

Oysters – Lynne Golodner

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Image by Tommaso Cantelli, via [Unsplash \(https://unsplash.com/photos/oWyg8EVd0Nc\)](https://unsplash.com/photos/oWyg8EVd0Nc)

The oysters arrived on a paper plate, craggy half-shells pooling ocean brine. A server slung a basket of napkins, vinegar and cocktail sauce on the table. Dan lifted a shell and slurped. I forked one and bit into the softness, closing my eyes. I breathed in through my nose to taste more fully. These were bigger than any oysters I'd ever seen – palm-length, light gray. I texted a picture of them to my father: "I'm back!"

I was emerging from a decade of living as an Orthodox Jew, shedding the cloak of off-limits shellfish and figuring out my own way to sanctify food. I preferred to follow flavor, experience and exploration, not rules dictated by ancient rabbis and preserved by homogeneous communities. I'd grown up in a secular Jewish home where my father saw expensive and exotic meals as his reward for hard work, his antidote to a bland childhood. Food became the way we connected.

Although it was my choice to embrace Orthodox Judaism, I'd missed sampling elegant dishes and

creative concoctions. Instead of traveling to new destinations and tasting culture through cafes, airport kiosks and roadside eateries, I'd had to plan vacations around kosher hotspots and canned goods with rabbi-approved *hekshers* (symbols indicating kosher supervision). I'd missed learning a place through its menus. Most of all, I'd missed savoring flavors with my father.

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Dad first flew on a plane at 18. Much later, when he made his way as a scrap metal entrepreneur and could afford fancy vacations, he took full advantage, wanting to visit corners of the world that as a boy, he hadn't known existed. My family went on cruises and to Caribbean resorts when blue-cold Michigan winters grew bitter. Japan was Dad's favorite destination, where he ate *shabu shabu*, named for the sound of the ingredients – thin strips of meat and vegetables – cooking in hot water tableside. Dad ventured to China when few Americans were brave enough to go, and he insisted that Chinese food as we knew it was nothing like the real thing.

My father regaled us with stories about what an awful cook his mother was. All I remember of Grandma Sarah's kitchen were the Keebler cookies she kept hidden on a high shelf to reward our good behavior, and the soft tuna fish sandwiches she made when Dad and I visited on Sundays. He insisted her culinary ineptitude was legendary: She burnt toast, cooked meat until it was tough as shoe leather, had no sense for a delicate sauce or a velvety marinade. "Where do you think I learned to eat eggs with ketchup?" he'd say.

Shrimp was a regular feature on our family table—cold with cocktail sauce or sauteed with rice pilaf. Once, my father returned from a business trip to Boston with a crate of live lobsters that my mother boiled for dinner. I consumed clams like popcorn, dragged through melted butter. And grilled swordfish was a weekday favorite as familiar in the rotation as breaded chicken – beside a starch and vegetable.

But oysters were our thing. I first tried Oysters Rockefeller in a white-cloth restaurant. Smothered in spinach, butter and cheese, their slimy texture was indiscernible, so I had no childish objections. It wasn't long before raw oysters beckoned, first swiped through cocktail sauce, and soon in nothing but their brine with lemon squeezed over top. I loved the taste and the texture – smooth, fresh, comfortingly salty. When I ate oysters, I felt a surge of energy as if I became part of the ocean itself, womb-like waves swirling around me.

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The place where Dan and I were eating oysters was less a restaurant than a small building on a wooden dock planted on poles in the Pacific Ocean. We'd almost missed the turn as Dan drove along a two-lane rural road in Oregon and I navigated from a piece of paper he'd printed before the trip. A folder of loose papers scattered along the back seat of the rental car. We were eight months into a passionate relationship, on the heels of disappointing first marriages. I was learning that he was great at vacation research, scouring the Internet for restaurants and hiking trails that most people missed.

I saw the similarities between Dan and my father. They both liked to sum things up: Dad was fond of sayings like "People who want to get married get married," and "It's better than the alternative." Dan smiled a lot and says, "It's all good, baby!" After work, Dan mowed the lawn or sat on the couch with me watching TV, while Dad read 1,000-page crime novels or the *New York Times*. They made friends easily – on a plane, in line at a store. At conferences, people swarmed to talk to them.

Both my husband and my father dealt in scraps. My husband an archivist, my dad a scrap metal entrepreneur, they devoted their lives to turning other people's trash into useful things. Dan saved stories, photos and documents, while Dad melted and crushed the wheels from old office chairs or discarded metal shavings into the bones of buildings, the foundation of new creations.

They could unclog any drain, repair any leaky downspout, replace any faucet, attach any light fixture. Dad insisted I keep operating manuals for every piece of equipment I bought, though he was the only one who ever read them. Dan took care of all my IT needs – transferring data when I upgraded my iPhone or computer, troubleshooting when my email wouldn't sync, and setting up new devices when I didn't have the patience for it (which was always).

Most importantly, both men accepted me for who I am – Dan completely, Dad about 90 percent. For example, when I wanted to go to graduate school for creative writing, my father offered to pay for law school. "Lighten up, Lynn," he would say whenever I came to him with hurt feelings. But his 90% acceptance was the most acceptance I found in my family of origin. Feeling like I didn't belong among the people who'd raised me propelled me toward Orthodox Judaism: I craved complete acceptance.

I thought following rules would make me acceptable to others. The real me was too intense, outspoken and brazen: I call it like it is. I'm honest and direct. And that made me "too much" for certain friends, family members and most boyfriends, who ultimately discarded me. So I gave myself up.

As a religious woman, I played a part – wearing the long-skirt, long-sleeved uniform; tucking my curly hair into hats; and not speaking in front of men. I sat in the synagogue's women's section behind a barrier to witness the service men loudly led. At first, following rules felt easy, a relief from the secular life I'd known, where following my instincts had led to so much rejection and hurt.

When I became religious, I didn't mind walking two miles to synagogue on the Sabbath instead of driving, and it was nice to have one day every week without the phone ringing or the TV blaring. What made me sad was that I could no longer eat with my father.

Though he was proud of his Jewish identity, Dad grew up on the streets of Detroit, where he was teased and punched for being a Jew. He never stepped foot in a synagogue from the day of his Bar Mitzvah until he married my mother at 30. Then he went only reluctantly, on the High Holidays, and napped in his seat for most of the service.

Before I chose the Orthodox world, I turned to him for advice and guidance, and our best conversations took place over juicy cheeseburgers and pop-in-your-mouth shrimp cocktail. Dad hated that I embraced religion. We no longer had a table to connect over; my table had so many rules, such boring food, and his seemed very far away.

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It didn't take me long to learn that hypocrisy is not the sole domain of the secular. Much of my insecurity in childhood stemmed from the gossip and judgment in my affluent enclave: You couldn't belong if you didn't wear tight black clothing, blow your curls out smooth, and eventually attend University of Michigan or Michigan State before moving back to the Detroit suburbs, marrying a Jewish guy, and having two or three babies.

I saw the Orthodox world through rosy lenses. Since one of the rabbis who welcomed me in displayed a sign on his dining room table that said, "Thank you for not speaking *lashon hora* (gossip)," I believed everyone strove to watch their words. Since modesty was mandated, I figured women would wear

subdued colors and A-lines, and focus on spirituality, not appearances. But the wealthiest religious women wore skin-tight, curve-hugging clothes that barely fell below the knee upon sitting, and I experienced more gossip, judgment and dismissal than ever: When I started wearing pants again and uncovered my hair, two close friends dropped me like a hot potato.

Where rules are rigid, people bend in extreme ways. In the Orthodox world, the acting-out was legendary: pious men seeking prostitutes, closet KFC eaters, wig-wearing women who run basement businesses and never pay taxes. The enclave I had been so thrilled to discover turned out to be a world of secrets.

Unhappily married, disillusioned by religion, and yearning for love, I divorced and left Orthodoxy at 37, reclaiming the freedom to bare my arms, drive on Saturdays, and spontaneously drop into a new restaurant without consulting supervising rabbis. Soon after, I met Dan on a Jewish dating site.

When I became Orthodox, I wanted to make life simpler, but it never really is. I wanted to know my role and be rewarded for filling it. For instance, I thought if I were the doting, obedient wife, I'd be happy. But I realized that I far preferred having choices. Having choices meant deciding who to love and how to love them. Though my childhood was imperfect, my father taught me to appreciate moments, celebrate good times, experience the world, and eat new foods without fear. If that made me too intense for some people, it would make me exhilarating to others.

I'd missed years of birthday dinners at iconic Detroit restaurants, 20 relatives chattering and passing plates. I'd endured pre-packaged kosher food at cousins' weddings, feeling so on the outskirts of my family of origin that those happy days made me sad. Now, on Friday nights when my children go to their father for Shabbat, Dan cooks for me – white beans with garlic and greens, mussels in wine with crusty bread, a charcuterie of tangy meats, creamy cheeses, and crisp apple slices.

One of the best outcomes of rejecting a religious lifestyle was reconnecting with my father through weekly lunch dates. For years, we chose different restaurants each week – Beverly Hills Grill for burgers or huevos rancheros, Leeza's for omelets and toast with greasy hash browns, Steve's Deli for matzo ball soup and Maurice salads. No matter how busy work was, I looked forward to those islands of time during an ordinary day – just me and Dad savoring bites of stacked sandwiches, scrambled eggs, lentil soup or dripping burgers still pink in the middle, and lingering in conversation.

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My father died early in 2020 after two years of battling an aggressive blood cancer. For most of his illness, Dad kept his calm strength, pretty chill about a terminal diagnosis. He never lingered in bad news, knowing he could do nothing to change it. The illness made him crave red meat, so in his final months, whenever he grew tired of hospital food, I got us corned beef sandwiches from Al's, his favorite hole-in-the-wall deli on Woodward Avenue. The sandwiches were still warm when I returned to his room. We sat close, leaning over the tray beside his bed, biting into the soft bread, the hot meat, the tangy mustard, grease dripping down our fingers.

Three days before he died, Dad ended up in the emergency room, disoriented and badly in need of blood. He swam in and out of lucidity, mumbling about chess. My mother dismissed his words as incoherence, but I knew the dying say things we need to hear, so I leaned in. "I need to make the right move," he said.

"I know, Dad," I replied. "You will."

We sat around him, nervous energy pulsing. It was a small room, bare white walls and no windows. Outside, winter raged in sleeting rain and blowing snow. Suddenly, I needed a corned beef sandwich.

Someone ran out in the cold and drove to Al's. When the sandwiches arrived, I peeled back the paper wrappings, covered my lap in napkins to catch the grease. I sank my teeth in and closed my eyes. The scent, the taste, the texture, the memory transported me to a place where my father was smiling and we were talking easy and long.

Dad opened his eyes. "What's that smell?" he said. "Get that out of here."

I wrapped up the sandwich, stuffed it in a paper bag, and took it to the waiting room. I no longer had an appetite anyway.

A month later, I took my family to the Florida Keys, where we ate key lime pie, Dad's favorite. I relished the soft tangy filling, crumbling crust, light and airy cream on top. I ate seafood fresh from the ocean and bloody steaks in open-air restaurants. The oysters were smaller there, but just as tangy and reassuring. I talked about him, and cried a little with every bite.

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The day Dan and I ate those amazing oysters began with a forest hike, another of Dan's internet finds. We switchbacked through tall trees downhill to a deserted ocean beach. When we reached the rolling, thunderous waves, we felt like the only people in the world. We took off our shoes to let the water wash over our aching feet. We sat on the sand and listened to the surf. Then we wound our way back up through the trees to our car and drove past windblown vineyards and the Tillamook cheese factory to a little building without a sign perched on a dock over the sea. An arching crane dumped oysters from the ocean onto the dock, salt water dripping through the planks. Minutes later, those oysters landed on our plates.

The buzz of conversation in the eatery hummed. Dan smiled, brushed his fingers over my leg. Our knees touched under the table. Servers bustled around the small space, between tables and a counter of refrigerated cases offering just-caught clams, oysters and squid, fresh salads, homemade cole slaw. When the door opened, I heard the roar of the ocean.

My father responded to my message: "Yes!"