

## Oysters, Pearls

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His station's simple: grill the steaks, lamb chops, and burgers. Duck legs on the griddle, fries in the fryer. I know he's prepped because I'm working next to him. We share a reach-in fridge and an overhead oven, melts cheese on his burgers and broils my oysters. He's only started a couple nights ago, over my weekend, but Chef says he did okay, put him on grill. He should be ready.

Still, I'm nervous. New guys, just out of culinary school, they're so intent on perfectly mincing their shallots or seeding their tomatoes or setting up paisleyed pools of chocolate-hazelnut sauce under their panna cotta they don't see the wheel blossoming with tickets or the panic rising in the waiters' eyes. I mean, sure, they can fashion a radish into a pink-tipped rose, but can they trim a whole tenderloin in four minutes?

I remember one kid a few months back, I was making Hollandaise — we'd run out and Chef had forgotten to sear the salmon — and this greenhorn, standing there in his academy jacket, goes, Want me to set up a double boiler? It was his second night. For what? I said, cracking eggs four at a time, I got to get this *sauce* done. Oh, he says, so we just whisk it fast over low heat? Jesus Christ, I said, whisk it over the highest heat you've *got*. Whisk it like a fucking *blender*. Now dice me some capers, I said, and get out of my way.

A theater-district place like this, the rush kills us. Everybody comes in at six, has to make their curtain by eight, and the rush rolls from station to station — appetizers, grill, sauté, desserts — like a river flooding downstream. By 8:30, I'm fine, but those first two hours kick my ass. When the rush hits, it's like diving off a bridge. You can't think about it, you just have to *do* it, and do it *all* as fast as you can. Or faster.

Tonight looks okay. I'm on first courses, Chef's on sauté and the new guy, Darryl, is between us on grill — the easiest station. Miguel is in the back, just in

case, and my specials aren't too tough: an asparagus and arugula salad, some chicken brochettes. Easy.

We get rolling with a few early tables, a couple of burgers and some steaks, and Darryl handles them okay. He sets up his plates right, perches the watercress just like Chef likes it. In all he seems to be on it. But I'm not going to say anything, won't even *think* anything until we're through the hurricane. I've seen plenty of guys play it smooth at first but disappear by the end — still standing there, still punched in, but all their cooking school confidence swirled down the grease trap.

About 6:15, I get my first wave. A six-top of warm and cold salads, a couple fours with special orders that slow me down. No oysters yet. I buckle down and try to handle it, but in another ten minutes I'm hit pretty hard. I start to back up a little, three tickets coming in a row.

I'm plating some brochettes when I glance over at one point, and Darryl has hardly anything on his grill. He's watching me. He's a big guy, maybe twenty-five, close-cropped hair and a high forehead, wide-set eyes, and that painful acne some cooks get. His hands are big and solid. He looks like he played ball in high school, one of those guys who had a hard time keeping his weight in muscle. He's wiping down his counter, and when he sees me look over, he grins and says, Hey, want a hand with those?

Sure don't, I say, Got it *all* under control. And I do, I'm just sweating a bit, hoping things even out soon.

Let me know if you do, he says.

Look, I say to him under my breath, when you're *trained* on apps you can *worry* about apps. Until then —

I leave it at that.

More orders come in. Two or three special salads, my first order of oysters, and some soups. I'm sweating. It's hitting his station now, mostly ducks and lamb chops, and a couple of steaks. He seems to be keeping up pretty well, though I can't really watch him. I'm timing cold salads to go with soups, trying to flag down a waiter to clarify his chickenscratch on a ticket. Chef is calling out orders, firing sauté, pounding the bell as food starts to come up.

Plate after plate after plate. I glance at my watch: an hour and ten, I think, and we're out of this. I look over just as Darryl does something strange: he's prodding a filet on the grill with quick jabs with his finger, like it's asleep and he's trying to wake it up. Jab, jab. Then he does the same thing to his hand, poking at the muscle just above the base of his thumb. Jab, jab.

Jesus, I'm thinking, What's with the acupuncture? Is that what they teach at chef school these days? But before I can think any more about it I get slammed again, only now it's *really* slammed: soup, oysters, gravlax, oysters, warm and house salads, oysters, oysters, brochette, oysters.

Oh, sorry, one more ticket! Caesar, oysters.

Holy shit.

It’s the oysters that kill me: a half-dozen Tomales Bays to an order, broiled till they open, shucked, sauced, then plated and sent out. Half a minute an oyster, three minutes a plate, *if* you don’t have any bad ones. And this is a bad batch. I do the math and realize that without some help, these tables aren’t going to get their food on time, won’t get to the theatre on time, and, eventually, will crawl up my ass. I’ve seen it. Hey, Chef, I say, can you grab Miguel for me? I need some oysters. Knowing damn well I *have* the oysters but hoping Miguel can help me shuck them. But Chef doesn’t hear me and when I look over I see he’s got eleven pans on the fire.

I can help you, Darryl says, and I give him a look that tells him all he needs to know about the idea.

I put half the oysters I need under the broiler and run back to where Miguel is peeling potatoes. *Ándale*, I say, Get up here. I grab an extra oyster knife from the dish hole and beckon him up to the line. Okay now, watch, I say, lifting an oyster out of the broiler with tongs. Put the knife in here — I tap opposite the muscular hinge — *aquí*, and twist. The oyster opens with a pop. *Comprénde?*

He nods. O-kay. He lifts the second one out awkwardly with the tongs and sets it next to the first. He touches it and yanks his hand back. *Ai!*

*Caliente*, I say, They’re hot! He holds the stony shell gingerly with his fingernails and prods with the knife. It’s slipping and rocking on the counter and he’s leaning on it hard when New Guy speaks up again.

Give him a towel to hold that with, he says, or he’s gonna hurt himself.

I look over and Darryl by now has a string of tickets and a grill full of steaks and lambs and duck legs and two baskets of fries bubbling, and I think, who is this guy to tell me what to do? *I* don’t need one, I say, Miguel doesn’t need one. You need a towel, Miguel? Hell no.

Miguel goes back to his oyster. I pull out the smoked salmon and start slicing thin shavings from it.

Chef calls out, Hey, I’m gonna need an arugula with these entrees.

Got it, I say. How close are you?

But he doesn’t answer, and when I look over, he and Darryl are staring at Miguel, whose own eyes are wide and round as chestnuts and mouth an oval of pain and disbelief, the oyster still unopened on the counter, the handle of the knife sticking out from below his first knuckle, its short, blunt blade buried deep inside his small brown hand.

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You know on those sci-fi shows, the late night ones, the episodes where time stops and the characters somehow keep moving normally inside it? What happens then is sort of like that, because when I think back on it, it’s almost like I slipped into some parallel universe. I saw everything — the hot oyster, the counter, Miguel’s hand, the shadow of blood beginning to shade the knife — and I knew I should be doing something, *thinking* something.

But what I thought of was this: the summer I was fifteen, I went fishing with my cousin Brock, across a narrow leg of the Snake River in Idaho where I’d grown up. It was a perfect day, the trout snapping like mousetraps at anything we threw out — flies, ants, jigs, hoppers, bits of bread and lettuce from our sandwiches. We kept one for every ten we caught, and headed back after sunset with a long string of rainbows. The moon was coming up, and we were late to meet Brock’s dad, my uncle Bob, on the other side.

But when we got to where we’d crossed before, we found the river had tripled in size. Some farmer in Rexberg, I guess, had opened an irrigation gate far upstream. The water was fast and black and Brock looked pale and scared. He’d wanted to cross somewhere wider, but I started in, lifting my gear and the fish as high as I could and trying to pick my way across.

Don’t be such a pussy, I said before I started. I’m hungry. Let’s *go*.

But right away I knew I was in trouble. There was a deep rut just past the first stones and I nearly slipped in, and when I tried to call out to Brock, to tell him to turn back, the rushing water drowned it out. As I turned, he disappeared — emerging, coughing and struggling, thirty feet downstream. Then I slipped and went in myself, ducked into a sucking current ten times colder than I’d imagined. The river pulled me along with no more weight than a cattail, and instantly my waders filled with water, like cold concrete slipping past my belt.

I clawed bankward, the rising moon shattering into drops as I thrashed to the surface. I grabbed at a passing root that turned out to be a leg, the leg of my uncle Bob, who tossed me toward the sand and dived in after Brock. He was below us, clung to an low-hanging tree, gray with panic. Our fish, our gear, our good memories of the day — everything was gone, our luck spent with Brock’s arrival on the back of my uncle, who carried him to the bank in the moonlight. Uncle Bob said later if Brock hadn’t snagged that log, he could have hit his head on a rock, and God knows what might have happened then.

We had chicken backs for dinner that night, and after we’d scraped our plates and watched TV awhile, Brock dug a Butterfinger out of his pocket and ate it there in front of me. I guess he never really trusted me after that, and I can’t say I really blame him.

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When I finally start to come back, the rush is almost over, and I still have a few tickets left. Except now, Darryl is standing next to me in the station, and we’re both opening oysters, a dozen of them in a long line on the counter. Chef must have sent him there, after the busboy took Miguel to the ER and someone — the dishwasher, maybe — cleaned up the mess. I can’t honestly say. I’m still moving at half-speed, and above all the kitchen noise I can distinctly hear the click of Darryl’s knife against each shell, probing the surface for the soft spot. He moves with slow grace, inserting the knife effortlessly, like a key opening a door, not hurrying, not dawdling — a steady fluid pace that feels connected to something. It’s music, and I can hear him playing it. Behind him his station is spotless.

We’re standing there, opening the last oysters on the last order when Darryl finds it: a pearl, balanced on the mollusk’s inside edge, silver and shimmering against the pale pink meat. It’s about the size of a pea, half-hidden in milky juice, but perfectly round, shiny under the bright lights. He picks it up with the tip of his knife and holds it out for me.

This one’s yours, he says. You’re on oysters. You get the pearls.

I’m kind of in shock. You sure about that? I say, startled at the sound of my own voice. You found it.

Nah, go ahead, he says. I find ’em all the time.

I take the pearl from him and roll it gently between my thumb and forefinger, feeling its weight, its smoothness, a hardness that’s almost soft. In its surface I can see a million colors, like a lifetime of memories that washed over it inside the shell. It’s perfect and round and still warm.

Hey, thanks, I say, dropping it into my jacket pocket. Thanks a lot.

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It’s not until later — after the rush, when I’m finishing staff salads and Darryl is cooking himself a filet for dinner — that I see him jabbing at his steak and his hand again, like he did before. He looks tired, his face shiny with grease, his jacket dirty from the night. Steak, hand. Jab, jab.

Hey, I say, What’s the deal with that?

He smiles slightly.

Medium rare, he says.

What are you talking about?

And without any warning, he takes hold of my forefinger and presses it into the muscle of his hand just above his thumb, about an inch below the base of his index finger — almost the exact spot, I realize, where Miguel stabbed himself,

where I *caused* Miguel to stab himself. It feels warm and firm and yet softly fleshy: exactly like a steak cooked medium-rare.

I remember somebody in science class telling me that a pearl starts as a grain of sand, an unwelcome object that enters this otherwise perfect system. It comes in, and rubs the oyster’s body the wrong way, and the oyster starts to cover it, layer by layer, with shell stuff. And it gets rounder and smoother and rounder and smoother, until finally, over time and under pressure, this ugly little grain of sand that caused the oyster so much irritation in the first place turns out to be this amazing, valuable thing.

If I concentrate, I can still feel it in my pocket, round and smooth and slightly warm. I like having it there, a reminder of something I’m not quite sure of yet. I don’t know if I’ll keep it, or give it to Miguel, or offer it to Darryl again. But it’s there, and I’m here, and something is different.