort of,” I said, skirting around the question.

We would make small talk in between long minutes of silent concentration, steady sipping, and light background sizzling.

“Check,” I said, moving my bishop to a predictable and undefendable attack on his king.

He sacrificed his rook, then asked me about my parents. John T. was a polite boy.

“Check,” I said again, after three more moves. He had blundered.

Libby, I know, meant for our cooking night to just be for the two of us. Libby, I also know, is very non-confrontational. If she was mad at you, she wouldn't say so. And she was mad at John T. for not doing the massive pile of dishes he left on the kitchen counter.

“Libby?” I asked, standing to my feet and walking over to the kitchen.

“Yes,” she said, turning from the cutting board.

I was going to ask if I could get a glass from the cabinet to pour my beer into before going back out to the living room to play on my phone. I changed my mind.

“You need help?” I asked, seeing the small pile of thinly sliced green onions sitting next to a much larger bunch of unsliced green onions next to it.

“No, no, I’m completely fine,” she said. “Thanks anyway.”

I turned around to go back to the living room but saw John T. standing awkwardly at the entrance to the kitchen.

“I was going to see if you guys needed help also,” he said.

I could see in Libby’s change in stance that she was annoyed.

“No, I think we’re alright,” I said, as if I had been helping Libby with the cooking all along. I searched for a ladle in the drawers and started stirring the oil heating up in the second pan, entirely unnecessary.

“Alright,” he said. Then he sighed, stretching his big hands to the ceiling, and started for his room. He was over a foot taller than Libby, and as I stood between the two of them, I felt like we were lining up for school photos.

“Wait, did you want to start a new chess game?” I asked.

He looked embarrassed.

“I think I’m going to head to my room for a bit,” he said.

I realized I wanted him to stick around, but when his door was closed, Libby let out a slight sigh, so I did too. She was a slight person, and most of her actions were slight, except for in cooking. She fiercely chopped a few more green onions. Then she smiled and told me about her nephew who just turned two.

“He’s started playing piano with me when I go visit,” she said.

Almost on cue, we heard John T.'s electric keyboard buzz through his door.

"Yeah, and John T. won't stop playing this little jazzy bit for the album he's working on," she added.

I was surprised. He never mentioned his album, but I knew he used to be in a band.

"Album?" I asked.

"He's already started recording some of the songs. But he's insufferable about it. He practices for like eight hours a day."

"Have you told him it bothers you?"

"What? No," she said.

I turned the tap on and decided it would be a good idea to drink some water first before more beer.

I pictured John T.'s glum face, his beard moving up and down as he grooved in his room to a looping series of four chords on the keyboard, humming just loud enough to hear from the kitchen. He always looked a little glum. And although he hadn't always had a beard, the shag that currently occupied his face somehow added to his permanent glumness. My ex had described John T.'s beard as a "grotesque creature constantly on the brink of survival." I remember laughing at that comment, which he had repeated in front of my parents when telling them about his job.

I listened to the hiss of the onions now mixing with the oil, still occasionally stirring it absent-mindedly.

"So what else has your nephew been doing?" I prompted Libby.

She could talk about him for ages.

She started talking about Sesame Street or something along those lines while I mused about John T.'s other secret projects and goings-on, adding an "uh-huh" and "aw that's cute" on queue.

"These onions smell amazing," I said.

"Wait til we add the chili paste and fish sauce," she said.

I nodded and smiled.

On Libby and John T.'s fridge was a series of drawings they had done together with Libby's boyfriend, Ferris. There were Hulk men in swim trunks drawn with exaggerated pecks, and horse girls in lingerie with cowboy hats and boots on. There was also Libby's tattoo calendar, booked out for the next two months. And John T.'s sister's baby shower invitation.

Libby poured in the spices while I studied the drawings, then I heard John T.'s door open.

"Wow, that smells good," he said, walking toward the kitchen.

"Want to join us?" I asked.

Libby, out-of-character, said, "I'm not sure there's enough."

He wouldn't have invited himself to sit down and have dinner with us, but I knew he was going to linger in the area and mope a bit if I didn't say something. He was unfortunately easy to bully—soft-spoken and gawky—so he didn't respond with anything audible to Libby's comment.

I turned toward Libby to see if she would hold up this front for very long. She saw me raise an eyebrow.

"Sorry," I said, turning and looking into his amber-green eyes.

"No worries, I'll just make some frozen hash browns later," he said, and headed toward where our chess board had been sitting.

I went to the bathroom and noticed I had John T.'s jazzy keyboard run stuck in my head.

Libby shot me a text while I was in the bathroom. *Why did you invite him?*

He was going to invite himself anyway, I shot back.

When Libby and I met, it was through my ex-boyfriend. They used to work together in college at the radio station. I remember being suspicious of her. She was so cool. After a few months of casual conversations and run-ins with her, I finally accepted one of her invitations to hang out, and we've been friends ever since. She pulls me into things, and I come along. That's how I met John T. as well. I thought about John T.'s old band. I had dismissed it as corny when I first heard it because that's what my ex-boyfriend called them. Corny. And he knew a lot more about music than I did.

Then I fixed my hair and headed back out to the dining room, grabbing another beer from the fridge on the way.

"Wow, Libby, I never knew you could cook like this," John T. said as he watched us sit down.

"Yeah, it's thanks to Ferris," she said.

"Too bad he can't come tonight," I said.

Then it was silent for a moment as we took our first few bites and John T. fiddled with the pawns on the chess board nearby. I looked up at an employee badge on Libby's wall from the station she and my ex used to work at and my head felt hot, but it was hard to tell if it was the practically-boiling spicy stew or the stabbing memories. I stood up to get more water and the table shook, causing a few drops of the soup in my bowl to splash on my leg.

"Ouch," I said.

John T. looked up, concerned.

“Are you alright?” he asked, half a beat before Libby.

“Yes it was just a few drops,” I said. “I’ll grab some ice to put on it.”

“Better to get a cool washcloth,” he said, with more confidence than he said most things.

Libby nodded. “I’ve heard that before, too,” she confirmed.

“Yeah, I actually have a bit of experience with it,” John T. said.

I went to get a washcloth and put it on myself, but the burn was so mild that I really didn’t need it. I stood in the bathroom again instead. Looking into the splattered mirror above the sink, I surprised myself by picturing John T. soothing my little burn as he rubbed first a washcloth, and then massage oil, up and down my legs. I closed my eyes and almost made a sound.

When I got back, John T. was in the middle of telling Libby a story from his old job, but she wasn’t giving him her full attention, eyes darting to the clock and to her phone, to her soup and now to me. I gave her a blank look.

“As it was a fancy restaurant, we served our dishes ‘in-pan’ to our patrons, mainly elderly women taking themselves out on solo dates with their widowers’ money,” he said.

I figured he was referring to the restaurant he used to work at with my ex. As far as I knew, my ex still worked at the same restaurant. I sat down.

“So the restaurant has an ethos of sustainability, or whatever. *A local place with hearts focused on the world.* Some of the biggest baloney I’d heard,” he said.

Then he winked at me, which would have been weird if it weren’t for the fact that it matched his regular awkwardness.

“But a starting pay of \$19/hr is no small sack of potatoes,” he continued. “And I’ve worked restaurants before. Libby knows this. Back in high school. A burger joint, Chipotle, Chick-fil-A.”

Libby again nodded. I knew she had worked at Chick-fil-A. She hated it. I forgot that John T. had too.

“My role always fell somewhere between food prep bitch to janitor. So I really had to smooth talk my way into this new position.”

I saw Libby glance at her phone.

“I definitely embellished what I put on my resumé and in the interview and all.”

“Was that a big deal?” I asked. I hoped Libby didn’t notice how eagerly I was listening to John T. I usually preferred following her lead in social situations, but this moment felt different.

“Well, I don’t know, I haven’t lied on my resumé much before,” he said. He was too pure.

The majority of my resumé was fake, mostly bolstered by lines I had picked up from my ex’s resumé, which was also fake.

“Anyway, on the first day of training, the manager was skeptical of me. But the other waiters were willing to show me the ropes, so I thought I would be fine. No one told me how to take patrons’ orders since I think they assumed it was something I knew. So I definitely had to cover my ass in those first few shifts. I told the manager it was different at my old restaurant. And when they asked ‘Where is that old restaurant of yours you keep mentioning?’, I had to say something like, ‘It’s near my grandmother’s house,’ which didn’t feel good, but I was making good money already on that first day, and I was in too deep.”

I felt bad for John T. I knew my ex wasn’t always nice to him, and even though John T. was a few years older, he was always introduced like a little brother. I could imagine my ex giving him a hard time on his first days at the restaurant, like a way of hazing a newcomer.

“So this was about a year ago for reference, and I think I would handle it better now, but, basically, in my second week of working at this restaurant, I made a pretty huge mistake.”

He didn't pause for long, but when I looked over at him, with his tawny hair slightly covering his eyes and a chess piece still sitting in his palm, I had a gut feeling that his mistake was something I already knew about.

Libby was fully listening now, too, phone completely out of sight.

“So I know you've both been there before, but I don't know if you remember that one of our food items is a boiling mussels dish, *moules au safran*.”

My stomach knotted. I now knew for sure what he was going to say, and I was so angry at my ex that I almost choked on the stew I was eating. I swallowed hard.

“Yeah, I actually think I remember several French dishes,” Libby said. She had gone to the restaurant with me several times when I was dating my ex. Luckily, she stayed by my side through the breakup and they haven't been friends since it ended, so it had been a while since either of us had gone to that restaurant.

“Well in my second week, I took an order for two women, two regulars to the restaurant, and one of them ordered the *moules au safran*. I guess she'd ordered it before lots of times and was a big enthusiast for all of our French cuisine. But when I took her order and ran it back to the kitchen, I didn't know that the dish was served in boiling broth.”

“Oh no,” Libby said.

John T. was so calm about this story that he seemed almost emotionally vacant. Like he had dissociated from it all. “I was given a dish with a broken handle, and when I got to the table and lifted the dish off of the platter, I spilled all of it directly onto the patron whose meal it was. All over. She got second and third degree burns from her chest to her knees. We had to call an ambulance and I was let go right away.”

Libby was covering her mouth. I had stopped eating. I knew this story, told very differently. And I knew whose version I believed.

“It’s honestly haunted me since then. And that week was already a living hell, with my breakup and all. But that poor woman screamed like something I’ll never forget. She screamed at me—I don’t blame her—and then she screamed like she was dying. I couldn’t think, but I did grab the ice water pitcher and offered to put it on her. She just screamed in response. But that’s when I learned not to put ice on a burn, since someone at a nearby table jumped up and stopped me from doing anything with the pitcher. It was such a scene.”

Imagining poor, shy John T. in the middle of that chaos further stirred my rage.

“You look more in shock than John T.,” Libby said, looking over at me.

I didn’t say anything.

“It’s a memory that’s not going to leave me, that’s for sure,” he said. “Are you alright?” he then asked me.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said.

He reddened.

“No, I mean, it really was not your fault. It was my ex,” I said.

Libby gasped.

“He knew about the broken pan, and he told me a very different version of this story. Well, mostly different. He told me that he made sure the waiter knew to be very careful with the pan, and that he gave the dish to someone on the staff who had been there for years and would have known better if he hadn’t been high all the time, and that—” I trailed off, as I realized it was probably all made up and I didn’t have anything else to say.

The purr of the refrigerator filled the silence.

“I never knew that was why you left that job,” Libby said to John T.

“It wasn’t as hard telling it just now as I thought it would be. It just felt relevant from when we were talking about what to do for burns.” He sounded robotic, like my ex.

“I can’t believe that happened to you,” Libby said. “And yet I shouldn’t be surprised to hear how it all went down. I am so sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” I mumbled. John T. flicked the greasy hair out of his eyes and reached his arm across the table to pat my shoulder. I caught my breath as I looked down at his long fingernails. He pulled his hand back.

Libby stared at the whole interaction and rolled her eyes.

“I’m sorry you went through everything you did also,” he said to me. He sounded like he needed to clear his throat. It did not help slow my breathing down.

“We should call the restaurant,” Libby said.

John T. looked to me and I shook my head.

“There’s no point, it was a year ago.”

I let a laugh leak out, like I couldn’t be bothered to get revenge, then sighed. I glanced at John T. and noticed his beard had some potato chip dust in it, which I hadn’t seen earlier. They came up with a few more ideas, but I could only stare at John T.’s pile of dishes on the counter, next to Libby’s dishes on the stove, growing colder. I usually ended up washing my ex’s dishes since he was always tired from doing them at work. I wondered if that was why John T. hadn’t done his dishes yesterday. I stood up.

They were still figuring out how they would plan some type of sneak attack, some cold retribution. Their intensity rose as they plotted. I wasn’t exactly included, but it wasn’t an intentional exclusion either. Libby would suggest something, briefly pause to see John T.’s reaction, then laugh at her own absurdity. But I didn’t hear their words, and they didn’t notice when I went to the kitchen to grab another beer. I just didn’t have anything to say.

My mouth still burned from the stew, but I could no longer smell its spice. I took one last look at the dirty plates and bowls, doubled in size now. Then after a few long sips, I set the can down next to the sink before slipping out the door.