

OYSTERS

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DESPITE MY FATHER'S IMPATIENCE with the language of pop culture, I would venture, albeit timidly, to call him, a "Foodie." From his pot roast fixation to his jelly omelet, his tastes were nothing if not eccentric. His love for Hershey's chocolate, his distrust of garlic, he carried to the end. But in his last months, nothing gave him more culinary pleasure than the unlikely delicacy, the oyster.

Holding tightly to his family, a handful of friends, and his poker game, his decline had turned his days uncomplicated. Often he would sit for hours, a dark silhouette against the backdrop of the sea, studying the social hierarchy of the seagulls. His movie star blue eyes were now more reminiscent of the pale color of the Provincetown bay. His body, grown thin, was camouflaged just barely by what had become his attire for every occasion: Uggs, blue sweats and a polar fleece vest. My husband, Peter, and I would make the long trip to visit and were rewarded with his pure delight, and a promise for an oyster dinner.

Navigating the terrain from house to restaurant all but did him in. Thankfully though, cocooned in a corner booth, revived by a whiskey sour and a bosomy waitress, he found his second wind. We spoke of politics, family gossip, and his work. When the oysters arrived, my husband and father conspiratorially downed the slippery creatures extolling their virtues, as aphrodisiac, perfect protein, brain food. As the meal ended, we watched with amusement as my father carefully examined each shell. He placed a few reverently in his takeaway box. "If you're lucky," he said with quiet authority, "you'll find that the shells reveal the most remarkable faces." With that, enlivened by the good company, flanked by my beautiful stepmother, Norris, he gripped his canes and made ready to go. Sadly, as I watched him exit, his bent over form, part hermit crab, part king, I sensed his end was near.

The morning of my father's funeral, I stepped out on the deck to take in the Provincetown light. Sheltered from the elements, his collection of shells caught my eye. Hundreds of these invertebrates lay neatly placed, their bone white shape exquisitely offset by the grey splintered wood. In honor of my dad, I peered down to take a careful look. Their craggy faces stared back, ghoulish and wizened like bereft old souls. But they were fantastical, too, with wild expressions running across the topography of their surfaces. And it came to me then that these creatures of the sea were a gift: A testimony of a man who was not afraid to claim the extraordinary in the ordinary, and to hold and finally to pass on a small but enduring piece of the cosmos.