by Hillary Hauser

PICKLE DAYS

Santa Barbara in the nifty fifties was the perfect place to be fourteen.

A minute ago I was working at my desk with the radio on. I was smack in the middle of a writing assignment, due yesterday, when an old Frank Sinatra song came on. Stopping to listen, I was suddenly transported back to the summer of 1957. Here was this song about ants moving rubber tree plants, and I saw myself, clear as day, swimming out to the raft in front of the Miramar Hotel. This was something I did almost every day during the summer when I was fourteen, to meet with other kids my age—mainly and hopefully boys.

What is it about music, that it takes us back to the past faster than a speeding train? I stared blankly at my unfinished manuscript, completely interrupted by memories and reminiscences of Santa Barbara as it was back then.

So when you're feeling low
Instead of letting go
Just remember that ant—
Oops, there goes another rubber tree plant.

Boom. I am eleven years old in Mrs. Cherry's class at Montecito Union, fifth grade, and we are being led out onto the front lawn for our midday naps. Our neatly rolled cardboard mats are unrolled underneath the big tree, and we lie with our noses in the grass trying to find four-leaf clovers while being read a story. No one ever goes to sleep, and no one ever finds a four-leaf clover, but the barest possibility that one can be found makes everyone look all the more.

The best time at Montecito Union is P.E. when we can run loose on the terraced lawn, the girls kicking each other in the shins in the name of soccer and the boys kicking the girls in the name of kicking the girls. Besides kicking we get to play baseball, foursquare, tetherball, and during free time we can play jacks and trade trading cards. Today I'm going to see if I can get Barbara Ariza to trade me her Gainsborough's "Pinky" card for my uninteresting one with the old vase of flowers.

The author c. 1955 in front of her family's house on Miramar Beach.

Speaking of art, sometimes after school I get to head out for art lessons at the old Y on the corner of East Valley and San Ysidro roads. The wooden floor of the entry hall creaks as you walk across it, and the old upright piano sounds tinny when I play "Beautiful Dreamer."

But on normal days there are no art lessons, and so my best buddy Polly Cushing and I will bicycle home and then go off somewhere. Polly loves pickles more than almost anything so today we bicycle to the snack shack at the Miramar Hotel boardwalk, and the cook gives us each a dill pickle, and we sit on the wide wooden stairs to the beach and eat them. The French lifeguard, Jacques, wheels up on his bicycle wearing his red bathing suit and asks what we're up to. We tell him we're eating pickles.

We never know for sure what our itinerary is. After the pickles, Polly and I might sneak a game of croquet or shuffleboard at the Miramar and then go play in the big bamboo bush that grows in the empty lot on Fernald Point next to San Ysidro Creek. We can watch the bats fly from the tall pine trees at sunset, or after a rain float down the creek in inner tubes. Or we'll bicycle to the Music Academy of the West and listen to the violinists practice in the garden. Or along the Bird Refuge to see if we can see the hobos in the woods of the Child Estate. We've heard how the compassionate and eccentric Mrs. Child provides a place on her land for the itinerant riders of the railroads, allowing them to camp and build fires on her property as they migrate up and down the coast.

In the summertime, Miramar Beach

is The Place. A little white picket fence goes up in the sand, and stays up, all summer long. On the boardwalk side of the fence the hotel guests sit, and on the ocean side, the public. The fenced-off side to the left of the stairs has swings, slides, and teeter-totters for the hotel kids, and the fenced-off right side has backrests for the hotel adults. Non-hotel people, like us, stay on the ocean side of the white picket barrier.

The beach is the meeting place for "the group." My older sister is more a part of this group than I am, but I manage to hang around like a sibling pest. Besides Hal Bates, the leader of the group, there is Winslow Collins, Buddy Yule, Vesta McDermott, and occasionally David Crosby, a funny-looking kid who always brings a guitar with him wherever he goes.

During the average group day there are several friendly contests to see who can ride waves farthest in. Vesta McDermott in her leopard bathing suit usually wins over the boys, but then Vesta swims five miles a day in the ocean even during the shark scares when the rest of us are sitting on shore. We are all prepared for sharks, however, because the *News-Press* has published instructions as to what to do if we run into the beast while swimming: stay calm, hold your breath and go under to minimize splashing, and as a last resort hit the shark on the nose with a clenched fist. The best procedure, of course, is to stay out of the water entirely, but Vesta goes in anyway with her white bathing cap.

I go for my long-distance ocean swims under the watchful eye of Dave Shiffman, my Sunday School teacher, who has taught me how to love kelp. We swim out about a quarter of a mile and get next to a giant kelp plant and look down, down, down, as far as we can see. At age thirteen I am getting over the idea that the giant kelp is a monster out to grab swimmers.

At age thirteen I am also in La Cumbre Junior High School taking typing from Mr. Baker, who holds our papers up to the light to see if we have cheated by erasing any mistakes. There

MY SANTA BARBARA

is also English from Marilyn McMahon and homeroom with Gilbert Van Horn.

La Cumbre Junior High of 1957, 1958, and 1959 is an interesting socio-mix of petticoats and popularity contests. The last page of the 1959 *La Cumbrean,* entitled "Popular Personalities of 1959," features "Ideal Ninth Graders," "Ideal Eighth Graders," and "Ideal Seventh Graders," with a boy and a girl picked for each honor. I think this might be a plot to make young people more insecure than they already are, because the way we look is already enough to make Elvis Presley drop his guitar. The girls wear their hair in ducktails. The boys have bristly flat-tops with the hair on the sides glued down with lots of Wildroot Cream Oil, and they roll up the sleeves of their shirts.

It is cool to wear layers and layers of petticoats (if you're a girl), and the *only* place to get them is the Remnant Store on lower State Street. Today after school I get to go there and pick out a new petticoat from the hundreds that hang from the rafters, a ceiling of curly laces and stiff ruffles. They are best when they're new. Later on the trick is to soak them in the heaviest starch available and spread them in big circles on the lawn to dry in the sun. You wear about four of these all rolled up around your waist in a big uncomfortable wad, holding them in place with a large leather belt that keeps them from hanging down below your hem. If you're lucky your skirt will stick nearly straight out. You wear this with a matching angora sweater and saddle oxfords with rolled-down bobby socks.

I'm not allowed to go to the Friday night dances at the Rec, which is just as well, because I don't know how to bop. So I spend most of my time studying piano with Mrs. Mackie. She thinks I have potential and has convinced my parents to buy me a grand piano from Bennett's Music Store. "For her to be practicing on that old spinet," she told my parents, "is like an artist trying to paint with a stick."

I love to play for anyone who will listen so yesterday afternoon I played on my new piano for my sister's group—Winslow Collins, Buddy Yule, and David Crosby. It was a Chopin nocturne, the posthumous one in E minor. When the last chord had died away, I turned around and saw that everyone had left the room, even David Crosby, who said he liked music. Then they popped out from behind the sofas and said something about cruising State Street that night and checking out the Blue Onion drive-in.

At age fourteen I meet my very first boyfriend—Peter Hart—on the raft at the Miramar. He is a nice fellow from San Francisco who is staying at San Ysidro Ranch with his family, and he is eighteen, which is a little old for me, but my parents say O.K. His family

The way we look is already enough to make Elvis Presley drop his guitar.

comes down to the San Ysidro Ranch bathhouse next to the Miramar Hotel boardwalk. Yesterday Peter introduced me to his mother and father, who own the M.J.B. coffee company, which my parents say is a nice thing to own.

The next day Peter and I walk all the way from the Miramar to the East Beach concession and buy a Dad's Root Beer, and we hold hands on the way home. Hal Bates points at us and makes a little fun. The next night, the night before he returns to San Francisco, he takes me on my first real date. He picks me up in a real car, takes me to a real movie at the Granada Theatre and then to a real coffee house on Chapala Street. On the way home we stop on Channel Drive where I experience my first real kiss. Even though I have practiced kissing in the mirror for a couple of years, I am not prepared for how it really feels, and I tremble like a leaf all the way home.

Peter goes home the next day, and for

months afterward I play Dean Martin over and over until the grooves wear off the record:

Return to me
For my dear I'm so lonely
Solo tu, solo tu, solo tu, solo tu
Mi amor...

In 1959 my father is transferred to Seattle and the family moves to the great Northwest. I enroll in a girls' school up there that has a sponsorship program for new students—that is, one of the old students takes a new girl around for two weeks to introduce her and show her the ropes. At the beginning of my second year at the school, as a junior, I hear there is a girl coming from Santa Barbara so I ask to be her sponsor. The girl turns out to be Polly Cushing. Though I haven't seen Polly since our pickle days, we take up right where we left off, but this time she introduces me to the dubious joys of drinking Ripple.

In 1966 I graduate from college and return to Santa Barbara for the summer. The Remnant Store is no longer selling petticoats, but then again ducktails and Wildroot Cream Oil hairdos are gone, too. Miramar Beach is narrower (no longer is the white picket fence put out), and the snack shack is gone. The raft is still there, and the average age of the kids sitting on it is the same—fourteen. Hal Bates has become a local deejay. David Crosby is making a fortune, and we now know why he carried his guitar around with him so much.

An assortment of fishermen, boat captains, and longshoremen pay a top rent of $125 a month to live in the little houses on Miramar Beach. One house has lobster pots and crates to sit on, a kitchen stove that has to be lit with Ohio Blue Tip matches, a refrigerator that has to be pried open with a screwdriver, and a shower that incubates healthy algae. A family of raccoons lives under the house. This is the house my new Santa Barbara friends and I congregate in much of the time. I discover the Channel Islands and scuba diving—and the next thing I know I am living in Los Angeles editing a diving magazine.

1976. I come back to Santa Barbara and discover that the Miramar Beach house with the algae in the shower has just sold for $175,000 and now has fancy canvas awnings and nice deck chairs instead of the lobster pots and crates. The San Ysidro Ranch bathhouse is gone. Sam Battistone has built a house in the empty lot on Fernald Point where Polly and I played in the bamboo. The Miramar raft is still there and the average age of the people sitting on it is still fourteen. Unbelievably, I run into Peter Hart, who had given me my first kiss sixteen years earlier, and he is about a foot shorter than me.

Now it is 1997, and the Miramar Beach house with the algae in the shower has just sold for almost $900,000, and Fernald Point is crowded with luxury homes that go for $4 million up.

Fishermen, boat captains, and longshoremen pay a top rent of $125 a month to live in the little houses on Miramar Beach.

Enough! I should be working on this overdue writing project. It is just too easy to reminisce and fritter away time when the radio is playing oldies. I shut the thing off and turn back to my computer—but wait a minute. First I think I'll eat a pickle. And then I'll dig out the posthumous Chopin nocturne in E minor and play it on my beautiful new Steinway. Then again, maybe I'll take a big break from all this work and go to Miramar Beach, a contented fifty-two-year-old woman with a lot of happy memories swimming around among the fourteen-year-olds. ≈

Hillary Hauser has written many books and magazine articles about the ocean.