



Chapter One



Silver glinting behind leafy trees—that is the first thing I noticed as I stood in the backyard of our new house that hot summer day. Like a glistening metallic eye, the silver winked through the deep green leaves. A creepy feeling stole over me. It was as if I were being watched. Weird! But then again, everything seemed weird in this new neighborhood.

Look in the other direction, and you could see our just-landscaped yard, sweating in the July heat. A few new shrubs and young trees crouched beneath the Indiana sun. Mom refused to put down grass seed yet. She said it would burn up. We'd wait until spring. I

hated this new neighborhood, this new house, and this new yard. The “lawn” looked naked and raw. Ripples of heat rose up and turned the air wavy. Our old yard was small, but it was nice and shady.

There was only one really big tree in our old yard, but that was enough. That space, the space defined by the tree and its shade, became the first small world I ever made. Making scenes in boxes was my hobby. But they were more than just scenes; they were stories. Just about as soon as I got my first dollhouse, I decided to try and make my own, except I didn’t want a dollhouse exactly. I wanted a whole world and a good story put in a little box. I didn’t care that much about all the dollhouse stuff: tiny refrigerators, minute sewing machines, and little beds and chairs—all the same things that you outfit a real house with.

I knew I would never make a small world of this stupid backyard. Never! I did have a thought, though. Backyards might change, but the sky doesn’t. I was under the same sky here in this new ugly neighborhood as I had been in our old shady one. At night, the stars, the constellations, were the same. I found some comfort in that thought. My older brother, Emmett, was an amateur astronomer. He had even built telescopes, and we did a lot of sky watching at night. Why

not make a small world of the sky, maybe a small universe?

I was staring back at the metallic eye, maybe slightly hypnotized, when I heard a car pull into our drive. It was Mom. Her Buick shimmered darkly in the heat. It didn't look quite real, as if it might just up and evaporate.

“Georgie!”

“Yeah, Mom.”

“You water those trees yet?”

“No.”

“Well, why not?”

“Too hot.” Mom walked over to my lawn chair—I'd been reading my comic books under an umbrella we'd stuck into a crack in the patio.

She sighed. “Too hot? Georgia Louise Mason, you've been complaining all summer about not going swimming, and now's your chance to get wet and cool and you don't do it.”

“Mom, everyone else gets to go swimming up until August. You wouldn't even let me go to Susie Grenelle's birthday party, and it was in June! At a private pool!”

“Honestly, Georgie, are you going to hold Susie Grenelle's birthday party against me for the rest of my life?”

“But Mom, I have no friends in this neighborhood. I have to go to a new school, and we are the only family in the whole state that had to stay out of swimming pools all summer. Even on the Fourth of July!”

I took the Fourth of July personally. It was not just a national holiday. It was my birthday. In fact, my mom and dad had considered, for about two minutes, calling me Georgia Liberty Mason, but then decided to slide in Louise for the middle part, a kind of nothing name if you ask me. Ever since I could remember, or at least ever since I had known how to swim, I had had a splash party for my birthday at the local swimming pool. But not this year. Not now that there was polio. I took this so personally that I refused to have any Fourth of July stuff on my birthday cake, as I usually did. I guess it was a matter of offend me, offend my country—we share a birthday. So there!

“Georgie, sweetheart.” Her voice changed. It wasn’t scolding anymore. It was kind of soft and wavy like the ripples of heat. “You don’t want to end up like her.” She nodded toward the trees where the silver glinted.

“Who?” I was getting a queasy feeling in my gut.

“That girl over there, our new neighbors, the

Kellers. I met them yesterday. Their daughter, Phyllis, is the same age as Emmett. She got polio and she's . . ." I think I knew what was coming. "She's in an iron lung."

I dropped my comic book on the patio, rose up from the chair, and looked at the glints of silver. It had seemed weird but at the same time almost magical when I had looked through the trees. Now there was nothing magical. It was simply and horribly unbelievable. I had seen iron lungs, but only pictures of them on television and in newsreels in the movie theaters—where we were now not allowed to go in the summer, along with the swimming pools, because of the crowds and the fear of catching polio.

"You mean right next door to us there's an iron lung?"

"I do indeed."

"But I thought you had to be in the hospital if they put you in one of them."

"Mr. Keller is a very important scientist for the Eli Lilly drug company, and I suppose like most of those Lilly big shots, he's got plenty of money. So they can afford to have one at home. It's all very sad. So let's not talk anymore about swimming and swimming pools."

“And the state fair,” I added in a dull voice.

I had always loved the Indiana State Fair. Here’s what I loved about it: the goats, the freak shows—even though Emmett said they were fake freaks half the time—and the cotton candy. In that order: goats, freaks, cotton candy.

In my opinion there was nothing better than goats. Goats are the most companionable of farm animals. That’s what my grandma always said, and she should know because she was a farmer’s wife and had a mess of goats. They are fun because every goat has a different personality. I knew goats that had more personality than many people. At the state fair they had goat exhibitions. And that was my idea of heaven. Just a whole mess of goats frisking around in the arena, showing off their goatiness. I wanted to have a goat at our old house, but Mom said the yard was too small. And then when we moved into this new house with a big huge yard, I asked again, but Mom said the neighborhood was too fancy to have goats pooping all over the place. Goats wouldn’t be “tolerated.” Imagine moving into a neighborhood where they wouldn’t tolerate goats. Emmett said there were a lot of things not tolerated in Indianapolis—like Negroes at the swimming pool and Negroes at the amusement park

and Negroes in neighborhoods like ours. So I guessed that Negroes were having an even more boring summer than I was.

“I don’t know why you want to go to that old state fair, anyhow. It’s hot, dusty, and dirty,” Mom said, and plopped down into the lawn chair next to mine.

“Because.” It was too hot to explain any more.

“Sure hope your dad doesn’t go this year.”

“He’s got to,” I said in a shocked voice. “Mom, he’s head of the Indiana Poultry Association. Who will judge the chickens?”

“Let someone else do it. He doesn’t get paid a nickel for that durned job.” My mom could never bring herself to say *darn*, let alone *damn*. I could never figure out how slipping that *u* in there made *darn* less of a curse word.

“Well, he has to,” I said quietly. Mom just grunted. My dad was a poultry broker. It’s a fancy name for buying chickens and eggs in huge quantities and selling them to grocery store chains and restaurants and hotels and stuff like that. But it was *not* being a chicken farmer, as Darrell Caufield said, and for which I beat him up in the second grade. Anyhow, Mom was right. Dad didn’t get paid a nickel for being the head of the Indiana Poultry Association or for judging the chickens

at the state fair. He just did it because it was what he called a “civic-minded” thing to do, and besides, at one time there had been a lot of what he called “corrupt practices”—in other words, cheating—in the poultry world. I know it’s hard to think of poultry as attracting gangsters. But there had been, according to Dad, “hanky-panky” with health regulations and shipment of hatching eggs.

“You know, Georgie, instead of sitting around complaining about the heat, you could go to the library. There’s a brand-new one here. It’s close enough to walk to.”

“It’s too hot to walk.”

“It’s air-conditioned once you get there. They have it up full blast. I was just there.”

“Is that what you got in those bags—books?” I asked.

“Yes, and other stuff for school.”

“School doesn’t start for way over a month. Why are you getting it now? The books will be overdue by the first day of school.”

“They have a special policy for teachers. We can keep them for six weeks and just call up to renew.”

“What else do you have? It looks like you’ve been to the five-and-dime.”

“Yes, the extra-fat crayons came in and they are perfect for kindergarten kids, and I knew they would sell out in a flash.” My mom was a kindergarten teacher. “Come on, sweetie, get up and start watering these trees. It looks like a durned desert around here.”

“Can I read my Archie comic while I do it?”

“I’m sure he won’t mind.” She laughed.

No, Archie wouldn’t mind, I thought, but would the gorgeous blond Betty or the raven-haired Veronica be standing in a dried-up yard watering a spindly little tree? They didn’t use the words *raven-haired*, of course, in the comic books. But I liked that word for black hair. It sounded dangerous and beautiful at the same time. They talked about movie actresses or heroines in old-fashioned books having raven hair or, better still, raven locks. I was not raven-haired. I was brown-haired. Muddy-water brown. And my hair was too stubby to be considered locks.

I decided to water the tree closest to the small grove that separated our yard from the Kellers’ and see if I could catch a glimpse of the iron lung. I had done a report for school on the polio epidemic. Starting in January, the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis had sent out 1,225 iron lungs to all the epidemic states. There were twenty-one epidemic states.

Indiana was not one yet. But our next door neighbor, Ohio, was. Philip Drinker had invented the iron lung, and then this other guy, Emerson, improved upon it. They were both probably millionaires by now. Even though not every polio person had to go into an iron lung—plenty didn't—they still couldn't make them fast enough for the really sick people whose lungs didn't work. At least not this year. 1952. The year was only half over, and I had read in the newspaper that health officials were anticipating more than 50,000 new cases. Holy cow! I kept track of these things. I was sort of a list maker. I did a fantastic graph of all this stuff for extra credit in math and got an A++. And I still kept track of the new cases in a little notebook in my desk and wrote down the numbers. These statistics were published every day in the newspaper, and sometimes they showed pictures of polio wards crammed with iron lungs. I kept a folder with stuff that I had cut out from the newspapers about polio. And now I could hardly believe it—there was an iron lung right next door with a girl in it.

I wondered who the girl looked like—Veronica or Betty. I had this notion that any girl who was a teenager had a very good chance at being beautiful and glamorous—even, I guessed, if she were in an iron

lung. Something happened to girls when they became teenagers, I believed. And when I became one, in just two more years, when I would be thirteen, I too would stretch out. My legs would lengthen, my waist would drop, my eyebrows would sweep like minnows swimming in a stream, and my stubs of hair would become glossy locks. In fact, I would be able to flip my hair around with barely discernible yet coy movements of my head. And I would wear real lipstick, and not that awful Tangee orangy stuff that smelled good but looked like nothing.