SKIPPING SCHOOL

By Linda S. Buyer

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Even though the lower halves of the tall, paned-glass windows that lined the outside wall of the classroom were pushed all the way up, the air inside was perfectly still. Little girls in pastel and white seersucker A-line sundresses and boys in dark blue or brown short pants and short-sleeved button-down shirts drooped over their wood-topped desks. The quiet was overwhelming. Mrs. Nelson felt beads of sweat on her upper lip even though she too was wearing a sleeveless summer dress.

The morning bell crashed through the silence. Children lifted their wooden desktops and got out their handwriting workbooks for the first lesson of the day. Mrs. Nelson pushed her straight-backed, armless oak chair away from her desk and stood up. Looking down at her third graders, she announced, “We’re not going to practice our handwriting this morning.” She waited with a slight smile for the cheers to stop. Susan, in the last seat in the middle row, slumped further under her desk. “Today, we’re going to take a test instead.” Susan straightened and checked her pencil box. Three nice, sharp pencils. “This is not an ordinary test, and it won’t count toward your grades. It’s not about our class work. It’s for the school board. All the third-grade classes in Chicago are taking this same test. Just do your best. Get out two pencils. Sharpen them now if you need to. Once we start the test, you need to stay in your seats.” She picked up the pile of tests and sighed as Annie marched to the front of the room with her pencils and started whirling the handle of the silver sharpener attached to the blackboard’s wooden frame. “Annie,” she snapped, “slow down. You always over-sharpen yours and they break as soon as you start to use them. If that happens today, you won’t be able to finish the test. You’ll get a low score.”

Annie’s small blonde head tipped back to see Mrs. Nelson’s face. “I won’t break my points today. I’ll be careful.” She slowly finished sharpening her pencils, checking the points after every revolution, until she was satisfied and returned to her seat. Mrs. Nelson sighed and handed out the tests, then moved her chair over to the windows hoping to catch a breeze. Tongue tips were starting to appear as pencils clutched in small hands filled in the dots, she wondered if it somehow helped.

Sherry was lying with her head on the arm of the couch reading, and realized it was getting too dark to continue. She put her open book on the black and white mosaic coffee table and sat up to turn on the table lamp behind the couch. She craned her neck to look through the kitchen door at the unnumbered wooden starburst clock hanging beside the back door. Susan was sitting cross-legged in the black wire armchair on the other side of the living room reading *The Children’s Garden of Verse*. Faye sat frog-legged on the floor having a tea party with her stuffed monkeys. “Time for bed girls. Susan, we have an appointment with Principal Jenkins before school tomorrow. He wants to talk to us about that IQ test you took last week. Going to make your father late for work.”

“With the Principal? All of us? Faye too?”

“No, not Faye. Faye, Dougie’s mom said you can have breakfast upstairs with them tomorrow, and she’ll walk you to school.”

Tommy and Billy got sent to the principal’s office for fighting. Phil got sent because he wouldn’t stop telling those stupid knock-knock jokes.

Susan didn’t talk out of turn or fight with anyone. She was Teacher’s Pet.

“It’s because of the test we took last week?”

“Yes. Go get ready for bed.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“No. Go get ready for bed. This is the last time I’m going to tell you.”

The loud ticking of the clock on the wall behind the secretary’s desk sounded like doom to Susan. She thought she knew the answers. She was first to turn in her test. Must have been wrong. Three long minutes until she found out what her punishment was going to be.

Sherry pressed down on Susan’s knee. “Please stop swinging your legs. It’s very annoying.”

“I don’t have anything else to do with them. I can’t reach the floor.”

Sherry pressed harder.

The principal’s gray-haired secretary picked up the handset of her phone and said, “I’ll send them right in.”

Principal Jenkins shook hands with her father and gestured toward the three straight-backed oak armchairs arranged in front of his desk. Her parents sat on either side with Susan in the middle. She started to swing her legs again and her mother pushed down on her knee, hard.

“Jim, Sherry, it’s a pleasure to meet you both. Susan, I’m sure your parents told you that you’ll be starting fifth grade instead of fourth grade next year, and why.”

How many times had her mother said, “Children are to be seen and not heard”? Susan nodded and didn’t tell him she had no idea what he was talking about. She listened intently as Principal Jenkins told her parents that Mrs. Nelson thought school was too easy for her.

Susan wondered if school was so easy because what they did at her old school in New Jersey was ahead of school here. That must be it.

Principal Jenkins said skipping would just be a minor adjustment. That the other kids felt bad because Susan clearly knew more than they did. This would level the playing field. Skipping her ahead to fifth grade would solve both problems.

Sherry said, “Maybe she’ll make some friends in fifth grade.”

Knowing more than they did made other people feel bad. Mommy said so before. About Faye. They were skipping her because she was making the other students feel bad. She hadn’t meant to. Susan wondered what any of this had to do with the IQ test.

Principal Jenkins continued, “That’s settled then. One more thing. They learn the multiplication tables in fourth grade. Susan needs to learn them over the summer. That’s the only part of fourth grade she can’t skip. Times tables can’t be mastered without lots of rote rehearsal.”

Jim replied, “I’ll work with her. Has to be me. Her mother, like all women, is really bad at math. Can’t be trusted to add two and two and get four.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Of course, I can do fourth grade math.” Sherry hissed.

The nine AM bell rang. Jim opened his mouth. Principal Jenkins looked from Jim to Sherry and said, “Susan, run along to class, we can finish without you.”

Sherry had abandoned the breakfast table and was reading on the living room couch. Jim was waiting with his hands full for Susan and Faye to clear the breakfast dishes off the dining room table so he could pay the August bills. “Daddy, aren’t we supposed to study the multiplication tables?” Susan asked as he sat down and placed a pile of bills and the checkbook on the navy-blue tablecloth along with a pad of lined paper.

“We did. We’ve practiced them twice already. You can practice by yourself now.” He gestured at the pile of bills. “I have to figure out which of these to pay.”

“But Principal Jenkins said …”

“You two and your mother are very expensive. Her therapy bills and your school clothes really add up. Yours especially. Faye can things you’ve outgrown.”

“I see a therapist because of you.” Sherry chimed in from the living room.

“I didn’t grow on purpose.” Susan said softly.

“Doesn’t matter. Costs me money anyway.”

“I have money in my savings account. We could use that for my clothes.”

“You have sixteen dollars. Not nearly enough. Be glad I can afford you. I work all week while your mother does nothing and then I have to work all weekend as well.”

He opened the checkbook register and checked the balance. “She doesn’t like anything except those tasteless, crunchy nubbins for breakfast, so I had to go to the deli this morning to get lox and bagels for you and your sister. Lox is expensive.”

“We could eat cereal. I really like that Lucky Charms cereal that Ma gives us. That would make Faye happy. She hates fish.”

 “And what would *I* eat for breakfast?” He picked up the top bill. “Your mother can’t be trusted to do simple math, so *I* have to pay the bills.”

“I could help you.”

“No, you can’t. You’re only ten and barely know your times tables.”

He made three columns on the lined paper, heading them Date Due, Amt Due and Amt Paid, and entered the due date and amount due from the bill he was holding. “You know that stuff you drank when you were a baby? Abbott Labs bought the company that makes it and they’re going to start manufacturing Similac right here in Chicago. It’s a huge market. And they’re going to need a whole bunch of new equipment. I want to be the one to sell it to them.”

He picked up the next bill from the pile and added it to his list. “I’m taking their buyer downtown to the Blackhawk for dinner tonight. It’s a real classy joint. They make Caesar salad at the table. Jake told me he likes prime rib.” Jim patted the stomach that had started to lap over his belt. “Theirs is the best in town. I’ve spoken to the sommelier and ordered some great wines. I need to really impress him. I’m working my fingers to the bone for the three of you. I don’t have time to practice with you.”

“I’m sorry.” Starting fifth grade. Supposed to be a big kid. Should be able to do it myself. “Of course, your work is more important.”

Susan’s favorite part of that summer was Saturday trips to the local library with Faye and her mother. “Mommy, look! These books have the same name as our school, Lucy Fitch Perkins. How come?”

“She’s a famous children’s author. Her books are about twins from different places or times in history. See *Irish Twins, Japanese Twins, American Revolution Twins.*”

Susan wondered what it would be like to have a twin to do things with as she added one of the twin books to her check-out pile.

Susan didn’t study the times tables that August.

Instead, she read more of Perkins’s books. By Labor Day, she had read them all except *The Indian Twins*. Her family and Dougie’s were going to the park for a barbecue. She had a plan. She was going to bring jump ropes for Faye and Dougie. If she kept them busy, the adults would let her read.

The bell rang and Mrs. Laurent finished writing the next day’s math assignment on the board before turning to her fifth-grade class. “Okay, lunch time. Get your lunches from the cloak room, come back and line up. We aren’t going anywhere until you are standing quietly in two lines. Boys on the left.”

Susan opened her desk and slowly put her math book inside, wanting to be the last one into the cloak room. Boys pulled braids and bumped into girls on purpose as they went through the cloak room door. Mrs. Laurent tapped her foot as everyone retrieved their lunches. Susan was making the sure the piles in her desk had the smallest items on top, that the papers were squared off, and her supplies were neatly spread out. “Susan, that’s enough. We need to go. You’re not only wasting your lunch time, you’re wasting ours as well.” Susan looked up. The cloak room was empty. She ran to collect her lunch sack and took her place at the end of the girl’s line.

Mrs. Laurent led the class down the main hallway to the lunchroom, putting her forefinger over her lips and shushing, as the pushing and giggling accelerated.

The prettiest girls in the class, Debby and Linda, always commandeered the only four-person table. Everyone else sat at the six picnic-style shiny silver tables with attached benches that filled the rest of the room. The boys who were good at sports had the left-hand table under the windows and the girls who wore short psychedelic print dresses in neon colors had the right-hand table. The middle two tables had the kids that didn’t stand out. The last row of tables had the odd kids. Chess club nerds. The marching band. The kid who could twist his tongue into a cloverleaf. Susan.

Debby and Linda mostly chose seatmates from the cool girls’ table. When he scored big in the football game after school on Friday, they let Mark sit at their table for the whole next week. When the Chess team made it into the Middle School Championships, they let the team captain sit with them for two days.

Susan hated Fridays. Her lunch gave the kids something to whisper about beside what a baby she was. Susan crossed to the large garbage can in the corner scrunching her small brown paper lunch sack and threw it, and the remaining half of the salami and mustard sandwich her mother packed, into it. She saw Mrs. Laurent standing by the double doors into the corridor and asked for permission to go to the bathroom.

Seated behind the muddy brown metal door, Susan heard the water turn on at the three-hole stainless steel sink.

“Did you see *Gidget* last evening? Wasn’t her yellow dress with the Peter Pan collar the cutest?

“Sure was.” Susan recognized Linda and Debby’s voices.

“Those white tights *you* have on are perfect with that psychedelic print.” Linda said. “I saw that in last month’s Vogue. With a white turtleneck under a tent dress just like you’re wearing. I need white tights to go with my new skirt.”

“What do you think of this white lip gloss with my outfit?” Debby replied. “My mom doesn’t know.”

“Cool, can I try it?”

Susan stood up and flushed the toilet. She chose the sink furthest away from Linda and Debby. They exchanged glances.

“Susan, do you know what the facts of life are?” Linda asked her.

Susan froze with her hand halfway to the soap dispenser. Her eyes flicked left to right several times. Not finding an answer, she tried bluffing, “To which facts of life are you referring?”

Linda dropped the lip gloss she was applying in the sink. Linda and Debby looked at each other again and started to laugh. Susan ran back to the lunchroom.

Susan was responsible for walking herself and Faye home from school each day and then helping Faye with her homework until Sherry returned from the painting class she was taking at the Park District fieldhouse.

Before Sherry had a chance to put her painter’s palette and brushes away, Susan started talking. “Mom, Faye’s lying. She says Mrs. Nelson showed them a different way to subtract and that I’m doing it wrong!”

Sherry replied. “Fay did not lie when she said Mrs. Nelson showed them a different way to do the problem.”

“You don’t know. You weren’t here.”

“I know she didn’t lie.”

“Well, I’m showing her how Mrs. Nelson taught me. Her teacher! It’s right and she keeps saying it’s not. I hate her!”

“You don’t hate Faye. She’s your little sister. You don’t want to make her feel bad, do you?”

“Yes, so she’ll do what I say. You want me to teach her, and she won’t let me! You’ll be mad at me if she doesn’t get Bs.”

“Have her show you what Mrs. Nelson said. If the answers are right, then that’s how she should do it.”

“She can’t! She just says I’m wrong. MY answers are right!”

“Don’t shout at me. Go to your room.”

Except for tutoring Faye, Susan had nothing to do after school so she worked her way through the literary fiction that filled the headboard bookshelf on her mother’s side of the pushed together twin beds and the eleven-volume set of *The Story of Civilization* on her father’s. She decided that almost all the people in the novels were too nice to each other to be true. There were horrible people all through history. Genghis Khan, Nero, Vlad the Impaler, Hitler… That’s what life was really like.

Her mother occasionally insisted she stop reading and get out of the house and get some fresh air. Susan never saw the point. The windows in their apartment were open all day if the weather was nice. Her mother insisted that she and Faye sleep with their bedroom window open even in the winter. They were allowed to go to bed with it closed and she’d sneak in after they were asleep to open it. Jim said he thought that was crazy but didn’t stop her. Susan started picking out her school clothes for the next day and tucking them into the bottom of her sheets. She perfected the art of getting dressed in the morning before getting out from under the covers.

Students dropped small valentines on their friends’ desks on their way to their seats. Some stopped only a few times, while others put something on every desk they passed. Linda and Debby had to keep restacking their piles which threatened to spill over. Susan was glad she’d been the first to arrive, so they didn’t know she didn’t have any cards to give out. Her mother said Valentine’s was just a crass commercial holiday and that she wasn’t going to dignify it by spending any money on it. Susan took out her flashcards, shuffled them, and placed the whole stack in front of her. She read each card and tried to answer before looking at the back. She placed the cards she knew in a pile on the right and those she didn’t in a pile on the left. Her desk didn’t look so empty.

While the class waited for the first bell, they argued about which TV show was best. Linda whispered something to Debby. They giggled.

“Hey Teacher’s Pet, what’s *your* opinion?” Linda leaned toward Susan. “Who’s better? Jeannie on *I Dream of Jeannie* or Samantha on *Bewitched*?”

“I, I don’t know.” Susan replied.

Debby said, “How can you not know?”

“Um, I just don’t. Who do *you* like best?”

“I like Samantha, of course. I can wiggle my nose too.”

“Then I think she’s better.”

Linda asked, “Can you wiggle your nose?”

“I, I don’t know. I’ve never tried.”

“Let’s see.”

The bridge of Susan’s nose wrinkled but the tip didn’t move.

Linda put her hand on her hip. “You can’t like Samantha best. Your nose didn’t wiggle.”

“Um, okay, Jeannie then.”

Debby said, “What do you like about her?”

“Um, I don’t know. I’ve never seen it.”

“Why, what’s on instead?”

“Um, I don’t know.”

“What do you watch at eight o’clock?”

“I don’t watch anything.”

Linda and Debby looked at each other. Linda started to smirk and said, “What do you mean, you don’t watch anything?”

“That’s my bedtime.”

Debby laughed. “Your bedtime is eight PM? You really are a baby. Why’d they ever put *you* in fifth grade?”

Susan ran to Mrs. Laurent’s desk and asked to be excused to go to the bathroom.

“Sixty-nine = six minutes in and nine months to wait” was scrawled on the back of the stall door. What does that even mean? It’s our TV set and we’re not allowed to watch. I never know what anyone’s talking about! No one else has to go to bed so early! I’m a freak.

It was cold in the shadows under the trees that grew among the sparse, slender blades of grass peeping up around Perkins’ black-topped playground, but it was warm in the mid-April sun. The playground monitor was standing in the far corner of the schoolyard giggling at whatever the mailman was saying to her. Students took advantage of her distraction and piled their coats at the edge of the blacktop next to the monkey bars.

Susan wanted everyone to see her new Marimekko-print skirt. It had large green poppies with yellow centers on a white background. She ran across the playground to drop the plain gray wool overcoat her mother had made on the pile. Her great-grandmother had bought the skirt and the short white wool turtle-necked trapeze sweater she was wearing with it when she came for Passover last week. She’d stayed downtown Chicago in the ornate Palmer House Hotel and taken Susan to shop at an equally ornate department store across the street. Ma chose the skirt for Susan because it made it obvious her irises had the same concentric circles of yellow, green and gray as Ma’s.

Because it was in the shade of a tall, Christmas-tree evergreen, no one was using the monkey bars. This would be a good time to practice dismounting. Susan climbed up and sat on one of the long sides of the monkey bars, facing the rungs. Larry and Mark were just adding their winter coats to the nearby heap. Placing her hands on either side of her hips and holding on tightly, Susan let her body slide backward until her knees hooked the bar between her hands. The puffy cloud right overhead looked like a magic bus. She twisted her toes under the rungs and let go with her hands. Her short, wide sweater inverted and covered her mouth.

Larry poked Mark. “Wow. You can see her titties.”

Susan was puzzled when Mark gestured for Ray and Kevin to come see. Her mother said that she didn’t need a bra until she started to develop breasts. In fact, she’d said no one ever needed an A cup. Said Linda and Debby’s mothers were foolish to think they did.

Ray whispered to Mark, not taking his eyes off Susan, while Larry waved to a small group of boys playing catch.

Apparently, boys didn’t care if you were developed or not. Only the girls.

Susan ignored the boys and kept her eyes on the clouds. She heard leaves crackle underfoot.

They’re paying attention to me!

She reached up and grabbed the bar, swinging her legs out and over her head. She fell backward when her feet hit the ground and landed with her skirt in a circle around her. Mark offered a hand to help her up.

She raised her hand hallway to his. He clasped it and pulled her to her feet. Susan smiled up at him.

Mrs. Laurent was walking around the classroom matching the names on the beige squares she was distributing to the students. “Remember, graduation is three PM Saturday. There’s a note in your report cards reminding your parents that you need to be here by two-thirty at the latest.”

The bell rang. “You can go if you already have your report card.”

Desktops clattered and there was a rush toward the classroom door.

Mrs. Laurent handed report cards to the remaining end-of-the-alphabet kids. They cleaned out their desks and left. Only Susan remained. Mrs. Laurent gave Susan her report card. “Straight As. Not what we expected when we skipped you. Nothing to do about it since you won’t be in the district next year.”

Do about it? Not be in the district next year? What did she mean?

Mrs. Laurent continued, “You’re class salutatorian. You need to prepare a short welcoming speech for Saturday, a salutation. A few sentences at most. Welcome grandparents, parents, siblings, to the graduation ceremony for the fifth class of fifth-graders to graduate from the Lucy Fitch Perkins grammar school. That kind of thing. Your parents will be proud of you.”

Faye and Susan rushed in waving their report cards. “Let’s see.” Sherry said.

Susan pushed in front of Faye. “Here’s mine.”

Her mother looked it over. “All As. Mrs. Laurent says you are a little too eager to show you know the answers to questions. That’s why they skipped you. The third graders thought you were too much of a know-it-all. Now you’re salutatorian, your fifth-grade class must think the same. No wonder you didn’t make any friends this year.”

“I didn’t make friends because you make me go to bed at 8 o’clock and won’t let me watch TV. That’s all anybody talks about.”

Sherry pulled Faye’s white cardboard square from its beige sleeve.

“Good work! You got Bs in Language Arts, Social Studies, Art and Gym. Mrs. Nelson says you get along very others and are a joy to have in class.” She smiled warmly down at Faye. “You have Cs in Science and Math. I know you tried hard. Susan, you need to do a better job teaching her math, and we’ll add science to the homework sessions.”

“I tried! You know she won’t listen to me. She always says, ‘That’s not how my teacher did it’ and she can’t ever explain what the teacher did, and I’m doing the problems right anyway!” Susan stomped her foot.

“Do not stomp your foot at me! Yes, you do have to. I don’t want to hear anything more from you. Go to your room!”

Susan flung herself on her bed and punched the pillow, then pushed her face into it and started to cry. Straight As and nothing! Faye’s Bs are good?! How is that fair?

Susan loved the white lace dress she had chosen for graduation. She stepped back far enough from the long mirror on the back of the bathroom door to see the white lace-edged ankle socks her mother insisted she wear with her shiny black Mary Janes and frowned. She pulled her graduation gown off the hanger on the hook next to the towel bar, slipped it on and went to find her mother. Sherry was reading on the couch. “Mommy, will you listen to me rehearse my speech?”

Sherry put the book face down on the coffee table and looked at the kitchen clock. “You’ll be fine. I have to get your sister dressed or we’ll be late.”

“Should I say ‘Welcome’ and spread my arms like this?” Susan raised her arms to shoulder level with her palms up. “Or down at my sides?” She let them hang straight down.

“I doesn’t matter. Do what you like.”

Susan’s gown suddenly looked too large. “One must be better. Could you watch me?”

“Not now. I need to dress Faye. Tell your father we’ll be ready to go in ten minutes.”

Jim was drinking a beer and watching *American Bandstand* sitting at the foot of the side-by-side twin beds Sherry made as soon as they got up every morning.

“Daddy, mommy says we’re going in ten minutes. Will you listen to my speech? Should I say it like this…”

“Ten minutes? No. I can’t go like this. I need to put on a jacket and tie. You never know who might be your next customer.”

What if it’s not right? If it’s not perfect, everyone will laugh at me. Too much of a baby to give a speech.

Principal Jenkins introduced her as the nine-old-salutatorian of the fifth fifth-grade class to graduate from Lucy Fitch Perkins. Susan spread her arms and welcomed the grandparents, parents, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins of the graduates. The crowd began to titter when she reached uncles. At the mention of cousins, several fathers laughed out loud. Susan stopped talking and returned to her folding chair on the stage. It was hot under the lights and Principal Jenkins talked for long time. Then it was the valedictorian’s turn. That was even longer.

Susan wondered if she was going to faint. Why were uncles and cousins so funny? One simple thing to do and she couldn’t even do that right.

The valedictorian finally sat down and Mrs. Laurent gestured for the students to line up at the side of the stage in alphabetical order as they had rehearsed. Principal Jenkins secretary called their names one at a time and each student got to go up to the podium where Principal Jenkins shook their hand and gave them their diploma while their families cheered. It was silent when Susan crossed the stage.

Afterward, family groups eagerly hugged their graduates and talked about where they were going to celebrate.

Susan walked with Faye and her parents toward their red Impala convertible. Being careful not to step on the cracks in the pavement, she said, “Where are we going to go celebrate?”

Sherry replied, “Nowhere. Your father has a business dinner tonight. He’s taking a client to the Blackhawk. He needs the car. We’re going to have supper at home. I made you a cake for dessert though. Faye, it’s your favorite. German Chocolate cake”

Seeing Susan’s pout, Sherry said, “You don’t want Faye to feel bad because you graduated, and she didn’t, do you? This way you both get to feel good.”

“I hate graduations! This was hot and stupid. My pretty dress is all sweaty, and no one even saw it. Just these baby socks and shoes! I never want to go to another one!” Susan shouted.

“It’s not ladylike to shout. Especially in a parking lot. And if you don’t want to attend your graduations in the future, you certainly don’t have to. It’s just a silly ceremony. You graduate whether you attend or not.”