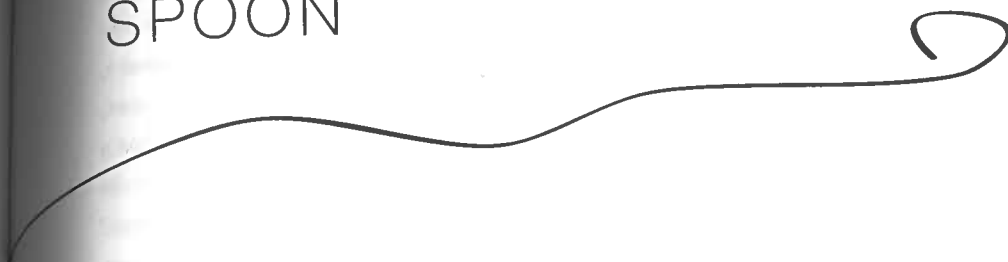


SPOON



THIS SPOON, FLATTENED, not a spoon at all, couldn't spoon anything, no, it's a fossil, an effigy, a spoon for a paper doll, except too weighty. Well, a mirror, then! A tiny glass with a too-long handle—but a prop, a pretend thing—no reflection to be found in its face, it's made of stainless, not silver. This spoon came from the dining room at the Miramar, that old family resort just off the Pacific Coast Highway, on a hill overlooking Santa Barbara and the sea—the Pacific, that is—that vast expanse of blue, that infinity pool of an ocean, with none of the zigging and zagging of the Atlantic, none of its temper—not down as far as Santa Barbara anyway—all equanimity south of Cayucos, at least from afar, though quirky and angular, frigid and dangerous at its shoreline farther north.

But the Miramar: faded, comfortable, worn at the edges—affordable! A few main buildings visible from the road, and then, pulling into the lot, the landscape dotted with little white bungalows roofed in royal blue. Such an odd piece of property—a train running through it—hence the flat spoon, along with a couple of forks also filched from the dining room, plus quarters and pennies, nickels and dimes, nothing but discs

now, wafer-thin, their names, dates, values, smoothed away. We'd leave them on the tracks summer after summer, wait for the trains to come, then pick them up afterward and stow them in our bags—entirely worthless, inestimably valuable—instant souvenirs; better, useless as they were, than regular spoons and forks, better than small change; though, in fact, those long weekends were all about the dole every time: *Can I have a quarter, can I have two, can I have some money for the soda machine, for the candy machine, for the popsicle cart, for the ice cream shack, for the train? Will you take me to the snack bar, to the lemonade stand, to the restaurant, back to the train tracks, please?* And we didn't worry about that train. A straight line, it cut the property in two; we could see it coming from afar, left our loot on the rails, and when we heard the whistle, ran to watch, held hands from yards away (it blew back our hair and our summer dresses) then rushed in to collect and inspect the remains. An activity—an adventure—that never lost its shine, not for the under-ten set, and all of them under ten in those years; under nine, seven, five, three.

The Miramar. We went in droves once a year every year towards the end of summer—a whole neighborhood—a whole community of people. So many of us transplants on this coast, from the east or the midwest, we glommed on to each other and pretended for all we were worth until it was true: We were makeshift family. We who'd come to Los Angeles on a lark, on a bet, and stayed without ever deciding that's what we were doing; we who found ourselves suddenly ensconced, suddenly homeowners with two cars, two dogs, two children, and no uncles, aunts, grandparents to pick up the slack. Blood relations in short supply, we stuck our necks out—cooked for each other, drove for each other, stood by each other—and, all together, planned our family vacations in the last weeks of August. Found ourselves at the Miramar, where the children could wander; where we grown-ups could put our feet up, the ocean just outside our windows, fat novels in our laps, our televisions tuned to the U.S. Open. Year after year (and day after day) we lay across our unmade beds, sand and crumbs in the rumpled sheets, watched the people in Queens fanning themselves while those Santa Barbara breezes turned the pages of our books and tickled our exposed upper thighs. Up to our ears, we

were, in crusts and dregs—our rooms littered with the remains of grilled cheese and macaroni and cheese and cheese sticks; abandoned root beer floats and floaties; half-eaten fruit and half-chewed fruit roll-ups. And our kids everywhere, all over the property, turning up now and then, here and there, on bikes, on skates, in helmets, and goggles; smelling chlorinated, salty, just slightly mildewed in their soggy suits. And all this debris only evidence of good health—prospects if not prosperity—fertility! Sexual viability! We were young then, too.

And in that place I let down my guard. It wasn't the beach that called me, or the pool, or the bar, or the sun, or the water; it was the way the hours stretched before me—unspoken for, uncluttered. Once there, in those cool, sparsely decorated rooms, the walls bare but for the occasional unsigned seascape, no trace of former occupants, no evidence of life in midstream—I somehow achieved lift-off. I floated outside the whole business, everything muffled, muted, even my own responses which seemed to come from somebody else, slightly delayed and out of synch, as if I were watching and listening—not watching, not listening—from far away, or just swathed in bubble wrap maybe. I didn't exactly look the other way—but neither did I react when one kid turned up mid-morning with chocolate ice cream all over her face, or the other put a straw in his second can of Seven Up well before lunch. I became speechless and slow-moving. It was all I could do to shake out the towels, to stand under the shower with my little girl at my knees, my hands in her scalp, absently rinsing the sand away. Cream rinse and cold cereal were my best defense, the most I could manage in my vacation stupor. Without asking permission, I turned inward, abdicated my responsibilities; a tacit agreement really—under the pretense of family time—that I would disappear into myself. But for a morning's search for sea-glass, a twirl in the shallow end, a half-hearted round robin on the ocean-side courts, I went missing, *except* for those trips to the tracks—where I could have stood forever waiting for the train, staring without blinking, willing it to come until I felt it, first under my feet, then rushing me in the face, whipping me back, blurring my vision in the instant, causing the intake of breath, and the folding of myself around the small person in front of me, or the

gripping of that little hand in mine, until he squirmed or she squealed, until the train receded. Not able to say what I'd seen or felt, but I'd been present at least, there when it happened, whatever it was.

And then. And then the tug on my fingers—the clamor—the race to retrieve the quarter, the fork, the penny, the nickel, the flatware. This spoon.