Hello and thank you all for reading the very beginning of my memoir, a description of which follows this paragraph. More than anything, I’m interested in your immediate reactions to this section regardless of what I think I’m trying to do. In it I age from 0 to 6 years old. As you read, I hope you’ll remember or believe my premise that small children have more sophisticated thoughts than we assign them. We had no way to articulate our observations at the time they occurred but I’m attempting to access those in a believable way here. Do we have complex, detailed memories not based on photographs or stories others have told us? I’d like to find out what you think, if this is working for you on the page and if you’re willing to go along with me, the kid with the (first person limited) voice as I recall the zeitgeist of the place and period and age the voice of the narrator (me, again.) Of course I’m interested in any of your reactions to it including whether or not it is first person limited. In case you want to listen along to the musical references, a playlist with YouTube links is on a separate page at the end of the manuscript (with apologies in advance for the Mitch Miller.)

Title TBD

The adventures of a girl growing up Bohemian in the years between the Beat Generation and the Blank Generation. Set mostly in Greenwich Village, but also in Miami, Paris, Puerto Rico, San Francisco and Detroit, this story includes the following accoutrements and accompaniments of American pop culture: road trips, a talking parakeet, yellow sandwiches, Yoko Ono, drag queens, an orgy, The Mafia, a meat grinder, The Vagina Painting, an apartment-dwelling rooster, Dick Nixon, Coca-Cola™, small acts of resistance, the farm report, a near-death experience, good clothes and many, many records.

Part I

Miami Songbook
(The Voice of The Baby Scorpion)

1955-1962

“Happiness isn't something you experience; it's something you remember.”
Prologue

*Let Me Go Lover* (as performed by Joan Weber)

Everybody loves a pregnant woman—especially if she’s a flirt, like my mother. At 4 a.m., in her continuous state of morning sickness she drives to the loading dock of the mothership of all Coca-Cola dispatch sites in Atlanta, Georgia. She jawbones with the boys a while as they fill their trucks with cases of *The Pause That Refreshes*, and they give her free bottles of Coke syrup, which she drinks to quell the nausea that is me. I doubt whether anything like that’s worked for her since, but Coca-Cola will always be our medicine.

Say what you will about togetherness and despite the comfort of familiarity, I was anxious to bust out of the womb. On the other hand, if I hadn’t been squeezed for lo those many months into the hunched position, one just right for contemplating my umbilical cord, I wouldn’t be telling our story at all.

What if this is a kind of “do over?” What if the glow-hole thing is both end and beginning? What if I’ve poured right back into the life I just lived? That would cover the whole “deja vu” angle. If this is what’s happening here, I’d have put on the brakes somewhere along way, wouldn’t I? Because I’m not sure I want to see some of you again. Anyway, too late to ponder. I’m out of the bag (so to speak.) I’ve vacated the interior of a human I’ll call my mother for as long as I shall live—and maybe ad infinitum—and this fills me with equal measures of thrill and dread. So, I scream.
Chapter 1

1955

*That’s Learnin’ the Blues* (as performed by Frank Sinatra)

An hour ago, everyone was asleep. I woke up in my cradle, was wailing away some time, hoping to make contact with another human, perhaps even my mother, who is still lying down. As a kind of nod to my need, she has a string tied from one of the cradle’s containment dowels to her toe for the purpose of rocking me. She gets a little rhythm going. Time passes like that but I press on. It’s not what I had in mind. I want a drink, a visit, a view, maybe a musical show of support in this unpleasant cycle of my own garish noise. She finally gets up, plucks me from my blanket, walks me through the bedroom, the hall, the living room, and a few more feet into the U-shaped kitchen. It’s festive in a way. It has a backsplash of one-inch-by-one-inch white subway tile and over the sink, a fake window. A fluorescent light behind café curtains produces a forever daytime effect. The fabric is brown linen with pink and white colored pots and pans, chef hats and barbecue forks outlined in black and colored-in with white and lime green. My grandmother says curtains “warm the place up”, but Miami is already hot. We moved here from Atlanta just a few months ago, when my dad got his new job on the Sports Desk at The Herald.

My mother opens one of the metal cabinet doors over the counter and begins pulling out plates. She issues a “Goddamn you” for each and every one she deliberately smashes into the white porcelain sink. Even I know that’s not what they’re for.

“Goddamn you.” she repeats.

And my father’s sleeping right through this. The lily-white sheets are tidily wrapped around this cherub-faced pajama-man, sleeping soundly, songing-along with the crashing of china on porcelain, of curse on lips, of howling on shoulder. That’s me, still the small and wailing addition to this jarring symphony, the one who set it off, the one thrown like a tea towel over my
mother’s left side as she shatters. I can hear him snore in-between her exasperated breaths, in between most every Goddamn you.

On our kitchen counter is a white Sunbeam Mixmaster, a Waring Blender (also in white) and a brown Crosley Bakelite radio that my mother snaps on and turns up. My bottle is boiling in a pan on the Wedgwood stove. The story is that I’m “colic-y.” She and the pediatrician are experimenting around with feeding me soy-product because as it turns out, I’m allergic to my own mother’s milk. That tells us something about our relationship. What else it tells us is, I’m fat, gone from being a nub to a chub in 6 weeks of this glögg.

Underneath all this outward excellence is Frank Sinatra lobbing “That’s Learnin’ the Blues” from somewhere inside the Crosley. His happy-go-lucky rendering makes him seem witless, delighted.

The breaking of dishes continues along in this way:
“The nights when you don’t sleep,” snore, scream, crash.
“The whole night you’re cryin.” snore, scream, crash.
“.... You’ll walk the floor and wear out your shoes.” snore, scream, crash.

My bottle takes us away from the sink. Or maybe we’re just out of dishes.

I know I have language even without being able to speak any words. Sometimes four voices pile up in my head at one time, in layers. I have insight and an aesthetic. I also have this vague discomfort about the people I’m with. Set aside the physical traits and they don’t seem at all like me and I keep thinking I want to go home or go back. But back where? I am home. That’s the situation. I’ve been me all along, since that first thing I told you about being born. I can tell you this and I know it to be true: I’m forcing myself to adapt. I just can’t really say how I know.

My mom wears a knee-length sleeveless cotton empire nightgown and almost always goes barefoot. I go down from her shoulder and onto the couch like a sack of potatoes.
She moves out of sight. I listen and hear rustling along with the music and the snoring but I can’t see much over this bottle I’m holding. Oh yeah, baby, I can hold it myself. I can see the plain white ceiling and the dark blue and green plaid slipcovers on our couch and Honey, our Basenji dog next to me, and a picture of Hemingway over the couch, part of a big collage of black and white photographs my dad likes. That’s what I see and I don’t know how I know what any of this shit is. I just do.

What I never know is if my mother’s coming back, I just assume it and a minute or two later she does, picks me up and throws me over her shoulder again. I can see the crushed down backs of her navy blue, Kitty Kelly flats and her plain green cloth coat that doesn’t quite cover the bottom of her nightgown. She picks up a small paper bag and car keys and we head out to the side-porch which doubles as my dad’s office. He has a black Royal typewriter on a big heavy desk and the TV is on the floor in there to the left of it, right next to the kitchen. We can’t see in the dark so she hits a switch. Palmetto bugs fly at us from every direction. For an instant we gasp while they make a racket slapping into things, then settle, then we’re out through the back door, into the darkness, with both dogs following and one final “Goddamnit!” from my mom as the screen door slams behind us.

She opens the door to the passenger side of our powder blue Plymouth to put me on the front seat. The interior light comes on. No bugs. I’m lying there just as I did on the sofa with the dogs jumping around on the front seat, only grazing my face with the lightest of toenail touches. “Honey! Freckles! Get in the back.” She leads them out of the driver’s side, opens the door in back for them to get in again.

When my mother’s at the wheel, I hear her first sigh of relief. She’s rolled all the windows down and zipped us out onto the quiet streets. The dogs are settled too, each by a window on their white and yellow striped beach towels, their faces out in the open air, their ears blown back. I know because this is how it always is and because sometimes I’m in my car seat and have a better view of everything. Right now, each of us has our own Miami postcard picture of palms lit by the moon. My mom clicks the radio on, drives Lincoln Road, Biscayne Boulevard and around Collins Avenue all night long. We pass the animated billboards: Coppertone, with a dog pulling
down the bathing suit bottom of a little girl, Johnny Walker Black with his moving legs and walking stick, The Morton Salt Girl with her umbrella. We see The Eden-Roc, The Fontainbleau and other fancy hotels with neon signs that shimmer. Smells from the sea and of orange blossom dance in and out of the car on the heavy, damp air. Johnny Mathis, Debbie Reynolds, Perry Como, Harry Belafonte, advertisements for Dania Jai Lai, Tennessee Ernie Ford all fall from the radio into our car and soften the previous hours into paste.

As first light begins to part the sky, my mom pulls into a Phillips filling station at some cross-section of Nowheresville. She opens up the paper bag she’d placed beside me on the seat, pulls out a “yella sandwich.” It’s made with one slice of white bread and has butter, French’s Mustard, Duke’s Mayonnaise and a slice of American cheese. Also out of the bag come a couple of Milk Bones for the dogs, and my soy-gloop-in-the-bottle.

A tall boy dressed in white leans in beside her window. “Can I get you some gas, Ma’am? Oh! Cute baby.” he says, kinda surprised to see me.

“No thank ya. I’ll just have my little snack and be on my way.”

“Alright, ma’am. You have a good day, then. B’bye.”

The next thing I see is white light and I feel hot and damp. It’s Miami daytime again and we’ve pulled back into the driveway. My mom is carrying me in The Position. I’m part hostage, part accessory. The dogs rush inside ahead of us. Palmetto bugs are asleep, or safely tucked in somewhere ’til it’s night again. She takes me past the kitchen, through the living room and back to the cradle.

My dad’s still snoring in here. Never knew we were gone. Soon he’ll be up and off to his new job.
This is pretty much our routine. We do it a few nights a month for the next couple of years with slight travel variations—and new dishes that we buy at the Winn-Dixie with S&H Green Stamps. The soundtrack varies, I lose the diapers, start thinking about rockets—and “The Bomb.” Who made it and why?

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Chapter 2

1959

*Big Rock Candy Mountain* (as performed by Burl Ives)

*Quizás, Quizás, Quizás* (as performed by Nat King Cole)

Things are great, even if people aren’t. I got my own room, a record player, a baton and a clown punching bag like the one on the teevee show called Romper Room. I have lots of books and some records and a box of dress-up clothes.

Right now I’m listening to Burl Ives and playing dress-up in my closet. It has sliding doors that stretch the whole length of my room. My mother painted them my favorite color, which is Coral Rose. I’m in here pretending that’s my name and I’m playing in my white petticoat made of tulle and wire hoops. I’m not supposed to wear it for dress-up but it makes such a good outfit with my red plastic rain boots with brown fake horn buttons on each side and my Davy Crockett hat. I match the boots with a cape I made out of a red taffeta skirt that came from the collection of my mom and dad’s friend Arlene. Arlene gives me her cast-offs to have fun with. Her hand-me-downs are like our new stuff but they don’t fit my mom so I get them. I’m also making a fort with my Lincoln Logs and trying to get the eyes back into my Happy-Tappy pinball toy. Then I’m pouring tea for the dogs—but not real tea. They’re always lying around wherever I am. I’m saying all the words to One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish out loud because Honey and Freckles think it’s a masterpiece.
Arlene has a sunken living room and a guy named Ray. Ray lives there but it’s her house. He’s not her husband or her boyfriend or her brother but they’re together all the time and either gasping with laughter or bickering. Ray is small-boned, always tan and he ties his perfectly ironed cabana shirts in a knot above his belly-button (which is an outy.) He walks like a girl on the Miss America Pageant, which is a favorite show of mine. I just live to see it every year now. I know two things about Ray that the grownups tell like a secret. One: He’s Filipino. Two: He’s Arlene’s houseboy. I’m not sure what this means but I know not to ask.

Last time we were over there Arlene had on a circle skirt that was open in front over a pair of tight black toreador pants. She wore a peach organza blouse with pirate sleeves that had diamond buttons at the cuff and her shoes were pointy peach satin high heels with diamond clips. She doesn’t walk, she swans, and the smoke from her Craven A cigarettes follows her in swirling trails. She pulls each drag from the end of a long, ivory and silver cigarette holder, and throws her head back when she exhales. Everything about Arlene is SO House Beautiful.

I like deciding what makes good outfits. For instance; no always to the combination of yellow and brown—which is only good on furry animals. The petticoat’s going to get me in trouble but I want a get-up that will really impress Arlene and Ray. Maybe my mom won’t make me change out of it when she sees me.

I’m planning and thinking about things like this in my closet doing the twenty-hundred things I do at a time in here when the air gets full of static electricity, like in storms right before my hair stands up. My name gets called aloud but I can tell it’s on the inside my head. It’s a voice I don’t know or recognize. And I get goosebumps on the back of my neck and arms and I’m very hot, dizzy even. The voice is filled with scolding and it says only my name, the sounds of it drawn out slowly…and I get very still and tell no one.

“Leeeeeeeeeeee-saaaaaaaaaaaaaaah...”
They find me passed out on the floor when they’re ready to go and I don’t know how much time went by. My mom sits me up. I’m all shivers and sweat and she investigates my body and finds a mosquito bite blown up king-size across my whole thigh. It’s on fire but I can’t see anything to put out.

I hike up my petticoat and then I vomit all over my leg. I hardly knew it was coming. My mom runs to get a towel to clean up, a wet washrag for me to hold to my head and a bottle of cold coke for me to drink. My dad’s bent over, searching around the closet floor with a flashlight. He lets out a couple of short, high-pitched yells while backing out of there and beating the floor with one of my Oxfords. “A baby scorpion!” he says, holding out the shoe bottom for us to see. We all freeze staring at the juice of it running down the leather sole.

That’s okay. I hate those Oxfords. They’re practically all I get to wear because they’re “sturdy.” Sturdy means unfashionable. On the bottom of the Coke bottle, stamped in the green glass is the word Chattanooga. Maybe I should look at the underneath parts of things more often. A baby scorpion. I guess that’s who bit me, alright.

We keep to the plan after the killing and go over to Arlene’s for cocktails. She puts on Nat King Cole and Ray makes me a Shirley Temple at their wet bar. I just love him so much. And then he makes my mom and Arlene their daiquiris and pours coffee for my dad, in case he goes back to work.

Down in their sunken living room, they’ve got every magazine you can even imagine. It’s practically a newsstand; “Look” and “Life” and “House and Garden” and “Vogue” and “Time Magazine” all spread out in a fan shape across their giant space-age glass coffee table.

When I was a real baby I didn’t know the word “read.” I thought the word was eat. Do you want to eat a magazine? Do you want to eat a book? So, I did—that’s how much I’ve always loved
them—and I thought if I ate those words and pictures I could have what was in them as part of my life’s adventures. Now, I know the word and I’ve read everything I ate and more: “Babar” and “Ferdinand”, any book by Dr. Seuss, especially Yertle the Turtle and the comics in the Sunday newspaper and even the cereal boxes. My mom taught me how, but sometimes I just like to look at pictures like in Life or even in the Sears Catalog. That one’s like going into a great big store and I forget what’s really around me.

We’re all doing what we do when we come over here. Maybe they should take me to a doctor, though. I could fall off the world again just like I did back there when it all went black. But I’m the lucky one. I didn’t get spanked for wearing the petticoat. No one seemed to notice at all.

Chapter 3

1959

*Hushabye* (as performed by The Mystics)

I got my Alice in Wonderland Doll for Christmas when I was 3 but over this whole year of us being together I loved her too much and wrecked her painted face and her hair. Then, I broke her leg. I did it by accident but I couldn’t stop thinking that maybe she felt it when it turned backwards and snapped off. I tried so hard to fix it and when I couldn’t, I started to cry. Nothing was worse than thinking of Alice hurting from her leg that I broke, except for if it had been one of our dogs. Even getting punished couldn’t be worse than that.

At first my mom told me not to cry because there was nothing to be done about it but I was just so sorry I couldn’t stop myself. My mom hates crying—even though she always says we don’t hate and that hate is bad. She said she couldn’t stand it anymore and if I didn’t stop immediately, she would take Alice away. But the idea of that was even more terrible and it didn’t help me to stop. I kept right on crying and then she scooped Alice from my hands and said if I didn’t stop the tears right now, that she would leave and never come back. Then I really tried but I couldn’t control myself. Everything she said seemed to make it even worse.
And she left, and I followed her out into the street begging her not to go and she shoved me back inside the house and told me that I’d better lock the door and not come out because it’s dangerous out there. And I sat on the floor still crying like a baby and the dogs came over and were licking my face and I kept right on going. I cried because I’d broken Alice’s leg. I cried because I was scared. I cried because my mom was out in danger. I cried because she was never coming back. I cried because I was crying.

It got dark and I fell asleep right there by the door, crying and praying to be a good person and for my mom to come back safe and please don’t let me die and stuff like that. I don’t know when I stopped or what time it was when my mom came home, but she did. And the next day she was normal and I didn’t cry and we went to the beach and we didn’t talk about it. I kept my eyes on her though, up there sunning on our blanket, in case she was going to leave me again.

Even though we’re not allowed to hate, what I hate is the sun—which everyone here loves so much and it’s always summer in Miami. Even though I have a sandbox with an awning and a little plastic swimming pool, my mom and Honey and Freckles and I go to the beach almost every day. She puts our old pink blanket out across the sand. The wool is thin and the satin edging is wearing out so you can count each thread. We have a brown wicker picnic basket with peanut butter sandwiches and a thermos of ice water. My mom takes her dress off over her head and shakes her hair out after. She’s wearing a black one-piece bathing suit that shows off her figure. Most of her skin is tan from all the time we spend here. She also has big pink and white spots that look like clouds crossing her body or what cows have. She says it’s from a lack of pigment. I think maybe that’s why we have hot dogs a lot and why she calls her dress a moo-moo.

She also has a book she wants to read about a lady named Chatterley, so she tells me to go make friends. I’m starting to notice that my mother is not my friend. She’s not even watching me. I
thought it was supposed to be dangerous out in the world. Someone could steal me. Maybe I’m hoping they will.

Chapter 4

1960

*Suite Espanola No. 1 Op. 47* Asturias (Leyenda) as performed by Segovia

On afternoons that we don’t go to the beach my mom sits on our couch in the living room rehearsing her guitar or playing the ukulele and drinking a glass of wine.

When we have company, which is sometimes on Sunday, the grownups play records and do a concert. Sometimes they play their guitars and sing along with the records, too. It’s like a Hootenanny. My mom and I do a few comedy tunes together: Numbers like “A Hole in the Bucket” which we learned by ear from the Harry Belafonte record and “Froggy Went a Courtin.” Everyone tries to do their own versions of the songs they love most.

My dad’s the one who buys all our record albums. He says that he can’t even carry a tune so his only instrument is the record player. If he’s not at work, he goes wherever records are sold. It’s always a big deal when we get a new one. Right now, we have “The Country Blues” on the Hi-Fi all the time. This one is big. Everyone’s over the moon, like the dish ran away with the spoon. When our number one guitar friend, Buck Lindsay comes over I ask him to tell me which of the performers on the record are dead. “Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie McTell, Blind Willie Johnson, Leroy Carr, Big Bill Broonzy, Robert Johnson.” He says the reason so many of the people who play on our records are dead is on account of living the blues. “The blues is a killer,” he says.

Lately, my mom’s been studying Classical and Flamenco guitar with Mr. Arnold Grayson. I thought it was *Flamingo* guitar and when I said it, everyone laughed, but I don’t know why it’s funny. Miami has a lot of birds and is famous for Flamingos so it isn’t just some crazy idea. I
thought it was *My* Ami, too. I also thought Johnny Mathis was Johnny Mattress. I’m a riot, I guess.

It’s a long drive to her lessons at Mr. Grayson’s place. It’s out near the Everglades. Other than the tar itself and a million saw palmettos there’s only one other building along his road. It’s a place like something out of my imagination but it’s real and it’s a hospital for dolls. I didn’t know that dolls had their own hospitals.

We met Mr. Grayson the same way we meet everyone when it’s just me and my mom. He came up to us (in Burdines music department) and said “Where did you get that beautiful red hair, young lady?” He was talking to me, of course. My mom has brown hair but then the two of them start talking about guitars and the next thing I know we’re going to lessons and she’s dying her hair red. She says she’s tired of everyone asking that question and that we don’t want strangers coming up to us all the time. I wasn’t going to say anything but maybe she’s *not* my real mother. But she probably is. But maybe she’s not.

Arnold Grayson is handsome in a Perry Como way. My dad says his real name is Asher Ginsberg and he changed it to Arnold Grayson so he could “keep his belt buckles.” I don’t know what this means. I’ve never seen Mr. Grayson’s belts.

I have to bring things to do during the lesson to keep me from being bored and bothering them while they play. There aren’t any duets for my mom and I in Classical or Flamenco. No words to that music at all as far as I can tell, so I like bringing reading and coloring books and I’ve been carrying Alice’s leg with me in my wicker pocket book everywhere we go.

Most of the time, the three of us sit on tall three-legged stools in a room with louvered windows almost all the way around beginning at the shoulder level of the grownups and extending to the ceiling. A wide shelf runs just under the bottom of the windows on three sides and I use a part of that for my desk. Arnold and my mom have music stands. It rains almost every time we come here. The air smells like Lipton tea and the sound of the raindrops on the glass panes and flat
waxy leaves of the croton plants outside and on the metal roof is like having an orchestra playing along with the guitars. It’s very relaxing—and my mom is always telling me to relax.

One of the weeks we drive out here, my mom pulls into the little driveway of the Doll Hospital, gets out of the car and opens the trunk. She pulls out a paper bag. Inside is my Alice. “Well, come on,” she says. We go into that place. But it’s nothing at all like I imagine. It’s kind of more like a doll bakery except it’s dark. There’s a display case that’s also the counter with a cash register on top. The glass case is completely stuffed with old dolls and doll parts. Some of the faces are pressed up against the front and they look like they’re suffocating. Behind the register is a thin lady with grey hair in a bun. It makes her sound like she’s old but she isn’t. She wears a lavender rayon dress with a pale yellow flower print. Behind her is a heavy grey-green curtain that parts in the middle. We can’t see if there are beds set up for the dolls in there or what. “Aren’t we missing something?” my mom says. I take Alice’s leg out of my pocketbook and hand it over. The lady looks down at it and then at Alice and then at my mom and then at me “I’m sure she’s going to be alright,” she says.

On the way home from the next lesson we stop at the Doll Hospital again and pick up my Alice. She looks exactly like new. Her face has been put back exactly and her legs are perfectly perfect and her patent leather shoes have been vaselined and even her dress and pinafore have been washed and starched and pressed. I say thank you, but I have to squint and smile hard not to cry at getting her back this way, at seeing her beautiful face again. I’m going to be so careful now that I’m not a baby anymore.

Chapter 5
1960

*Mister Softee Tune* (as performed by a horn-shaped speaker on top of a white ice-cream truck)

*Stack-o-Lee* (as performed by Mississippi John Hurt)

Most of the time we live alone, my mother and I. My mom says my dad likes to work. His job is on the City Desk of the paper now. There’s a lot going on there, because where we live is here,
in this big, hot, wet place, things like Arthur Godfrey in the hospital with nose cancer because he pulled out a hair from inside it. My dad knows all about things like that, and also sports. I don’t like sports, except for The Orange Bowl. At halftime once it rained feathers in Crayola colors. When I thought about it though, I knew those feathers didn’t come from pillows.

The Orange Bowl had a marching band. I wasn’t all that keen on marching but I liked the drums and the batons and on my next birthday my dad bought me my record player and my first 45 single. I wanted the record because I already had a baton and it’s good for practice and because it’s yellow vinyl, not black and it’s yellow because it’s Mitch Miller conducting *The Yellow Rose of Texas*.

My grandmother hates Mitch Miller. “He’s sooo tacky,” she says and I like to tease her about “Sing Along With Mitch” and trick her into seeing that on T.V. “He’s phony, phony, phony”, she’ll say and “Tacky, tacky, tacky.” I think he looks like the Devil on the paper around the Underwood Deviled Ham can. My dad loves that stuff. I can’t wait to play the record and baton around the living room if she visits.

When my mom and I are at home late at night by ourselves, George, the Ice Cream Man comes by. He’s not regular about his nights. “Unreliable.” my mom says. She also says never trust anyone named George. That’s because of it being her Dad’s name. We never see him. Ever. Nobody does. She says George, her dad, is a “sterno drunk”. I guess that means we’re not supposed to get him mad but it might be some fancy Flamingo Beatnik talk. Anyway, we aren’t supposed to trust Georges except maybe if it’s George Washington and my mom says his teeth were stinko because they were made of wood. But it could also be from lying through them. She says God can strike you dead with lightning if you lie through your teeth. Or maybe that’s only in my case.
George’s arrival is announced by his song, which you can hear from far away. It’s very much what you’d call kiddie music; high pitched and jangly, not organized or even pleasing and it jumps out at you from a horn on top of his white truck and it plays over and over getting louder and louder until you go crazy, or give in and buy an ice cream. I start asking for a Dilly Bar at the first note I can hear of his music. Dilly Bar is Dairy Queen thing but George has a variation of it and I like saying “Dilly Bar.” If I get to have one, my mom comes out with me to pay and then she curses about George while we’re walking back into the house. She says, “That George is a goddamned drunk” and “I could cut the whisky smell with a knife” and “what other ice cream man in the known universe comes around blasting some infernal tune at ten ‘o clock at night?” It takes all her breath to say it.

I just wonder how the music comes out of that truck horn, if it’s from the same place as that certain voice that calls me from inside my head and then, if that voice was the voice of Chattanooga, the scorpion baby, but I don’t ask. That poor dead scorpion baby’s parts are still smushed around on the way-back of my closet floor but I can’t think about that now. I need to concentrate on not getting chocolate shell and vanilla ice cream on these ruby and lime-green Chinese silk pajamas. I got them from my grandmother. She once married a George.

I don’t know exactly when my mom decided I was allergic to chocolate. “Bad dreams.” she said, and because she knows I’m not a plain vanilla girl, that put an end to all visits with George, that no-good drunk. I think he really liked us. Maybe we were his only customers at night. Maybe his truck is his home. I miss him. He was interesting. But I miss chocolate more.

Chapter 6
1960

If The Jasmine Don’t Get You (as performed by Vince Martin)
To continue our musical education, sometimes my mom and I go to coffeehouses in Coral Gables and the Coconut Grove at night. My parents and their guitar-playing friends love the music there and special attention is paid to finger-picking styles. I’m not sure if my dad knows we’re going by ourselves. He prefers to listen to our records at home, anyway. He says it’s not easy to see the people he likes in Miami. Some of his favorites are Odetta, Reverend Gary Davis, Harry Belafonte or Elizabeth Cotton who plays her guitar upside down and backwards. “If you want to see them you have to live in New York,” he says. Maybe someday we’ll go there.

One of the places in The Grove that allows kids has a little door behind the bar that’s sized perfectly for me but the grownups have to fold themselves in half to get through. Inside is a big living room with mattresses covering most of the floor and low tables in between. They have candles on them in red and green glass holders with fishnet around the outsides. I get to order iced tea to keep me awake for the whole show and it comes in a hurricane glass with a skinny straw. In the front of the room there’s a tiny two-man stage about as high off the floor as the mattresses. One guy who performs here all the time is Vince Martin. He’s a good picker and singer and he’s handsome and he takes requests at the end. I always ask for “Candy Man” and he sings it to me every time.

One night we make fried chicken dinner at our house for Vince. He’s coming to visit and play with us. I’m running around with a crazy kind of excitement I don’t even understand. I get stupid about what outfit to put on and then because he’s late I change it again. It gets to be ten o’clock at night. I know this because I can’t stop asking what time it is and all that nice dinner my mom cooked with homemade biscuits and gravy is cold. My dad says I have to eat something and go to bed. I’m really sad and mad all at the same time. It has been my most confusing night ever.

My mom says she’ll ask Vince if he’ll come over another time so I can see him in our own kitchen and living room and we can sing together like he promised. I get halfway through some peas and a piece of fried chicken and then quit stalling, go brush my teeth, change into my pajamas, get tucked in and he still hasn’t come. I want to stay up but I can barely keep my eyes open. As soon as I finish my prayers, the phone rings. I can hear my dad speaking:
“Oh, hi Vince. Yeah. Is that right? Ha ha. I understand. Well, is there anything we can do for you? Okay, then. Thanks for letting us know.” He hangs up.

“He’s in Dade County Jail on charges of driving with an open container and under the influence of a controlled substance.”

“Hunh” says my mother.

_Candy Man. My Vince. I don’t know what any of that means except for jail._

Whatever happened, I know he’s never coming over here. Not a chance.

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Chapter 7

1960

_Come Softly To Me_ (as performed by The Fleetwoods)

Right around the time of my new chocolate allergy, a parakeet bird flew into our house. It was one like they sell at the Woolworth Store. Honey and Freckles got a little too excited about it so we put those two in my bedroom and let the bird investigate around while we opened all the other windows and both doors to try and free it. My mom whistled and sang and talked to the bird and I tried to show it the exits, but it was very stubborn and wouldn’t go back outside. After some time went by, we put the screens back in the windows, closed everything up again and drove to Woolworth’s where we bought one of their birdcages and some bird food and bird toys.

It took almost the whole rest of the day for us to catch him and put him inside his new cage. Usually I’m chasing Freckles and trying to get her back into our house. My mom forgets to close our little gate. It’s in the back where the dogs and I spend a lot of time. I have to run after her because Freckles loves to take off and run away and she doesn’t know how to be careful or that she might get lost. My mom is perfectly casual about it, says not to bother, that she’ll come back, but I don’t know how she can be sure. Freckles keeps on running. I don’t think she has a chance out there against all the danger.
Once we got the bird settled, we let the dogs out of my room. They ran all around the place sniffing everything before they figured out that the bird was up on the counter in the kitchen. Then they calmed down and I went to the back door to make sure the gate was closed before I let them out into the yard.

The bird looked at himself in the little bird-mirror we bought and he puffed up his whole body like he had a balloon inside. I think it meant he was happy but my mom said he probably just thought his reflection was another bird. Then she said birds need privacy in order to get a good night’s sleep so we covered his cage with a big piece of Madras left over from the last sport-shirt my mom made for my dad. It was just like we had wallpapered the bird-room.

One time I was looking through all our drawers for stuff to play with and I found a round, pearly, plastic box in my mom and dad’s dresser. It had a molded piece of rubber that fit perfectly inside it. I closed it up and took it out of the drawer and asked my mom what it was and if I could have the box. That was when I got a talking-to about privacy. We went over a list of things that would be minding our own business and also what we shouldn’t do in front of other people. It was good to know so I won’t have to be ashamed of myself as much, probably. For birds, they’re dressed for the rest of their lives and only really need privacy for sleeping.

When I went to bed, I didn’t even think about Vince or Adam from Bonanza or any of the Georges. I couldn’t think of anyone but that bird. If he was a he, he looked like a king. He was sky blue and a speckled grey and white mixture and when I held him my heart jumped up and down because he was so soft and kind of crushy and squashy like a tiny, beautiful satin pillow but he was alive and fragile. Also, his yellow beak was very sharp. I wanted to call him our bird and give him a name. Was he a she? Was she missing her old home? Was she sleeping? Was she thinking about a little girl? I wanted George to see her or him, but when I heard the music, I knew I couldn’t ask. But maybe birds like ice cream, trucks, loud music, and drunks. I’ll bet they do. I wish I’d paid more attention to the talking bird man at Parrot Jungle.
Bird’s first full day in his new home began with us uncovering him at seven in the morning. We could hear him moving around inside so we knew he was awake. My mom and I stuck our big heads next to him and said some things we thought birds might like to hear in voices we made up for bird ears and our little visitor cocked his head and looked at us like we were crazy. If he’d been doing anything private I couldn’t tell. Then he screeched and that was loud and painful and then he said this very clearly: “CHEEP! CHEEP!” And then he said, “Good morning Sam. Good morning Sandra.” and we were speechless. I never knew any real animals that talked. I thought they only talked in books and in Huckleberry Hound and Bugs Bunny and The Wonderful World of Disney. No one in our house was called Sam or Sandra, but sometimes my mom called my dad cheap.

We put an ad in my dad’s newspaper that said LOST BIRD looking for Sam and Sandra. It had our phone number on it and my mom said we’d wait and see if anyone was looking and I hoped so hard that no one would call because all kids want their own real, talking animals.

Chapter 8
1960

_Has Anybody Seen My Gal_ (as performed by Mitch Miller and The Mitch Miller Orchestra)

My mom’s mother travels a lot. Her name is Whitney and she calls me “Beautifullest.” That’s her whole name for me. I like it because it makes me feel special, even though I know I’m not. My mother told me that we’re not special and all people are the same even if we don’t look it or act like it. That we can’t have a good conscience if we think we’re different. My dad also told me I’m not special. But he didn’t say why.

She explained this in the car when we went to help people sign up to vote for John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Almost all the people we signed up are brown and they’re called Negroes and they haven’t been encouraged to vote even though they’re just like everybody. My mom says Negro means black in Spanish. But most negroes aren’t Spanish or black. Almost all the music we
listen to is by negro musicians and we think they’re special whether my mom admits it or not. They also come in many other pretty colors but they’re all called negro and we’re not. We’re lighter colors and we’re called whites and nobody is really white, either. White is for walls and marshmallows. And my mom has all colors of spots. And she’s encouraged to vote. But none of us are special. What about Johnny Mathis? What about Ray? I think he’s special. His color is in the middle of everybody. What about Harry Belafonte? Is he white or negro? It’s very confusing so I don’t know why we have to know.

The people we signed up for voting were ladies and they were dressed up in beautiful bright dresses and hats that had many colorful flowers on them. “Church clothes,” my mom said. My mom and the ladies talked and laughed like they were old friends and we got to see some of them again when we picked them up and drove them to the polls for the real voting. Two of the ladies wouldn’t come out again. My mom said they were afraid and that the ladies who vote are brave and they want change, that there are too many bad men in this world and we all believe that Kennedy can turn things around and no one will have to be afraid anymore. I wanted to vote for JFK, too but you have to be twenty-one.

If John Fitzgerald Kennedy isn’t special, I don’t think I understand what special is or who that word is for.

My grandmother and I think everyone is special if you look into them. I call her Moda, which is almost the way I said Grandmother since the beginning. She lets me eat Cocoa Krispies with cream and buys me presents that are perfect for me like my Easter Bunny who is small and goes with me almost everywhere. When she visits us from South Carolina, my dad comes home early. I know it’s because she makes him feel special, too and when she’s here, he doesn’t just eat and fall asleep. He sits up jabbering to her about himself and she seems highly entertained and he seems happy. Even if we aren’t special it’s very important that my dad is happy.

Aside from her Mitch Miller allergy, my grandmother likes music, especially Buddy Bolden and Scott Joplin and she likes show business, too. She used to be a flapper, which is why she has a haircut called Bob. She’s very slim and tasteful and wears a size 4 ½ shoe. Her favorite colors
are the combination of a certain purple with what she calls “fawest” green. She’s also known for her black and white coat made out of a pony. I like to pat it but the idea of a pony becoming a coat is very bad.

Right after the chocolate allergy and the parakeet bird and before I start kindergarten, my grandmother and my mother’s sister come for a visit. Aunt Money’s a college graduate but she’s never had a boyfriend. My mother said she’s “twenty-two years old and still a virgin,” which I think means she looks like the angels in pictures with Jesus. But she doesn’t look like that at all. But she kind of acts like my dad is her boyfriend. She giggles at everything he does or says and then she cocks her head down like the parakeet bird, which, now that we know him and he’s ours, means we can pat his head if we want to. It makes me feel uncomfortable that she does it. And I don’t know why they call her Money. Nobody ever has any.

My mom and dad and their families have known each other for a long time from growing up in two towns in South Carolina practically next door to one another called Aiken and Graniteville. I’m pretty new by comparison.

My mom and dad met in High School. They made jokes together about people, and said punny things like having an imaginary friend named Moon Upinthesky who was Jewish like my dad. There weren’t a lot of Jews in their classes, or any, I guess, and my mom, who is always attracted to whatever thing is not like the others, went for him in a big way which makes it pretty obvious that we’re not all alike and that some people think some people are special even if they say no one is. My dad likes to be called Mort, because his whole first name—Mordecai—is too long but everyone who knows him from the old days calls him by the whole thing, except for Jane, who is my mother, of course.

I don’t even know what a Jew is. My mother says that there are Christians and Jews. Christians have Jesus but Jesus is a Jew. Jesus is special, even if no one is. I went to Sunday school for Jews and then one for Christians because everyone thought it was in my interest. Jews have Hannukah, the festival of lights and Christians have Christmas, the festival of lights on trees. My mom makes us have both because it makes my grandparents happy. I don’t mind because there
are presents but I really don’t know why everyone doesn’t combine. Especially if we’re all the same. When I ask questions about it, I get answers that only make more questions and we’re all very tired from my asking about everything.

When it’s just me and Moda and Aunt Money hanging around together, those two talk about my dad. They say “Iddn’t he jus’ the cutest thang?” and “Uh huh! That Maw-dee-cai, yo daddy is just the cutest thang.” Practically my entire family grew up with southern accents, which means they talk like that and they say certain words really slow to show you they mean it.

I’m like the Tar Baby in the Uncle Remus stories when they go all crazy for my dad. “De Tar Baby, he jus’ say Nuffin.”

The dogs run past me to the back porch door and greet him when he comes home, which is so much earlier than usual that it’s still light out. I’m watching The Friendly Giant on T.V. and Moda and Money rush by me, summer-silk clothes making swishing sounds in their own wind.

“Oh Maw-dee-cai, you cutest thang, come on ovah heah an’ let us give you some shhugah!” Moda says. And he does and she does and so does Aunt Money and he doesn’t seem to mind but he doesn’t have any choice about it either. And he steps out of the crowd of dogs and my mother’s family and I ignore it, focus on the beautiful, silvery television picture.

Bird is calling out from his house on the kitchen counter with a few musical tweets and my mom is making my favorite for dinner; hot dogs and macaroni and cheese and my unfavorite: chilled asparagus--with mayonnaise. The whole bunch of bodies go past me into the kitchen and sit straightaway down at the table with the paper napkins I folded next to their plates and my mom orders me to turn off the T.V. and calls me to the table “Right Now!” Everyone’s acting all southern polite putting napkins in their laps, making chit-chat, passing things to one another as my mom is putting hot dogs on the plates.

I look over at my dad because he’s quiet and he’s looking at the food and he starts to get shaky, which is a warning sign I recognize. He asks my mother why she decided to make “hot dogs and
mac for gods sake.” His voice is pitched a little high and he looks boiled red and kind of bloaty just like the hot dog and he chokes out a strange strangled laugh as he looks around at all of us. Then he says to my mother as he taps the tines of the fork on the table, “What are you trying to make me look like here?” and he’s confusing everyone because he’s got a little snorty laugh and an indiscernible smile-like thing on his mouth. And I see her take this in and she and I look at my dad in the Madras cloth sport-shirt she made him from scratch and she sits real still and my dad says to my aunt and my grandmother, “See what I have to put up with?” and they giggle and murmur, “Oh, Maw-dee-ky, we know” and giggle a little more and put their napkins in their laps, but not me. My head feels like it’s being tightened and I hear the baby scorpion voice very close to it now; “Leeeeeeeeessssaaaah....” and I want to look around, see if its ghost is crawling up my leg but I don’t take my eyes off of my mother who lifts her plate with the hot dog and the catsup and the mac and cheese and the asparagus with mayonnaise and throws it across the table at my dad and I hear the edge of it clunk against the top of his wide flat nose that he really hates and he stands up quick as lightning and everyone else does too.

We’re all looking at my dad. A tiny trickle of blood is starting down his face and some catsup is sliding down that nice new sport shirt and then the plate breaks all to pieces on the floor. It’s very quiet again. Everyone’s standing up and nothing is happening. Nothing at all.

And then, in his loudest sharpest voice, our new bird who’s also looking at my dad says, “CHEAP!” and we each take it as we heard it. And my dad turns to look at the bird. An even quieter quiet happens and that static electricity thing forms hard around the inside of my head and I feel swoony now. My dad turns his head toward my mother and he yells “GODDAMN YOU!” and goes off to the bedroom and slams the goddamn door. I’m still not sure what he thought we should be eating instead.

Everyone is frozen except for my plate-breakin’ momma who is suddenly covering the cage of our new talking bird. Then Money starts to cry and says “Maw-dee-cai!” and goes chasing after him followed by Moda who makes a tsk sound at my mother and says “Shame, shame, ah know your name. Jane Holley.”
Huckleberry Hound Theme (as performed by Soundtrack Artists)

I’m the only one at the table now. I missed Huckleberry Hound for this. I’m listening for George, that Goddamn drunk. Bird is getting some privacy. Mordecai, also known as The Cutest Thang also known as Mort (so he can keep his belt buckle, I guess) is bleeding in the bedroom with Jane’s mom and sister and a washcloth. There’ll be no hilarious Sing Along with Mitch for The Beautifullest. that’s for sure. Jane Holley is practicing her guitar, playing and singing and having a second glass of wine alone in the living room: “In the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shines…”

I want a circle skirt, some chocolate and a houseboy.

Chapter 9

1960

Cow Bells and Coffee Beans (as composed and conducted by Henry Mancini)
The Perry Mason Theme (as composed by Fred Steiner)

My mom thinks she’s making me independent, but I think she’s making me strange. She pushes me to go out and play. She tells me to make friends but also not to talk to strangers. I’m always trying to figure out how to make friends and not talk to strangers at the same time. She says not to talk to strangers because some people are really bad (like burglars), but she never says how to tell who is and who isn't.

Everyone agrees that I spend too much time alone, though. I like to think about all my questions about stuff, but sometimes I start to feel like I’m falling off this earth. Then I have to close my
eyes and lean on something, like a post or a tree or a wall. I like to hang around my room memorizing my favorite books. I like to say all of “Green Eggs and Ham” out loud—but I’m beginning to admit I’m too old for that story. My mom says it's not good for me to “sit in the closet all day in the semi-dark when we have all this beautiful sunshine” and as you know, she doesn't want me fooling around with my petticoat.

"Go out and make friends," she says, and she blots the Raving Red lipstick from her mouth onto a square of toilet paper folded in half. Then, in a big swoop, she sprays some Chanel No.5 on her neck. Where’s she going? I want to know.

I put on the sunglasses that Moda bought me at her drug store in Graniteville. They’re not the kid kind. They have real glass that’s dark green and they're kind of swank. I’m wearing my favorite pedal-pushers, zoris, and a white crop-top with little fuzzy balls around the bottom of it. I go out into the front yard and then just past the hibiscus hedge, where I can see up and down our street. I make moves in stages. There’s no sidewalk so I’m walking along the little strip on the street-side of our hedge, and then house to house, pausing to look into one or two. I feel kind of like a burglar. If anyone sees me, will they know I’m only looking for other kids? I take off the glasses and run back to my own yard and then around back to my sandbox. At least I can tell my mother I’m outside. I try this for a few minutes every day until I meet my first kid. I’ve seen her before but on the day I meet her, she and her mom are just passing our house on their way home from the Winn-Dixie. They’re carrying a lot of bags of groceries.

"My mom told me to go out and make friends," I say. "That's why I'm standing out here on the sidewalk. Have you noticed me before? I was afraid people would think I was a burglar so I didn't go very far. Hey, I like your dress." They keep walking this whole time and I’m tagging along.

I’m thinking about how to look harmless and not seem like a stranger-burglar when I realize they’re not talking and maybe don’t even know what I’m saying but then we’re in front of their house and they invite me in. The mom says “Out into the backyard,” and she has a very strong accent that’s not Southern and she shows us the way through the tiny house. The other kid and I
sit on her swing set and zip back and forth. Before long we’re talking about I don’t-know-what which amounts to just about everything.

Her name is Mary Alicia de Jesus St. Vincent Perez. When Mary wasn't even one year old she and her mother came to Miami from Cuba to escape The Communists. Now she’s five years old like me, but much fancier. Not just because she has the most names, but she says she always wears a dress with a full petticoat that her mother irons each day and a sparkly comb in her most perfect black hair. I think she could grow up to marry a bullfighter like in the paintings in restaurants.

Mary and her mother go to the Catholic Church a lot, and Mary is baptized. She told me that being baptized is being blessed, that nothing bad can happen to you, and you can get into heaven. Heaven is full of angels and you can be one. Mary says you can't go to heaven at all unless you’re baptized.

I wonder why she thinks about going to heaven so much when we’re only five, but maybe it’s because of the bomb. If no one's coming in a spaceship to take me back someplace, I want to live to be a grown up so that I can enjoy my life like in the ads, so I can drive a car and smoke and play cards and have coffee with friends, so I can be simply a female-female and go on dates and enjoy being a girl like on the Miss America pageant—and then maybe heaven—but much, much later.

I ask my mom if I’m baptized, but she says no. She says that Mary and her mom are religious, and that's why they're baptized.

"Are you baptized, Mom?"

"Yes," she says, "but we're not religious, so you don't need to be baptized, but we believe in God, and that's why we say our prayers." Jesus Christ, this is confusing.

She always says that God will punish me if I’m bad, and that if he struck people dead for lying I would be gone in a flash of lightning. Our Father, who art in Heaven, I guess you're sort of like my Dad. He shows up mostly for punishments.
When Mary and her Mom aren't at church, Mrs. St. Vincent Perez is usually ironing or cooking. The first time I went to their house, Mary and I sat on the swings, and she brought out a plate of something called tostones. "Green bananas," she told me in English. These are worth the whole going out to make friends trip. I knew then that I would definitely be coming back. I wonder if it's wrong to like them so much, to eat so many, if I should be polite even once and say, "No Thank You."

To pay them back, I push Mary so high on the swing that her toes can touch heaven, because for her heaven is in the sky where Jesus went. Tostones and a Coke and Mary and her mother and Jesus, and his mother, and Joseph and his wife—also called Mary—and a holy ghost. They tell me I am with them, but I still feel like the stranger in the dark green glasses.

For me, heaven is outer space. Our tiny bathroom at home (with lights out) is my rocket ship for adventures in the universe. Unlike the real launches, my rocket can only take off during thunderstorms and I take advantage of this crazy Miami weather for the countdown. I sit in the dark under the sink with my legs crossed and face forward. The sink is held up by two modern chrome legs in the front and I hold onto them. The toilet is right next to the sink and most important, the flusher is on the side closest to me. I sit patiently waiting for the lightning to make the little window in the shower visible. That’s the IGNITION sign. I reach over and put my hand on the flusher and begin the COUNTDOWN. So as not to endanger myself or the mission, I flush along exactly in time with the thunder which is the same sound as a real rocket BLAST OFF! I return my hand to the launch position holding on to the chrome legs and shake, imagine myself hurtling through the sky and back into space where I came from until there’s no more sound—except the rain—which might be meteorites. I’ve got to get back out there. I don’t think anyone’s coming for me.

I want to go to the real Cape Canaveral and go up in a rocket more than most girls want a Barbie. I want to know if the sky is the same as a ceiling. I suppose that’s why they’re sending up the rocket with a man in it, to find out. Since I think I might not be of this Earth, I have a lot tied up in how that launch turns out. I had a dream that I was a full-grown person on another planet and I
was a kind of nurse or maybe a doctor, working at an outdoor platform early in the night. I was there to graft skin onto those who’d had theirs burned off from a bomb or something like that. This place had a sign that said: Flesh Redemption Center. I don’t even have a Saint in my name but I believe in angels and aliens and I think they’re out in space whether you call it heaven or not. Everyone talks about the freedom they dream of. It’s in a lot of our songs. Up in my rocket is home. It’s even better than my dreams about driving our car.

Chapter 10
1960

*TABOU* (as performed by Lecuona Cuban Boys)

Boys come by our yards every once in a while and look in. If their mothers told them to go make friends, they're not any better at it than I am. If you look at one, they usually run off. I actually might like one of them more than the others, the one who has this very good tricycle. It's blue with shining sparkles in the paint, and it has white plastic cowboy fringe hanging off of the handgrips. He is probably getting to be too old for it, but, just like me and outer space and those red fish blue fish, it's his first love. His name is Scotty.

It's about seventy-hundred degrees, and so I’m hanging around under the awning in my sandbox with Honey and Freckles. It’s a day when Mary is at church with her mother. Scotty pedals right up to our gate. He stops and asks me if I want to ride on the back of that fancy trike.

"You can just hold on to my shoulders, and we'll go around the block. I'll pedal real slow," he says.

He’s wearing a Madras button-down collar shirt like the ones my mom sews for my dad, and a pair of white swim trunks with blue stripey pockets in the sides like Perry Como's at-home-by-the-pool-wear, and a pair of white flip-flops like my mom's, so I wouldn't say he's a total stranger, and since I am supposed to be making friends, I climb out of the sandbox and step right
on the back of the trike. I'm not sure what part of him I should hang on to, so I try a variety of those until it feels like I might not fall off. He doesn't seem to mind me doing it.

We get going and a little ways around the block and across the street, there’s a vacant lot. Scotty stops in front of it. It’s completely overgrown with weeds almost as tall as he is. "I wanna show you something," he says, I’m thinking maybe he's going to kiss me so I close my eyes and pucker up like in the movies. "Not that," he says, "THIS! LOOK!" and he pulls something from his pocket and hands it out toward me.

"Matches." he says, “Now do you get it?”
"Yeah?” I say back.

"Wanna burn some weeds?” he asks me.

"I don't think we should,” I say. Not definitely no. I don’t say that. I don’t even say just plain no. I say I don't think we should which I know sounds like a maybe, and almost like a sure, you go ahead. So he takes out a match, and he does some striking, and they each fizzle and go out as he lets them fly, which I think is good, and then he tries some more, and finally one flick and it's out there. A flame and then a little smoke and then fire, and very quickly we are staring at a blaze, and this is big, big, how it travels so fast, eating and glowing and blackening and smoking, but we can't stop watching, it’s like we’re hypnotized and then we kind of both wake up at the same time, seeing in our own private minds that the whole field will soon be a big barbeque pit and that we did it and that maybe someone saw us and that definitely we'd better go and I’m running now and he’s pedaling and we each disappear toward our own separate houses.

I don't know what else to do. I’m sure that we have left that whole field, an entire block burning, and there are houses on three sides of that field. I’m scrambling to think what to do when I hear the fire engines. Oh thank God, I think, thank Jesus, Someone else is handling this. I grab at the bougainvillea and, jamming some in my hair, slam my behind down in the sandbox, cool as ever, pretending that I’d never left. The dogs get up, make a few circles in the sand and collapse again next to me, tucking their noses under their tails, as if it isn’t hotter than usual. It looks as though everything is back together. I’m all pumping heart and pounding head and sweaty over my lip when the smoke smell starts to reach our backyard.
Calm as anything and gazing around at the toys in the sand, I decide on coffee and a candy cigarette. My grandmother gets me those so I can be like her. I put my hand in my little aluminum coffee pot to feel around inside it. It has a top designed to make it look like a real percolator with a brown glass marble in the middle, which looks like coffee going up into the lid. After I make sure there is nothing creepy in the pot, and after the fire is surely out, I’m going to put the lid on and pour myself a cup and have that candy cigarette by the swing set. I’m going to lean on the pole ever so casually and relax like my grandmother does, like my mom tells me to. Then I can think about all of my questions. Where do fairies live? What’s a World’s Fair? Why does bougainvillea have thorns? Hello little spiders and butterfly. I pull my hand back, but it won't come out of the pot. It's stuck in there. Every time I pull, I feel my skin stretching and starting to tear. God is punishing me already, I think, and at that exact moment, a couple of firemen come walking up the driveway, and the truck pulls up beside our house blocking the street.

"Where's your Mommy?" one says.

"Is she home?" says the other.

"Well, yes," I say, as if this is the wildest question of all time, as if he is implying that my mother would leave me home alone. Even though she does, she tells me never to tell anyone. She says that if someone knew I was home alone, they might come and rob us and kidnap me, or worse. Partly, I know I’m just protecting her. She says that reputations are important in the South.

"She's inside," I say just as cool as a fountain Coke.

"Would you take us to her?"

"Uh, okee dokee," I say, trying again for that grown-up relaxation I see in the commercials on teevee, my hand still stuck in the coffee pot. But I feel like The Beaver from Leave it to Beaver and Scotty is Eddie Haskell. I wish I’d stuck with my one friend, Mary, starched white and pure and heavenly and not in trouble. I’d love the comfort of some fresh, warm tostones.

"What have you got there?"

"'s my coffee pot" I say.

"Oh, you have your own coffee pot?" he says as if I’m a goddamned drunk. I feel a little bit like sassing him back. Before I can answer my mom appears and he says, "Hello Ma'am, can we
's some kind of a jam.”

Oh God, O god. I’m thinking now, what to do what to say. No Hoss, or Adam is going to come sweeping down the Ponderosa to save me. No fathersonholyghost. No luckyrabbitsfoot’s gonna work. I hear a plane circling the inside of my mind for the right words to keep this from being real. “Some are sad. And some are glad. And some are very, very bad.” I should be ashamed of myself. God will punish me and so will my dad.

"I didn't do it," I blurt that out from the top of my throat. The place you feel when you vomit. Yeah, that sounds good.

"You go back out to the yard with the dogs," my mother says.
OhGodOhgod. What if someone burned to death? What if we killed someone? My whole, young life thrown away for a ride on a cowboy tricycle because I maybe thought I’d get to kiss an almost stranger. I’m sure wishing I were baptized right now. I’m never going to make friends again.

While I’m waiting for the verdict, the dogs get up and go to the door to smell the firemen’s legs, smile at my mother and wag anxiously, trying to cut me a deal with their eyes. They work for me. No spankings. No spankings, okay?

I try to jiggle my hand out of the coffee pot as I chew over my troubles. I’m sweating like I'm on fire too. I hope it's the children's jail, even though I don't know for sure if there is a children's jail but if there’s a doll hospital maybe there’s a child-person’s jail. I’m praying it's not the grownups' jail and I’m starting to cry a little, mostly because I know there is no such person as Perry Mason, and then I’m sobbing with sadness and fear, and the big-chested firemen come out of the house with my mother, and I feel the dogs backing away, and the fireman says, "Your mother is going to drive you to the station." The fire station? The police station? I don’t know. He doesn’t say I’m gonna fry in some electric chair.
"I didn't do it. I didn't do it!" I wail, waving my coffee pot hand, beginning to lose my breath. Darkness is swirling around me in cloudy, smeary streaks. There is no Kingdom of Heaven for me, no Ponderosa, no growing up to be simply a female female, no future. I think of a picture I saw of a man whose eyes were bugged out of his head. My mother said it was Peter Lorre, and I asked her what it was he was seeing with those big cow eyes. Now I knew. It was a self like mine. This is why I look so deeply. Who am I?

"Now," said Fireman Cartwright, "we've arrested the little boy." They have? But they’re firemen. I don’t know. Confusing. But my mind is racing to get away from itself. This is what happens, I think, if you're not baptized, and you don't wear little white dresses like a real girl. This is what happens if you wear pedal pushers and midriff tops and lie in the sandbox with your dogs, daydreaming about being a grownup and driving out on the open highway and stopping only for tostones and a Coke and then continuing on, smoking, all the way to Cuba.

The two firemen get in the truck and pull out of the driveway. My mother invites me into the car. "Can Honey and Freckles come?" I plead. "What did you do? Stop crying right now, and tell me what you did, or I'm driving you to the station. Right now."
She puts the car key in the ignition. Starts it up.

"It was Scotty's idea." I'm gonna spill the beans, tell her everything. My head is down. I’m twisting the little coffee pot round and round, but it's no use. It’s still stuck to me. I have blood coming out of there now. Little drops of it that I keep trying to hide.

"God punishes you when you're bad," my mom says, eyeballing the coffee pot. Tears are dropping out onto my lap, but silently now. God doesn't have to punish me. My mother will, and I'll punish myself.

"The firemen said that if you told the truth, you didn't have to go in. You could have killed somebody but you got lucky this time. You can never see that kid Scott again."
I feel sleep coming down on me like a long, dark tube. My name gets called aloud but I can tell it’s on the inside my head. My mother turns off the car, opens the door, gets out, closes the door, walks to the house, opens the door, closes the door.

I have goosebumps on the back of my neck and arms. The voice is filled with scolding and it says only my name, the sounds of it drawn out slowly…. “Leeeeeexxxaah...” Chattanooga, the baby scorpion!

When I wake up, it's dark, and at first I don't know where I am. I start remembering the day and hope for it to be a dream, like the ones I have when I'm sick, but when I try to scratch my head, I bonk it with the coffee pot. My hand had become one with the metal, like Captain Hook, himself. I give it a little twist. I’m so angry at myself and I pull hard and off it comes with a big hunk of skin and I don't care because I don't get to have that skin because I’m not baptized and I could have killed somebody. I let myself out of the car and go out in the dark to the sandbox. I put the lid on the percolator, but it doesn't fit anymore. I’ve bent the opening to the pot all out of shape. I feel a bone-deep sadness out there alone by the sandbox at night. Not even the dogs know about it. I'm too tired to lean up against the swing set and have that candy smoke, but I'll be a grownup about this and go and wash my hand and put myself to bed. It feels as if I'd never even been a child.

Honey meets me at the screen door as I come in. Her tail expresses the whole mood with a slow wag. My mother watches me as I walk through the living room and then goes back to practicing her guitar, sipping her wine, singing "Stack O’ Lee.”

From my bed, I say a new prayer that comes to me: Dear God, I’m sorry about what I did today. Thank you for not striking me dead with lightning. I would like to fix that coffee pot. If I need to be baptized, please be sure to let me know. Amen. Then, Our Father Who Art in Heaven, like every night, except please not just for punishments. Then I hear George coming down the street with his ice cream truck tinkling at sonic levels. He’s blasted drunk and has no concept of time just like my mom says. I wonder if I’ll ever again know the taste of a Dilly Bar. I wonder if George could ever kill somebody? I wonder if all the interesting grownups are goddamn drunks?
A couple of days later, Scotty sneaks back to play with Mary and me at the dead end up the block to tell us what had happened to him after our incident. As he does, he plays with a stick and pokes at the hedge. Hedges are a big deal around here, and everyone has to have them. Most are filled with hibiscus the size of our heads. Scotty just keeps jabbing around in there with his stick like it's a sword and he is stabbing at a flowery enemy. Swift as anything, a swarm of bees bigger than a billboard is out of there and once again we run for our lives.

My house is closest. I go in screaming about the bees and Scotty. My mother runs out looking for the boy. He’s covered in bees, while I only have one or two. She pulls him inside, lays him on the kitchen table and tries to peel off his clothes while pulling out the stingers. I run in through the back and peek through a crack in the porch door. Finally he’s naked, his whole body swollen like a watermelon. God punishes you when you're bad around my mother.

"Scotty!" I holler through the crack. "Are you baptized?"
Let Me Go Lover (as performed by Joan Weber)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hyLRbRCCLU

That’s Learnin’ the Blues (as performed by Frank Sinatra)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LGFzCNsXbw

Big Rock Candy Mountain (as performed by Burl Ives)
big rock candy mountain burl ives

Quizás, Quizás, Quizás (as performed by Nat King Cole)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDGgUGBD-90

Hushabye (as performed by The Mystics)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94VWNiOcss0

Suite Espanola No. 1 Op. 47 Asturias (Leyenda) as performed by Segovia
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsHTgAMUwuI

Mister Softee Tune (as performed by a horn-shaped speaker on top of a white ice-cream truck)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzodaDCD798

Stack-o-Lee (as performed by Mississippi John Hurt)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAV\v23MG76Y

If The Jasmine Don’t Get You (as performed by Vince Martin)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1JUY1p-FT0

Come Softly To Me (as performed by The Fleetwoods)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvkj4TiSaNQ

Has Anybody Seen My Gal (as performed by Mitch Miller and The Mitch Miller Orchestra)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dY9gtYeHhk

Huckleberry Hound Theme (as performed by Soundtrack Artists)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtE_7j0_MFM

Cow Bells and Coffee Beans (as composed and conducted by Henry Mancini)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkkswXXUPhU

The Perry Mason Theme (as composed by Fred Steiner)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HT4wkkerFTc

TABOU (as performed by Lecuona Cuban Boys)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRIOWZQs4Gg