

23 March
Halfmoons from Cape Cod, Massachusetts

Southern springtime humidity has this way of hanging over pavement after the sun breaks through a rainstorm. It makes an even brief uphill walk feel like a marathon. Thick air stifles each of my breaths while sweat seeps into the seams of my ball cap. Why the hell did I decide to wear jeans? It all seemed much more mild when I stuck my head out the door a half-hour ago.

I had invented a reason to leave the house—that being needing lemons—because I wanted to mozy around town and listen to music. I figured it would be nice to get out and about for a little while. But as a heat-and-humidity-adversed chubster donned in denim and sleeves, I now regret that invention like a well-moistened Oppenheimer. I didn't even really need lemons.

Only after purchasing my citrus do I remember that it's Wednesday, or dollar-oyster night at the restaurant. I can't pass it by considering that the restaurant is surely selling some oysters I've never tried before. I pop in.

Finding a seat at the bar, I fan myself with the bill of my cap as sunlight pours through west-facing windows. Bartenders usually greet guests with a water within seconds of arrival, but the new bartender Chessa is a bit backed-up at the moment. The watering responsibility then bounces to the barback, but that's Connor tonight, and he's just training. So I stew in sweat, waiting for any kind of recognition.

Of course the first person I talk to is Emma, who describes in great detail the text she just sent me, which I already read and subsequently pretended not to have seen. There's a big party on Saturday: 150 people arriving all at once composed entirely of lacrosse players and their families, everyone behind the bar is totally fucked, et cetera. We talk logistics for a minute until Connor manages to pour me a water, which I drink half of in one sip. Relief cuts through impending doom and oppressive heat alike. I start acting like I'm listening to Emma again and make something up about how it'll be nice to be done with the event because we won't have to worry about it anymore.

That's a pretty weird thing to say, she tells me before leaving me.

I pull out my book, Roger Angell's *Game Time: A Baseball Companion*, flipping to an essay in the middle so that no one will suspect that I hadn't picked it up before. I get a few paragraphs in before Chase wanders up.

Wassup, foo'? he asks me.

Not much. Just saw Ray at the grocery store. Do you know what the oysters are tonight?

He leans over the stool next to me and fixes his eyes on something distant and likely imaginary. *Halfmoons from Cape Cod.* This is our third New England oyster in a row. *Small. Big brine. Less green on the shells.*

I'm interested, and glad to have been right about the oysters being new. When Chessa gets a second, I put in an order for six and a glass of Muscadet. She plugs the order into one of our new, state-of-the-art handheld POS and runs away to see to other, more important guests.

Chase and I chat for a minute about developments in the Star Wars canon before he goes back to doing job things. I watch Chessa run around while hosts try to hand her the phone for to-go orders and servers try to get her attention to make change for \$100 bills while guests clearly wait to put in their orders and tickets upon tickets upon tickets stack up. She's frazzled, and I get it. It's a tough place to work bar.

I sit as patiently as I can, attempting to read the essay. The one I'm currently working on, "The Web of the Game," starts off well enough. Angell talks about settling in the bleachers for a showcase game, alongside relics of another baseball era, and then begins indulging in long winded explanations of the relationships between players and teams and managers throughout the ages. I have to read this one paragraph about three times before I realize the point isn't to be comprehensible, but rather allude to the meta-social complexities of the game. Connor finally pours me my wine on Chessa's behalf. The sun continues to beat down, but my spell of overheat generally subsides and I'm suddenly less sweaty than I was.

My oysters hit the bartop just a minute after the wine, and they are beautiful. The six in a circle almost resemble a lotus flower; each small shell a petal bearing buttermilk-hued bodies with black-lined gills in a thin puddle of brine. This is the kind of oyster you model an emoji after.

I take the first one plain—as is custom—and it's lovely. Big, bright hit of brine, but with depth. There's nothing like that salty smack of cold, northern water followed by flooding layers of creaminess. Maybe their appearances informed my pallet, but buttermilk ends up pretty close to the mark. The salinity mostly subsides and a silky lactose ebb dampens any possible cloying metallic notion. *Rich, complex, and pleasant* are the only words that come to mind. I decide to write them down. Searching my backpack for a composition notebook, I find only the server pads I use for taking orders at tables. This bums me out because pages from composition notebooks don't frequently get torn away and thrown out from their binding, whereas pages in server pads are specifically designed to be torn away and thrown out. That's why they're perforated. Nevertheless, I scribble down *rich, complex, and pleasant* before grabbing a second oyster.

Because our oysters are always served with cocktail sauce and mignonette, I always have to ask someone to score some lemons on my behalf. I wait until Connor is near me and at the well to bug him with my request. *Sure*, he says as he makes his way into the kitchen. *Wait, no!* I call to him. I look over at Chase shaking his head.

Does he not know that there are cut lemons for the well right in front of him? he asks me. *I guess not.* Now I feel like an ass.

The prospect of waiting for him to return troubles me, so I settle for the mignonette. Acidic garnishes are acidic garnishes, afterall. I move to pour a few drops into the iridescent half-shell, but because of the ramekin's awkward shape, a stream dribbles wayward into the ice bowl. I attempt to correct with a more committed pour and end up flooding the oyster in mignonette. Accepting the consequences of my action, I bring the half-shell to my lips and tilt my head back. A vibrant acidity somewhat tempers the oyster's natural bracing brine, but it's less

like a two-part harmony than a drunk karaoke duo arguing who gets to be Paul Simon and who has to be Art Garfunkle. I chose to love the misstep as a misstep and appreciate the precision of our mignonette like never before, determined to play first chair against all outstanding ambitions. I clear the faux-pas away with another sip of wine and track my garnish progression in my notes when Connor emerges at last from the kitchen with my lemon wedges.

This is when I realize a little server notepad is not the same as a notebook, and a pitiful pile of lemons cut into thin half-moons aren't the same as a couple big, fat, juicy wedges. I wish the guys in the back knew how to cut a lemon right. Some things just don't end up looking like how you imagine them. Still, I press onward, dressing my third oyster with the newly acquired citrus. The oyster once more reminds me that a few drops of lemon are my own preferred garnish, and that nothing unlocks an oyster's essence quite like it. I let it linger for a moment before washing it down with wine. Andrew's old selling-point for the Muscadet rings in my head like a sitcom fadeaway insert: *It's like a team of scientists got together to design a wine specifically for shellfish.* I'm inclined to agree.

I dress the next in cocktail sauce and, upon taking it back, immediately wonder why I made that choice. It just tastes like cocktail sauce.

Wanting to teach myself a lesson for my flagrant errancy, I take the next naked. Its cold body pushes back against my tongue only slightly before disintegrating. This oyster convinces me that the lemon slices I prefer function as a garnish rather than a core element of a good oyster. As-is, this thing has it going on in spades. Sweet notes cut salinity just as well as acidic ones, albeit differently. It finishes crisp and clean; the bread and butter of good raw seafood.

Taking vague notes for vaguely superficial purposes, I decide to dress the final oyster with lemon. It seems the proper way to end the excursion. I fill the final shell with a couple drops and knock it back. The lemon reminds me why I like lemons, and the oyster reminds me why I like oysters. It's what I came for. Didactic harmonies play out to an attentive audience. But moreover, I'm relieved by the sense that the excursion is over. I've eaten my shellfish and taken my notes. I can leave now. Each exhale reminds me that I've tried something new, and each inhale reminds me that something new remains around the corner.

I close out with Chessa, thanking her for taking care of me. As I get ready to leave, Emma emerges to ensure that I didn't close out at all. *He's not paying.*

I inform her that I already did, and she gets somewhat bothered. *Well, I have the manager code; I'm going to delete your payment,* she tells me. *Well, okay, that sounds fine!* I say. I look through my wallet and luckily find a ten. I leave it on the bartop for Chessa. *Can't wait for Saturday,* I tell Emma as I leave. She texts me mere minutes later to tell me that she can still smell my sarcasm in the air.

10 April

Standish Shores from Duxbury, Massachusetts

Beeeen, sings Natalie back by the dish pit. *I've got a surprriise for you.* Her voice raises in pitch on the *-iii-* of *surprise*.

I stop dead in my tracks. *Oh, no...*

Trailing her to the ice machine, she points to three oysters stacked atop one another on a wire rack. *Oysters!* she says.

Wow, look at that! Are they the, uh... I struggle to recall their name. *Uh... the Duxbury ones?*

She looks up at me. *No, silly—they're High Tiders! I pulled them out of my ass right before it got fucked for three hours straight!* She laughs at her own joke. It's been a pretty busy Sunday night with mostly new servers and limited support staff, so I can relate to her snark. I laugh as well as I move in to examine the oysters. The bottom two are massive, but the top one is somewhat more reasonably sized; these are indeed Standish Shores from Duxbury, Mass.

Just then, Khaoula hauls in a tray of dirty plates and glasses. Kahaoula is Hamza's sister, currently hostessing at the restaurant. She moved here from Morocco just a few weeks ago. Leaning in close to me, she sings, *La la, la la, la-la-la!*

It's the violin melody from Money Jungle's "Away, Away," which is her favorite song from my work playlist of forgotten '70s British chamber pop singles. She sings this to me often. It's kind of our little inside joke.

I grab the top oyster and ask Natalie, *will you have one too?* She thinks about it for a second.

La la, Khaoula sings, beginning again from the top.

They're so big, says Natalie. *They kind of scare me.*

Olive, the busser currently polishing a rack of rocks glasses, interrupts, *Oysters? How can you eat those?*

La la, sings Khaoula.

Nikki, one of the new hires, joins the circle. *Does anyone know where the grenadine is?*

Oysters are gross, opines Olive. *And I've dissected sharks.*

Khaoula returns, *La-la-la!*

I put down the oyster.

Everyone, hold the fuck on. Silence. *I need some water.*

I scurry away to the soda fountain and pour myself half a glass, because the water there dribbles so slowly that to fill a pint would require the patience of a saint. Spotting the well of lemon wedges, I grab one and return to the crew. *Okay, Natalie, you can take the small one. I'll have one of the big boys.* Good? Natalie nods; she's in. *Khaoula, do you want one?*

I suddenly remember that Khaoula's currently observing Ramadan, and therefore probably never ever eats shellfish anyway. *No; thank you Mr. Ben*, she says. I feel like an idiot.

Sorry, my bad, I say. Chase—managing tonight—strolls in. *Chase? Oyster?* He sips his cappuccino.

Slimy-ass ocean boogers? Nah, I'm good. Great.

I raise my lemon and offer a squeeze to Natalie, which she readily accepts. I apply a strong dose to my own as well. *Cheers!* we announce before knocking them back.

Despite its intimidating size, this oyster is still leagues smaller from the previous Standish Shore I tried. The lemon seems to harmonize effortlessly with the body's already brimming composition; the cutting acidity outlines identities and interplays between every deep sweet swell and bright saline flourish. The melody comes together, at least for me. I look up to see Natalie's face sour.

Still too salty, she says.

Somehow, Khaoula now holds a to-go tin full of dried fruit and triangular pastries. *You want?* she asks around while popping a date.

I thought you couldn't eat all month? asks Nikki.

Just until sundown, Khaoula explains; Ramadan is trying enough as it is.

What are these? I ask while grabbing one of the triangles.

You'll like it, she assures me.

I bite in and honey rich with orange blossom water coats my pallet. *Oh, it's like baklava!* I assert with a full mouth.

Yes, baby! she confirms, *like baklava. But baklava is Turkish. These are briwats; Moroccan.*

I usually don't eat sweets, but this is hitting a spot for me right now. *This is great. Thank you, Khaoula. Is this always how you break fast during Ramadan? I think I've read that small fruits and such are traditional. Particularly dates, if I recall.*

She enthusiastically nods, *yes; too much food at once so sudden makes your stomach hurt. I have water and dates and briwats, and then I'm ready to make real food when I get home. I've heard about these home meals from Hamza; they sound divine.*

Just then, Hamza himself sticks his head down the corridor. *Hands, please!* he shouts. There's food in the window needing to be run; every server and the MOD stands around doing what seems to be nothing. It's not a good look. I thank Khaoula again, and then Natalie, and finally break from the pack to tend to the dish, which is a chocolate cake for my final straggling bar guests. I deliver it and consider the concept of sweetness as a punctuation. Maybe its function is to cloy as other functions try but fail to; its reverberations echoing a hair beyond the end of a performance and somehow resolve every previous gesture toward resolution.

Or maybe it's just sweetness to its own end.

29 May
Slash Creeks from Hatteras, NC

Full pages of manga at 45° angles line the walls of the stairway up to the izakaya at a ramen joint in Durham called Dashi. The stairway is a little kitschy, but still cute overall. The design of the bar proper, however, is far more elegant; gorgeous polished wood and big windows with an impressive wall of whisk(e)ys all come together and make you feel like you're in an Ozu film. Or, at least, make me feel like I'm in an Ozu film.

Stephan and I stop by for dinner. He's never been, and it used to be one of my favorite dinner spots before things there started to slip a bit during the pandemic. It was once great; it's now simply good. Still, I like to give it a shot every few months, and ramen is a decent enough reason to get out of town for an evening.

We take our seats at the bar and start looking over the various menus—one for drinks, another for appetizers, one for specials, and at last one for ramen bowls. *Well, want to share a couple apps?* I ask him.

That sounds great, he says as he picks up both of the menus that feature starters.

I look mine over and spot something familiar and comforting. *How about some edamame?* I ask.

Eh, that much soy never sits right with me, he says. *But look at this! Grilled chicken heart skewers! I want them.* I've never seen him so excited. *Will you have one?*

I pause for a second. *...I don't think I'm that brave.*

Stephan places the menu down and turns to me soberly. *That's why you need to eat more animal hearts. They'll make you brave. You could absorb the bravery of a chicken.*

I don't think chickens are known for their bravery, dude. In fact, isn't "chicken" synonymous with "coward?" Won't chicken hearts just make me less brave? I ask.

No, I think it's a cumulative function, he answers. I don't buy his logic, but he did study philosophy, so maybe there's something I'm just missing. *Whatever. I'm getting them. And then I will be as strong as six chickens.*

I'd argue further if I felt like it, but instead simply opt for a half-dozen oysters.

The service sucks at Dashi, and we wait around for a while before the bartender comes around. Stephan gets a beer while I get handed a Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc served in a carafe alone. After a few minutes of waiting, it dawns on me that the bartender has no intention of giving me a wine glass. With apprehension for looking like a loon, I clink him cheers and sip straight from the carafe.

It's nice to get out of town and be around people that don't know you, I say.

Yeah, Stephan confirms, *there are too many people that know me.*

Another bartender comes over to greet us. *Are you Stephan Mooneyhan?* he asks.

Shit.

Yes, he says, *most of the time.*

I'm Sarah's boyfriend. Stephan skips a beat.

Oh, yeah, we met that one time! I'm fairly sure that he doesn't recall, but has his stock of "I know you but you don't know me" responses, like we all do.

The two talk about music scene drama for a second while I open and split my pair of disposable chopsticks. Despite knowing that it's uncouth, I sharpen one against the other in an effort to curb my nerves. I hate being the third wheel. Luckily, duty quickly calls and the bartender goes away. Not long after, our appetizers appear from the corner dumbwaiter. We get them at once, their delivery being the only haste I've seen behind the bar this evening.

Stephan's plate bears two charred skewers with three pale brown hearts impaled on each, the hearts being only slightly bigger than a thumbnail. I don't know why, but I expected them to be bigger. Maybe that's why chickens are considered cowardly. My own plate arrives as well, but to my surprise, the oysters come pre-garnished with a yuzu mignonette and rings of green onion.

Why did they come pre-garnished? I ask Stephan as he picks up a skewer. *I know it said "yuzu mignonette" on the menu, but I figured that'd be on the side, you know?*

I think it's pretty common for them to come already garnished in a lot of American Asian restaurants, he tells me. He's probably right; I'm still new to this whole oyster thing, and have mostly only had them at work. Stephan has more experience than me when it comes to "acquired tastes." I can tell by the way he's digging into those hearts.

I feel stronger already, he says. *Does the oyster-dressing bother you?*

Yeah, it does. Do they not believe in their oysters? Do they think I can't make a decision for myself?

It's like high-end sushi, I think. You just gotta let the chef show you a good time.

He's probably right, and I probably need to let go a bit. I offer him an oyster and he accepts, and we take them back together.

Of course, all I can taste is the yuzu. Maybe it's because yuzu is such a strong and concentrated citrus flavor, and maybe it was doled out with too heavy a hand. Or maybe it's all I can taste because I'm a bit miffed about it. Sometimes it's hard to tell how our perception colors our experiences. They're not bad, they're just not what I expected.

Woo, Stephan says. *Lemony.*

Lemony indeed, I say, sipping my carafe of wine and gearing up for the next one. As I bring it to my lips, Stephan offers me a chicken heart. Breaking up the oyster with my tongue, I consider it for a moment, and resolve to at least give it a try. I don't think I'll like it, but who knows. Stranger things have happened, and I at least make an attempt to be game for new things when presented to me. *Only if you have another oyster,* I say.

You don't have to ask me twice, he says.

Luckily, the chicken hearts don't come pre-garnished. It seems like they may have been glazed with soy sauce while grilling, but that mostly just seasons the meat and gives it a nice crisp skin. Still, whole organs are a pretty hard sell for me, so I only muster the courage to bite off half of a heart. That's better than nothing, I assure myself.

The flavor is delicious, but most likely comes more from the seasoning than the heart itself. Hearts don't usually have much fat to them, and the fat they do have is often waxy and not

particularly appetizing, so I'm guessing the grease I'm tasting comes from some other oil, possibly sesame but just as likely something neutral. There's some umami kick from the soy sauce glaze, which I find particularly pleasant. The bigger issue, beyond the psychological one, is how dry the heart is. After a few chomps my mouth is a desert, filled with fibers more closely resembling sawdust than animal protein. I get most of it down and rinse the rest out with a sip from my weird wine carafe.

Feeling brave yet? he asks.

Brave enough to kill that last oyster, I say, picking it up and slurping it down. The roasted notes from the heart make me realize that it's even more acidic than the Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. That's saying something. *Who knows, maybe I'll absorb some of his patience.*