Spring, 1984. Working a concert at the Royal Festival Hall in London, I meet a Brit couple during the interval. “So you’re from North Carolina? Where?”

“Oh, it’s tiny, you’ve never heard of it.”

“Try us.”

“Williamston.”

“Home of the Sunnyside Oyster Bar! We’ve eaten there!”

Recently the Sunnyside was featured in *Gourmet Magazine,* but my London experience is proof—it was *already* internationally famous.

Winter, 1998. My eight-year-old daughter, Lily, and I have just moved to Durham from the Pacific Northwest. We’re visiting family down east in Williamston during an R-month, so naturally we visit the Sunnyside.

In business since 1935, it’s an unprepossessing Craftsman-style wooden structure on the road into town, with a discreet pink-and-blue neon window sign. We’re finally seated at the seventy-foot, horseshoe-shaped counter. Behind it, men sling out buckets of oysters, then artfully shuck and serve them one by one into each patron’s dish. Some work silently, others crack jokes, adding to the convivial din of conversations and laughter. Cedar shavings cover the floor.

We finish our pecks of cold, clean, slippery, briny raw oysters, then our medium-steamed ones, which are warm, more al dente—both kinds dipped in melted butter and a warmed-up,

secret-recipe cocktail sauce, served with saltines. The Sunnyside has no kitchen, so they don't mess with hush puppies, and there's nary a vegetable in sight in this inner sanctum. However, on big-crowd nights, like Thanksgiving Friday, people sometimes bring raw veggies and dip to the outer waiting area, where the bar is. While waiting they drink brown-bagged bourbon, and swing a string with a metal ring to catch the hook on the wall—world's simplest game.

The economy in eastern North Carolina is shriveling, but tonight, watching all the joyful reunions at the Sunnyside—some planned, some unexpected—you'd never know it. Few towns have such a reliable gathering place for meeting and greeting. Several guys I went through school with bought the business in 1991 from the original owners, the C. T. Roberson family. Here at the Sunnyside, there's a feeling of prosperity. "They must be making a killing," I tell my sister.

I notice Lil's wooden barstool empty, go looking in the knotty-pine-planked ladies' room, both waiting rooms, then out into the cold. I find her out back by the steamer, coat flung over a bush, dancing in briny steam. Seeing me, she sings, "This is my favorite restaurant in the whole wide world!"

That's funny because, like most children, Lily wouldn't dare eat an oyster. Even my Williamston-born father was squeamish. "*History's bravest man? The first to try an oyster."*

It's fun seeing people I know from childhood, people my parents knew. "*Salt of the earth,"* Dadd y called some of them. But knowing nobody, you'd still sense the charge in the air. Mama recalls oyster-lovers traveling by limo to this small town on the Roanoke River. To celebrate a husband's birthday, she says, wives as far away as Raleigh have rented a bus, filled it with friends and a fully-stocked bar, and directed the driver to Williamston.

The Sunnyside has changed over the years. Brown bagging gave way to liquor-by-the-drink when Martin County passed the referendum, though in 2010 they dropped mixed drinks because of the regulatory hassle and stuck to beer—and wine, which my husband notes with amusement is cheaper than the beer. The building has been listed in the North Carolina Historical Register, and given a couple of sensitive remodelings. The oysters, once from North Carolina's coastal waters, now come mostly from the Gulf. A few menu additions—bowls of shrimp, scallops, crab legs and recently—though rarely ordered—the heretical broccoli-with-cheese.

Also, changes in personnel. From the earliest days, all the shuckers were black men, their faces pictured on paper placemats with their autographs. Mama laminated several of these placemats for me to use at home, but they made me uncomfortable, reminded me that once blacks couldn't eat at the Sunnyside, only work there. A few years ago the first white face appeared on the placemats—one of my older sister's classmates from Williamston High School.

The shuckers are all colorful characters, talented servers. Good tips make it the best service money around. A job whites might have considered demeaning in the past, they are now proud to hold. More recent placemats show sunny faces, about half of them black and half white, framing a simple hand drawing of the Sunnyside Oyster Bar. Under each picture is a name: Timothy Smith, Joey Andrews, Elbert Lee "Griff" Griffin, Floyd L. Spruill, Eric Brown, Jarred Price, Johnny Whitaker, Cody Bryant, Nathaniel "Nate" Williams, Jesse R. Massenburg II, Natt Whitaker. I've laminated dozens of these newer placemats and enjoy using them and giving them to people from all over I've introduced to the Sunnyside.