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Creative Writing

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A Thousand Wonders

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A Thousand Wonders
Elizabeth: On the Road to Bourne

Bourne. Bourne where I was born. I never even say that name in my head any more. Always call it Chickahatchie County, when I call it at all. Even here on the interstate outside of Austin, with more than 600 miles left to travel, just being on the way is changing me. I was eight years old before I set loose in Chickahatchie County. Bourne was my grandparents little community out at the western edge of the county. I’d visited, holidays mostly. My mama took me away pretty quick after I was born, and we didn’t spend too much time there before. I don’t want to be that person, that girl up the tree. My giant white oak was the best rest stop I ever had. Grandy would put down plywood onto saw horses for tables under the tree for homecoming or picnic dinners—family reunions. Family. Reunions. Now there’s something better left for later, as well. I mostly remember the food. Pecan and chess pie for holidays. Homecoming meant pimento-cheese sandwiches, fried chicken, potato salad, and deviled eggs. Every time someone set down a platter or dish, the wood would sag a bit. I always worried for the food. Brunswick stew cooked up in a big iron cauldron over a wood fire under my tree. Grandy stroking and stirring and scraping with a boat paddle he used just for stew. People would come from all around on a Brunswick stew day, bringing Mason jars and appetites. Nobody ever went hungry at Grandy and Memma’s house. Bourne, back then, saw too many hungry people though.

Field hand, mornings spent picking cotton, dragging heavy canvas bags strapped over their shoulders back to the trailer for weigh in, cast their eyes at the back porch door a ways off where they would sit at noon with a plate of dumplings or cornbread and field peas. Cheap farm food but plenty of it. I wonder now if that was the only meal of the day for some of them. No. Truth be told, I know it was. Poor Negro families wanted to work at our farm. Grandy was
known as a good employer, not a cheat on weights, with a fair cook for a farm wife who
wouldn’t begrudge a black hand another piece of cornbread, even if she only served up the
fragrant fried chicken to her family. Nothing like grease to carry a smell.

I got my first whipping from Memma over fried chicken. Not one to think, I had carried
my fried chicken leg out toward the end of the porch where Grandy sat with the hands. Having
finished his lunch in gulps, Grandy chewed over who would be needed for the next day’s picking
and where and when. Memma had come out with a bowl of butter beans ready to ladle seconds
or thirds to anyone. When she saw me, her five-year-old heeled church shoes, now work shoes
scuffed and turned down at the sides, had skidded on the porch boards.

_Hyeah, Jack._ That was all she had said as she had handed the bowl to Grandy and
snatched me up by my chicken-leg-grasping right arm.

I got a whipping with a wooden kitchen spoon, all the time Memma hissing _sotto voce_ in
my ear about how my waving that chicken leg around out there in front of those hands was just
the living end. _Didn’t I have any sense of decency? What in the world was I thinking?_ Every time
I eat fried chicken now, I think of that. And I can’t even hold the leg of a chicken without
thinking about hungry people and choking a little. A lot of what I learned with Grandy and
Memma is overlaid with the smell of sausage frying or the taste of home-churned yellow butter
on one of Grandy’s biscuits. I don’t really crave anything from that time except maybe
Brunswick stew, which no one can ever make again. The knack for that died with Grandy. I
don’t crave any food of Bourne.

No. That’s not true. The idea of a buttered biscuit has brought one thing to mind as I slide
past the I-35 exits for Onion Creek and Slaughter Lane. Sweet sorghum molasses. Thick, acidy
sweet. Rich fragrant ropes of it coming out of a jar slower than the summer between third and
fourth grades. I would hold a knife like Grandy showed me, and when there was just a little too much sorghum on the plate of busted-open biscuits, I would cut the flow off like slicing meat. It was that thick. I never wanted it heated up in a saucepan like Memma did hers. I liked to see it melt in with the golden butter right on the china plate. You can’t get butter like that anymore. That died with Grandy’s cows. And I haven’t tasted sorghum molasses in 30 years, even though I’ve seen it at farm stands up in the Texas Hill Country. Sorghum molasses comes from one place for me—Chickahatchie County. It’s cooked up in a big cauldron like Grandy’s. And this is the most important thing about sorghum molasses. It has to be from the juice of sorghum cane squeezed on a press by the slow steady paces of a Tennessee mule, walking in circles, going nowhere his own self, but coming up with something really special for his trouble.

The Chronicles of Betsy

The faded dashboard of the 1961 Chevrolet Impala had gotten hot and hotter and then started to cool. It was red and had dials and buttons and mysterious sticks coming out of the steering wheel. Five circles embossed the middle of the wheel with crossed red and white flags in the center circle. A metal emblem of a matching set of flags hung loosely from above the glove box.

The first hour, Betsy had sat hunched down in the seat. All the windows were down and she laid her head against first the door, then the back of the seat, then the door again. She clutched an old black leather purse and click, click, clicked the clasp at the top without opening it an inch. Her dry fingertips rubbed over the tight, rolled handle feeling the cracks that had come over a long time. She traced the circular rings that attached it to the body of the purse, her fingernail occasionally catching in the junction of the two ends.
By the middle of the second hour, she laid on the seat in a curled up position, her head on the pocketbook like a pillow. She could see the end of a yellow card of some kind peeking down from the bottom of the underside of the dash below the glove compartment. She spent half an hour wondering how it got there and what the rest of the writing was. She could only see F and a little bit of what must be a lower case r. Time spooled out while she guessed the rest. Fred's Barbershop, Freedonia Lumber, Fresh Eggs, Fruit Stand? Probably not fruit stand or fresh eggs. They don't hand out tickets or stubs, and the card looked like a stub.

By the third hour, Betsy had laid out face-down the full length of the front seat, at least as much as her eight-year-old body could claim. She chewed on strands of her brown bobbed hair. The pocketbook was tucked up nearly hidden under the seat in the driver's side of the floorboard. She explored the mystery of the wires under the steering wheel while absent-mindedly lifting the handle of the pocketbook and letting it drop back down with a soft thunk. Thunk.

At the end of that time, it was late afternoon and Betsy had heard, in order, a screen door slam, pretty loud talking, lower talking, two quick slams of the screen door, some birds scolding, a very loud truck on the highway far off, a screen door that must be a back door because it was muffled, some chickens, some cows, some more chickens, another instance of back-door slamming, someone call her name. Other stuff happened during the time, but these were the things she took note of.

By the middle of the fourth hour, Betsy decided she had seen all she could see of the dashboard and crawled over into the backseat, dragging the purse with her. It was much roomier in the back, but less interesting. There were handles on the door and that was pretty much it, not even a butt in the three ashtrays. She rolled the window up and down, watching it disappear into the door. Betsy spent several minutes brushing her fingernail along the bristly edges of the
rubber part of hole that had swallowed up the window. She looked down into the space, but couldn't see anything.

With a start, Betsy realized she had put the top of her head out of the car. She hadn't realized it at first, but a big black bug had crossed the ground under the car and caught her eye. Too late, she yanked her head back and grabbed the purse up tight under her crossed arms. Her fingers inched up to the clasp and opened it...just a crack. Betsy stuck her nose close into the cold metal of the purse top. Breathing deeply she smelled the following things: Juicy Fruit gum, ladies' face powder, Kleenex. She sat breathing these things for five minutes. When she had closed the clasp again, still clutching the pocketbook, her hands tangled into the handles like purse-snatchers watched her, Betsy lifted the silver handle on the door and pulled it up.

Sticking her head out of the door, Betsy twisted her feet out as well. Most of the bulk of her slim body remained inside. Betsy stared at her feet for a minute—white tennis shoes, tied neatly, showing a bit of dust, but still very clean, topped by brown legs, colored by the sun of other days that would never be relived. Betsy slid her legs out to follow her feet, feeling the crunchiness of the red gravel through the thin soles of her Keds. Her red shorts had ridden up into the bend of her legs. She kept the purse firmly against her flat chest with first one arm, then the other, as she pulled and smoothed the shorts into place. Angled shoulder blades sought to close around the purse as she made her way around the open door, pausing a second to bump the door closed with her behind. Betsy headed to the back of the house.

It had been four hours and 48 minutes since Grandy's white Chevy Impala had brought Betsy to this yard. It had been seven hours and 23 minutes since she had kissed Aunt Carolyn goodbye and crawled into the front seat beside her grandfather. Four weeks and three days ago, she had come to stay with Aunt Carolyn. Four weeks and four days ago, her father had come
home from work, taken down the oiled pistol from the box in the top of his closet, walked into
the kitchen and pulled the trigger, killing Betsy's mother.

A Meeting with Mules

When I came to live with Grandy and Memma, I got out past the big white oaks that had
shaded those plywood tables. I'd been a town girl. Everything was so wide in the county. I
could yell out the door at five in the morning and no one would yell back. I tried it once,
screamed murder because Grandy said I could. Memma said, "Go on. Ain't nobody gonna
come see 'bout you." So I did. The scream rose up over the white oaks, six times taller than
Grandy, to spread out over the fields of cotton plants, high and thick, with prickly green leaves
and all manner of noisy bugs, some of which will sting you, Memma said. I got stung plenty, but
that was later, after I learned that no one will look for you out in the cotton.

About a mile away, across the tracks, with cattails in the watery ditches on either side of
the rails, the scream caught up in the smoke from the mule driver's chimney. I'm sure it went
down the way the smoke came up, right into the gray board house's kitchen. Memma was wrong
about the scream because later he brought the mules, a team of four, brown like fudge Momma
made when I'd asked her. The mule driver was more the color of the kitchen stovepipe, kinda
glowing black and silvery. When he came, the mule driver spoke to Grandy and took some
biscuits which Grandy had brought out from the pan where Memma set the leftovers to stay
warm on the shelf above the woodstove.

"You sho' make the best biscuits, Mr. Jack. Army cooking set you above the women
round here in biscuits. Seems like I heard 'em calling me this morning early."
I knew that was me and not the biscuits. “Can I rub your horses?” I asked him. I’d already learned to ask about folks’ animals. They are real careful to keep you back from all those feet, teeth, and horns.

“Miss, them’s mules. They don’t much like rubbing.” He swiped his big hand over his smiley face, the silvery sweat streaking his pink palm. “They like a apple to eat, but they cain’t eat when they got work to do. I let you feed them a apple sometime they ain’t got work.”

They did work, them mules and the driver too, whose name was Kelso. And I did visit his mules with apples and whatever else he said mules should have. Hundreds of days, I would walk out the front door of Grandy’s wide low white house onto the deep porch that sagged like those plywood tables filled with picnic food. I’d follow a path of my own design that took me past the fence row where the pokeberries grew purple and juicy on red stems, which Grandy said would make your stomach hurt, and he was right. I would stop to look both ways and back again to keep the trucks from killing me on the two-lane highway.

Kelso’s house was set back a ways across a field where Mr. Gene put in beans, not cotton, although I could never figure why anyone would think them squatty soybean plants with their bitter beans were better than the high cotton that burst out in the fall with thousands of little pillows of fluff. I didn’t have to step into the bean field, since I wouldn’t go to Kelso’s house, except that one time and that got me a whipping.

The mules were in a little lot behind the old store building, which wasn’t a store any more although the signs—Wonder. It’s good bread!”— still split the middle of the two screen doors. The mules had a shed that somebody, I forgot who, told me was a part of a depot back years ago. The mules kept back to the hard-pounded ground around the shed except when I came with apples or Kelso came to harness them up. They would stand while he strapped the girth and set
the collar and all the rest of the tack. They stomped a bit as he backed them to the wagon, if they were to pull one that day. *Hnyeah, mules. Get up.* Then they’d go out the gap in the barb-wire fence which I’d hold open if I was there, their trace chains making the best jingling sound I ever heard. I loved them mules. I did. Lucy Belle had a cat, and I never wanted a dog. I had part of those mules. And they had part of me.

**Betsy’s Place**

A root from the white oak pokes its way out of the pale Tennessee dirt. The size of my long-dead Grandy’s lower leg, the root emerges six inches from the massive trunk for a span of eight inches more, only to run back to ground for the remainder of its unknowable length. Other roots around the tree have revealed themselves, some of them overlapping. Are they the first shallow ones that nourished the infant acorn? Did the Chickasaw hunt here when the root first emerged?

Maybe it was later, when Great-grandfather Milton bought the land or took it. Did the tree, feeling unfamiliar rhythms, send down signals along with oxygen through the pulp to the roots? The air is changed, it might have sensed on the white underside of its dark green many-lobed leaves. This smoke has a tangible otherness as these pale beings cook their dinner. Did the roots return watery replies with questions for which a tree cannot have answers?

My childhood self had her own ideas. It’s a toad house, this root. I found the lumpy jumpies secreted in their own little root cave in the mornings before Memma stirred from her featherbed to toast cold biscuits that Grandy left for her. I used the roots as safe steps around pretend waters full of crocodiles, like the ones I saw on Tarzan. The steps of many children compacted the dirt around the toad house. Two of them were Lucy Belle and me.
After I turned eight, this was my whole world—two white oaks many times taller than Grandy, a low white house too plain to have thoughts of grand additions, and a vegetable garden with grape arbor out back. All the pieces of my world were set on top of the highest hill around. As I grew, losing the memories of other houses, Memma taught me to climb one of the white oaks, how to swing my feet up over a forked limb and to skin the cat to get down. I could see more of Chickahatchie County from the hideout in my oak. Bourne’s Grove Baptist Church, its concrete blocks stacked off center to keep them from falling down Grandy said, was just in front of my tree. Kelso’s wood frame First Baptist Church was just over the honeysuckle-covered rail fence from the grape arbor. Up high on my limb that made a seat, leaning against the perfect matching limb to make the seat a couch, my back would have been to Kelso’s church. I think that’s why it was so long before I found Lucy Belle and Sanctuary.

The Truth of Trees

A white oak draws water from the ground. I do that because Adenosine Triphosphate is soluble in water, and I need it for photophosphorylation. You need water too and also to make ATP, which is how you draw energy from what you consume, although I’d bet my oldest root you don’t even know it. Plants have been doing it much longer. We invented it.

We draw other things up too. Bits of things long dead clinging to water, riding up to my leaves and twigs. I have some of fourteen humans in me, and I can tell the difference in each one. The dark cold season has come and gone more than 400 times since I first drew up tiny pieces of what had been people. Humans change me in ways that the persimmon tree can’t imagine. He’s a shit-eater, that one, hugging that human stink hole and sucking it up through his long taproot.
I have human blood in me. For five seasons the ground was thick with it. Two men fell just here, trying to hide behind me. Metal balls spilled them open. Two of those same hot projectiles tore into me, metals leaching out into my cambium, coloring my heartwood. That was a bad time for living things.

I have her blood too. The little skinny one with the brown tufts on top of her head bled into me. On a hot day a hundred seasons after the five bad ones, she tore open her limb on mine, and her sap ran in a trickle down into the folds of my bark. She dripped more red onto the underside of a leaf, marking me until a storm. I grew new roots hoping to catch the rainy drops of blood and suck them up too. Often her tears fell just in the notch by the place where she sat on so many days and more nights than you might think. Once, she waited too late to climb down and wet me with her urine, the pungent salty rush soaking into my tender layers. I knew her.

I contrived a splinter to work into the back of her knee. Long, cold seasons passed after she left, making it harder to convince myself that the splinter stayed burrowed down in her limb’s heartwood. But she is a part of me. When the other one with light tufts on her head finally came up alone the same way and sat where the first one sat, we both felt the loss. She too eventually stopped coming up, although I sometimes would feel her twigs brush me as she stepped from root to root around my trunk, making the sound of the two of them with her one mouth.

I finally had to cut off the flow of water to that limb. With a fork down low, it had been perfect for child root limbs to wrap themselves around while child top limbs grabbed for my own and pulled into me, her soft tender flesh without a bark, so easy to tear. I couldn’t bear another one in her spot. Rot took that entry limb, and it was burned on a fire close by, bits of smoke entering the respiration stomata on the white underside of my dark green many-lobed leaves and
the leaves of my sister oak and the leaves of all the plants around, even the persimmon, who
missed her more than I gave that shit-eater credit for.

The Gospel of Lucy Belle

Lucy, the water won’t save your soul. But it did. Preacher said asking Jesus into my
heart saved me and the baptism was just to show obedience. I was scared to do it, go in the
water, not ask Jesus into my soul. God and I had been holding hands in the dark for a long time.
If Jesus was his only Son, I was all for asking him into my heart. I could use a brother. So I
walked the aisle to take Jesus into my heart and make God my daddy. Up front by the altar, with
all the cousins looking on, Preacher asked me if I knew what that meant, taking Jesus into my
heart as my Personal Savior. Yes, Sir is what I said. He asked me if I knew I had sinned and
wanted to be clean. Yes, Sir is what I said. Then he told everyone that I was a new Christian, and
my Mama cried and Mrs. Lila cried, all the church women cried, and I cried a little, too.

When we went home for dinner, Mama told Daddy, and he said, “Jesus got another one,”
and he pushed his glass over for Mama to get him more tea. He wouldn’t go to the baptism.
Daddy was not a church-goer.

Practically everyone I knew besides Daddy did go to the baptism. It was at the Baptist
church in Linderville of a Sunday afternoon. We don’t have a baptism pool at our church. I was
scared to go to Linderville. I don’t like big churches, and I don’t like to meet people, and some
people from Linderville Baptist came to my baptism. It’s their church is what Mama said. It’s my
baptism is what I said. Mama said if I was old enough to take Jesus into my heart, I was old
enough to be nice to the sweet folks at Linderville.
I almost changed my mind when I got dressed in the small room beside the baptism pool. The water from the pool made me hot and sweaty. It smelled like bleach instead of Old English polish, like a church should smell. There were some old things stored there, faded plastic flowers and folding wood chairs. There were some big boards where you see the numbers of the church. Usually those are on the front wall up behind the pulpit. I guess they got new ones, but I didn’t notice when I came in. These were old and the numbers were scuffed up like the toes of last year’s shoes. They must have gotten new numbers, too. I looked at the board for the numbers as Mama brushed my blonde curly hair back into a pony tail. Sunday School – 72. Worship Attendance – 103. Last Sunday – 111. Record Attendance – 338. Offering – $820. They had bigger numbers than our church. We usually had 25 people and $200 dollars. Seems like they would take in more money, though, with all those people. Maybe they didn’t tithe. Mama says it’s important to tithe. Daddy says she better not. We don’t tithe. I do put a quarter from my dusting money in my envelope every week at Sunday school.

Mama said it was time to be baptized and the preacher came into the room. Mama and Mrs. Lila scooted out the door so they could sit in the front pews and get a good look. Mr. Bubba had saved them a place. It wasn’t necessary since not that many nice folk had showed up from Linderville after all. Mr. Bubba had grinned at me with his no-teeth smile. We had ridden in his car, me and Mama in the back seat. Out in the parking lot, when we slid out, he tapped me on the shoulder with a piece of Juicy Fruit gum.

“For after, Lucy Belle,” and he tucked the stick of gum back in his pocket and winked at me. I had nodded my head and ran around the car to find Mama’s hand.
Now I could see around the corner of the baptism pool and there was Mr. Bubba right beside Mama and Mrs. Lila. He saw me and pulled the gum out of his pocket and winked again. I think he thought I was scared.

Preacher showed me how I’d go under the cool water with his big clean ironed handkerchief folded up and clamped down tight onto my mouth. *I don’t like it when Someone holds my mouth closed. Not a bit. I cry. I get all snotty and it is hard to breathe. I think I am going to die. But then God takes my hand and we walk in the Garden.* That’s what I told Preacher when he asked me if I was scared. He asked me that while Mrs. Lila was singing “Wash Me and I Will Be Whiter than Snow.” I must have been a little scared, or I wouldn’t have said that about *Someone* and the hand on my mouth and walking in the garden. Preacher looked at me really funny and gave my hand a little squeeze, but I peed a little bit in my panties. Then he led me down into the water and said that I would be washed clean.

“Rise up, Lucy Garrett, to walk in the newness of life.”

It all went really fast, and I wasn’t scared of Preacher or drowning, even though I can’t swim. Daddy was not a swimmer, so he wouldn’t let me learn. I was scared about what I said, and I would have been a little scared about peeing in my panties, but I was all wet anyway and Mama wouldn’t know. Mama and Mrs. Lila dried me off in the dusty room. Mrs. Lila kept crying and laughing, and everyone from Bourne Baptist Church went to Mrs. Lila’s house for homemade ice cream.

Mama was really happy that afternoon at Mrs. Lila’s house. Frank, Jr. played guitar for everyone. When Carla sang “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” she sounded just like Patti Page. All the kids ran around until we got drunk on ice cream and the heat and too much excitement. Mr. Bubba and the old men played horseshoes, and he gave me a pack of Juicy Fruit for my own.
After everyone else went home, Mama and me and Preacher stayed to eat supper with Mrs. Lila and Mr. Bubba. I got tired and fell asleep on Mrs. Lila's big feather bed. Mama must have gotten tired, too. She was really quiet on the way home. She just went into my room and lay down with me on my bed. We slept all that night. Daddy didn't come into my room to wake up Mama when he got home, because he didn't come home. The water saved me that day. Not the baptism pool water at Linderville Baptist, but the water of the levee bridge out on the highway. That's where they found Daddy later—under the green rushing river, washed whiter than snow.

Car doors slammed out front of our house the morning after my baptism. It wasn't Daddy's old truck. I know what that sounds like when it turns into the long gravel driveway at our house. So I didn't stop eating my Kellogg's Corn Flakes and head out to Sanctuary. Mama wiped her hands on a dishrag and walked to the front picture window. I slurped up some milk from my special Tony the Tiger spoon and licked my chin. I could see Mama's head turn a bit like she was trying not to see out the window and trying real hard to see out the window at the same time. Her right hand rose up, clutching the dishrag. A long string fell from the bottom of the rag where it had worn out from so many days of washing dishes and wiping the table. The string swayed as Mama's hand began to shake. She jumped a bit and started toward the door.

"Lucy Belle, get you some more cereal. I'll be back in a minute."

Mama's voice was high, like she was singing the end of "How Great Thou Art." I didn't get more cereal, but went to the same spot where she had been standing at the front window. Mr. Bubba and Mrs. Lila were out in the yard, Mr. Bubba talking really low so I couldn't hear what they were saying through the screen door. Mrs. Lila was standing by Mama, kind of holding both Mama's arms with her big red hands, one arm wrapped around Mama's back. All of a sudden, Mama's legs swayed to one side and her head turned toward Mrs. Lila's permed blonde curls and
continued around until she was staring right in the window at me. She closed her eyes and her lips moved. It seemed like she was telling me *thank you.*

Everyone moved kind of fast after that, coming into the house and sitting me down on the brown couch. *Your daddy ran off the road and got really hurt. He’s gone. Lucy Belle, give me the spoon.* Did I have a spoon? *He died? Yes, sweet girl. He’s gone, drowned in the river.* Mama pried open my fingers to take the spoon.

I snatched back my hand and held Tony the Tiger up close to my belly. My stomach felt tight. My ears buzzed like cicadas were in my hair. I could see right out the screen door down the long driveway. Daddy wouldn’t be coming down that gravel road any more. Ran off the road down on the levee and drowned in the river. Mama grabbed at me as I jumped up off the couch and ran to the screen door. Cornflakes and milk flew out of my mouth and splattered all over the concrete steps.

“Lucy honey. Oh, baby. It’s ok.” Mama held me in her arms, Mrs. Lila patting my back, humming and shushing me.

“Bub, go to the bathroom and wet a washrag and bring it here.” Mrs. Lila took me from Mama. I was squished up into her soft belly and breasts. I had always thought of Mrs. Lila as a fat lady, the kind who had a man to do the hard farm work and so just cooked and swept floors. But Mrs. Lila was hard muscle under all that fat. At nine years old, I was just getting some length on me, four feet tall before school ended last year. She toted me to my bed and laid me down, humming and shushing all the way. “You too, Janie,” and she patted the bed beside where she had laid me. Mama crawled into the spot behind me.

When Mr. Bubba came back from the bathroom, he had a china bowl of water and a washcloth. His lips were all squished up, and he was clenching them together over and over
making noise as he swallowed. Mrs. Lila went to take the bowl, but he pulled it back toward him. Then he came over to the bed where I laid, got down on one knee, squeezed out the cloth, and washed my face and neck with the warm water, cleaning out my mouth with the corner of the rag. I held my Tony spoon. Mama cried.

Sanctuary

Betsy’s slapped her left thigh just below the hem of her blue shorts, adding red welts from her fingers to the red bump that was rising on her meaty white leg.

“Ow. Dang ants.”

This dang ant was one of the large black ones, nearly as long as the first joint of her pinky finger, big enough so that Betsy could see their little eye spots. Carpenter ants they were, so Grandy said. There were much smaller black sugar ants on the ground, but they weren’t usually up the tree. The middling-sized red ones would bite sometimes. The reds and blacks fought when they ran across one another. Betsy didn’t particularly like any of the ants, but it was their tree first, so that was that. She didn’t know which color ant got there first, but they had been there, biting since the first day she had climbed up after Memma showed her how.

It had been three weeks since her first climb into the big white oak. She could confidently stand up onto the entry limb after pulling herself up with her arms. She knew where all the handholds were and where to step to make it up three levels to the couch-like limbs where she sat looking out over Bourne. Betsy stood up from her couch place, balancing on a lower limb so she could pull her shorts down to cover more leg. While she balanced there, shifting leg to leg, Betsy looked out toward the grape arbor. She could see someone coming up the fence row far down below the garden.
Green the color of English peas showed through the sumac leaves along the fence. Pale yellow peaked up occasionally. Betsy leaned out to see better but felt off balance 20 feet off the ground. She sat down on her couch with her legs in the space between the seat and back, draping her arms over the thick back limb. She had lost sight of the person for a minute.

Betsy scanned the garden and finally saw and little green bundle pass under the barbed wire back fence. For a moment she had full view of a little girl about her own age, blonde curls pulled back into a pony tail, wearing a green cotton shirt and cut-off blue jean shorts. The girl threw herself toward the rail fence, seeming to disappear into the honeysuckle vines.

Betsy lost sight of her again. “Hey!” Betsy scrambled up out of the unfamiliar position and scrambled down to her entry limb. She sat down with her legs over the fork and fell backwards into space, grabbing the limbs at each side of her, and in the same motion flipping her legs backward over her head. Her feet were two inches from the ground, so she let go with her hands, now twisted back at the forearms.

“Skin the cat,” she called out. She always said that, ever since her Memma had showed her how, calling out to her to encourage her to try the complicated maneuver. Skin the cat, Lizbeth. Memma’s too fat to show you how, but I used to do it. Just skin the cat.

Betsy ran toward the honeysuckle. As she got to the space where the little girl had disappeared, she could see an opening in the thick vines just big enough for her to pass over the lower rail of the fence. So she did.

She came out in the cool shade of many trees at the back of a large white frame building, much taller than it was wide. There was a steep green shingle roof over the main part of the building and two smaller rooms that stood out from the sides. Betsy walked near the building.
She could see no doors, so she chose one side of the building and walked forward out of the cool shade into a gravel parking lot. Betsy looked around for the girl.

Out front of the building, Betsy could see it was a church. A small white cross rose from the front of the roof. A smaller room stuck off the front of the building with big red double doors that looked like a mouth. Two small windows, one to each side of the doors gave the impression of eyes. It was a friendly kind of face. There were doors on each of the side rooms that were closer to the honeysuckle fence than Betsy. She wondered if the girl was in there. It seemed wrong to go into the big front doors since it wasn’t Sunday. Betsy decided to try one of the side doors. She went to the one by the parking lot and turned the knob. It was open.

It was dark inside. Betsy entered. It smelled of old wood and furniture polish, like Mama’s cedar hope chest. Betsy closed her eyes and stood in the doorway for a minute. Her heart beat a little faster and she thought that she might cry.

“Well, come on in if you’re going to. And shut the door.”

Betsy’s eyes flew open. She could see better in the darkness and followed the voice toward an opening into the larger room. The girl was laying on a raised platform near the pulpit. She was flat on her belly, with her arms bent, her hands propping up her head.

“You didn’t shut the door.”

Betsy retraced her steps and closed the door quietly, noting how bright it was outside compared to the church. As she reentered the large room, she saw that thick curtains covered the only windows along the sides of the buildings. Little light entered, making it hard to see details.

“I’m Betsy.”

The blonde girl sat up and swung her feet around to dangle off the platform. “I know who you are. You’re Mr. Jack’s granddaughter.”
“How did you know?” Betsy sat down on the front pew near the doorway.

“Everybody knows Mr. Jack and Mrs. Annabelle.” The girl scratched at her ankle.

“We’re some kind of kin, you and me. I was named after Mrs. Annabelle. Well, Mrs. Annabelle and my grandmother. Lucy Belle.”

“Your grandmother is Lucy Belle?”

“No, silly. I’m Lucy Belle. My grandmother was Lucille. She’s dead.”

“Lucy Belle.” Betsy scratched her thigh. “I saw you from the tree.”

“I know. I been watching you up in that tree.”

Betsy sat swinging her feet, scuffing her Keds on the wood floor. “Whyn’t you say something?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know how to climb up like you do. Besides, I figured you needed to be up there alone after what happened to your mama and daddy.”

“What do you know about my mama and daddy?” Betsy stopped scuffling her feet jumped up, arms stiff, fists balled up.

“I know they’re dead. Like my daddy is. He ran Mama’s car off the river bridge two Sundays ago and drowned.”

Betsy’s stiff shoulders deflated. It was quiet in the church except for sounds of wood expanding from the heat gathering under the tall roof. “That was him—the funeral at the other church?”

Lucy Belle nodded her head.

“Memma and Grandy take me to the Presbyterian. You go to the Baptist?” Betsy asked.

“Yep. I was baptized the day Daddy died. I’m a member at Bourne’s Grove Baptist now. Have you been baptized?”
“I don’t think so.” Betsy got up and stood closer to the platform. “Why do you come here if you are a member at the other one?”

“This is the church for the black folks. That’s why I come here. No white people come here except me. And you now. It’s my Sanctuary. That’s a place you’re safe in, where you can hide out.”

“I’m safe up my tree, except for the dang ants.” Betsy scratched her thigh again and went toward the doorway she had entered. “You want to come up with me?”

“I don’t know how to get up there.” Lucy Belle stood up but didn’t move.

“Come on. I can show you. And I’ll show you how to skin the cat.”

“You try that on my cat and she’ll scratch you up,” Lucy Belle said.

“That’s just what they call it when you flip upside down. You’ll see.”

“Alright,” Lucy Belle said, “but you use this door.” She started toward the other small room on the opposite side of the church. It looked very much the same as the other one.

“Why?” asked Betsy.

“Cause Kelso said this was the one I should use,” Lucy Belle said.

“You know Kelso?”

Lucy Belle held the door open. “Everybody knows Kelso.”