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## Ice Cream, Dancing and the River

*by Susan Pepper Robbins*

In the summer of 1948, when I was turning six, we moved from a rock house with an apple and a sycamore tree in its long back yard near Washington D.C., to an old farmhouse on two hundred and sixty-seven acres in central Virginia on the James River. We were a family whose problems were just beginning and were made worse by the lies we told about them. This was in the dark ages before there was a general understanding of denial, before we learned about compensatory fantasies. It looked like the real thing to us. I had a brother two years younger and a mismatched set of parents who loved each other. Later, daddy voted for Nixon and mama wrote in her candidate for president, Dr. Benjamin Spock, the man who changed the way children are seen and treated. He had been one of her teachers at Western Reserve University where she studied for her master's degree in nursing when she might have decided not to marry daddy. Fat chance.

As a boy, daddy had visited a farm once, but mama had grown up on one seven miles from our new home. He knew nothing about country life, she everything. It was not a good beginning. Undaunted, they moved. They lied to themselves about what they were heading into. Alcoholism, for one thing. Daddy was lying to himself about what a friend he had found in vodka, mama about the joys that country life would give us. She treated my brother and me as if we were gifts from heaven--here she had to lie in great detail. About me anyway. From daddy, I learned that there are ways to soften reality for oneself and let others take the hit.

Our new house had been built in 1820, its central group of rooms, at least, had been. It was situated wrong: not staring down over the fields to the river nor up through the overgrown fields to the state dirt road. Oddly angled away from both river and road, or as I later thought of it, away from any possibility of escaping, it was as if the house had been dropped from a crane by a drunk person.

Later, I would find out that the house had been moved closer to the road from its original site on the river bluff. The movers, the freed children of slaves, must have walked off the job to look for better work because they left the house where they stopped--not trying to gee and haw the mules harnessed to the contraption of logs the house had somehow been set on in order to roll it down from the bluff closer to the new-at-the-time state road.

The first time I saw our new home made me, in retrospect, much later, understand daddy's dependence on vodka and mama's need to reconstruct reality. We had to walk in from the road to the house because the driveway had trees growing in it. When we came to the last rise, I couldn't believe that I was looking down at our new home. "Where's our house," I asked. "There," mama said and pointed to a

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thicker, greener clump of trees. "Right there."

In the eighth grade, I would read "The Fall of the House of Usher" and understand the poor narrator's first glimpse of the friend's home he was visiting, the sinking feeling as he looked at the old pile across the tarn. The dead sister and dying brother waiting.

When we got closer, the trees seemed to be growing out of the house, the area mama said was the house. By that first winter, daddy had cut down the paradise and locust trees in the drive, but we had to leave the car up at the mailbox because the mud was so deep we couldn't drive the car through it. If we tried to get the car up to the house after a heavy rain, we got stuck. Always, until my brother started driving when he was seven. He had a way of fording the mud, riding the ridges between the ruts, as if the car were a motorboat.

The school bus driver would cut the engine and wait for us to run to get on. In the third grade, mama was running with us, her to teach the first grade, her training in nursing at a major research hospital put on the shelf and never mentioned though she certainly used it to treat the scrapes and cuts school children have and to try to help the more terrible abuses they suffered at home, the ones she could see in their eyes. One little girl she sent for diagnosis and treatment was found to have a brain tumor and died. Several had polio. She helped set up medical and dental clinics with visiting doctors who came every fall.

I was still unable to read at eight years old, maybe because I had been terrified of the thirty-seven children in the first grade who had all grown up in the country. Thank God for social promotion and for the lying skills I was learning at mama's knee so that I pretended that I was reading and somehow along with several others, I was passed into the second and then the third grade where I finally did learn to read. In the first grade, I had learned only to steal candy when it was sold after lunch on a table in our classroom for the whole school--about two hundred and twenty children. Handing out Almond Joys or rolls of Necco Wafers or some Mary Janes worked miracles and won me a few friends for that day. The next week, mama took me to the teacher who sold the candy and said that I wanted to give her something. It was an envelope with money. I handed it over pretending it was a letter, then ran out of the room hoping I would trip and break my neck.

My brother adjusted to our new life in the country, and by November of his first grade could read, as one relative put it, "like a top." By seven, as I have said, he was driving the car like a top as well as doing other things like a top. His method was, he explained, simple: "Speed makes power." He would gun the car up to about forty and then it would almost fly through the mud making a roaring noise which confirmed his understanding of the problem.

I think that his success in the first grade and with the car in the mud gave him a life-long regard for the truth: tell it quickly and it gives you the power to get to your destination. Later, he was the one who said to

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our father, shooting him between the eyes, that he was going for treatment whether he agreed to it or not. We put daddy in the car and took him to the center where he dried out. It worked many times. Mama and I would deny that there were problems with daddy's drinking, that there had been wrecks and debts, even once a child run over and taken to the hospital, even when daddy's own neck was broken in a one-car accident and he spent six weeks in traction, and once, a barn burned down by a slowly tossed cigarette by him weaving and stumbling away from the hay-filled loft. During those years, I saw myself as an equestrienne (without horse) or a ballerina (without bar or slipper).

Parts of the house were falling away from that center core of eight rooms. It was that center core that had balanced on the logs rolling down from the bluff to where it now sat. The front porch barely attached across the front, had a sleeping porch upstairs. The place had never been farmed with tractors, just mules and slaves, and later, with mules and hired men. The great-great granddaughter of one of those slaves, the old man we called Uncle Bonaparte, was Peaches Johnson who was the same age I was. Her great great uncle had been born a slave on the place and would laugh and shake his head when we asked him what it had been like during slavery. This question came to me when I was in the fourth grade and we had a unit on Virginia history. Slavery was mentioned as an event in 1619. He died when I was in the seventh grade, "somewhere over a hundred." He used to say he couldn't tell no white people anything about "none of that time, about none of the stories he had listened to as a little thing from his old peoples. They was too sad for us to hear." White people, he would say, "couldn't stand to hear sad stories. They would be too cut up by them."

He was a boy when his family was freed, but they stayed on working on the place. Nothing changed for them very much. Peaches and her family lived near Uncle Bonaparte's cabin in a frame house a mile from us. As soon as they could, in the late 1950's, they moved to Philadelphia where Peaches was killed. We heard about it years after it happened and thought it must have been the gang violence we were reading about. One of her cousins from Philly, he called it, visited her family in the summers, Charles Durand. He used to ride the old white horse around, sticking a rusty nail in his rump to make him buck so he'd look like a cowboy. We could imagine gangs made up of Charles Durands. Peaches might not have had a better life in Virginia, but she would not have been murdered, we were sure. Peaches was pretty and I helped her take care of her baby brothers Tyrone and Arthur. Mama had delivered those babies and she took Uncle Bonaparte's wife, the fierce Aunt Lucy, to the doctor for her gout.

Our new home had a twin house two miles up the river. It looked down on the river the right way and was called James View. Our house had seventeen rooms when we got there. It took daddy a couple of years to tear seven of them off. It wasn't hard because some of them were not attached securely to the main part of the house. We had to walk downhill for a few steps to get into some of the rooms. That first year mama raised chickens in one of the front rooms. I was old enough to know that people did not live with chickens. Rooms had been added by

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the generations who had lived there until World War I. We were the next occupants after 1918. Once I heard a hissing and it was a snapping turtle as big as a dinner plate with a long triangular tail. Prehistoric.

I knew that my parents had lost their minds, but I was trapped with them. We had left our nice rock house in the suburbs because daddy had lost his job with the government when all the veterans came home.

Maybe I went into what we now call childhood depression which has taken me a lifetime to learn to deal with. I thought I was having fun, but now I know that I was dissociated, had given up any hope of having a family who could be the family I wanted. I had thrown in the towel. I would adjust to this new life in the country if it killed me. On the good side of it, there was the table of candy just sitting there waiting to be stolen by me to bribe the criminal-looking first graders. But there were no ice cream parties where people danced and then jumped in the river--these were the stories mama had told me to persuade me that our move to the country was a good thing.

Mama had lied to us about the move to the country. She had told us that we were going to a house that had ice cream parties where people had lived who danced all night and then walked half a mile down to the river to go swimming to refresh themselves before they came back to a big country breakfast. She put all my favorite words into that lie--ice cream, dancing and river. Her lies would get worse, but that's the one that made the move possible for me. Swimming in the river did it for Eddie.

She had to lie to me to get me to leave our rock house in the city where daddy, sober as a judge, had taken me to the circus and once to a movie. Mama's study with Dr. Spock had made her so much more lenient and understanding of children than was usual, and than her own childhood had been. She spanked us only once, each, me for dipping my braids in yellow paint and Eddie for breaking five dozen eggs when he had been told by a country cousin that there were gold coins in some of the eggs, but he'd have to break each one to find out which ones had the coins. So, when I started having a tantrum to prevent the move to the country, mama told me the lies about the ice cream and river.

I thought happiness was coming in new colors before we moved, before I saw our new home. For one thing, in the country, in our new life, I thought that I would somehow instantly be ten years older, beautiful, with a figure, knowing how to dance and talk to boys, and being able to swim. It was my own Cinderella movie starring me.

"Your father is not drinking," was the governing lie that we came to live under. In the country, his drinking got worse. I think that in the city, drinking is different or people live with it better. Another lie was constructed especially for me: "You are not that kind of person." Maybe in the country, I veered away from the kind of person mama had in mind for me.

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The ice cream and dancing and river swims were minor league lies compared to the one about daddy's not drinking. She seemed to think that I could grow up into one of those voile-wearing girls, all worn out and frail from so much dancing and swimming and that I would marry one of the young men much later--a doctor who had trained somehow at Western Reserve, now called Case-Western Reserve. She seemed to think that daddy was sober every week night as she helped him up the stairs. I would marry two men, one who turned out to be homosexual--of course, he always was what he was, and did not turn out to be anything but himself, and one who turned out to be suicidal, and of course, he always was what he was. That, we learned from therapy. His death was ordained by his mother when he was three, but he held off until his mid-sixties. I was not the kind of person who had such intractable problems. I was an equestrienne and ballerina.

There were seven big rooms downstairs in our new home. The frantic and incessant peeping of the sixty baby chicks sounded like our two electrical appliances, a bathroom heater which we got that winter and the clock on the kitchen Hot Point, gone haywire. At a distance and upstairs which had five big rooms and a short, wide hall, the sharp little sounds were absorbed in the heart pine flooring, so we could sleep. There was a rosewood piano in the room with the baby chickens and an old carved sofa which Mama pointed out to us as good things, signs that we were in a good place. She said that Miss Mary Lou, the last owner who had lived there--this would have been at the turn of the twentieth century which to me seemed the time when the Christians were tossed to the lions--had had the strawberry ice cream parties in this front room, and had played the piano for the dancing people and when they were tired of ice cream and dancing, "if you can imagine," mama would say, they would sit for a while on the green velvet sofa before they trekked down to the river holding up their dancing dresses. The men did not care what happened to their trousers because they were real men, who did not care about things like trousers getting drenched in the early morning dew, but they would care about the girls' hems getting wet and maybe they carried the girls through the heaviest dews and damps. Did they wear their bathing suits under the dresses the way I did on Sundays hoping, hoping that someone would ask me to go swimming somewhere.

That was mama--thinking of the ice cream and strawberries and dancing as the baby chicks rushed to the corners of the room in a pale yellow cloud of fluff, leaving smelly streaks behind them on the layers of newspaper she had laid down for them. She certainly knew that ice cream took a great deal of work--she would milk a Holstein cow--her name was Sawbones--every morning and evening, separate the cream from the milk, make the custard, gather the eggs from her laying hens--it took sixteen eggs for the custard. She started a strawberry bed and knew how the plants depended on the right sun and rain, the weeding. She knew that making a voile dress or the dresses she would make me later took at least a week of sewing an hour or two in the afternoons, her portable Singer plugged in the kitchen outlet. She knew how to work and could work circles around anyone--that was her reputation.

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As all children of liars know, children will believe anything their parents tell them. In spite of hard evidence.

How could she tell the old feather cushions on the sofa, now pale as straw, used to be green I asked. How did she know about the dancing parties? She knew, she said, because her third cousin told her, the one who used to be one of the girls who danced and helped Miss Mary Lou turn the crank on the ice cream churn. "Not that old woman who is humped over and stinks," I said, remembering the person we had gone to visit in the nursing home and tried to talk to. "That's the very one," mama said. "She suffers from rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis, and she lost her farm to the bank. That's how we have come to have her house and farm."

She married daddy, who was, in fact, an alcoholic, but only during the week. On weekends, he was stone cold sober and farmed the two hundred and sixty-seven acres he and mama, in one of their mutual fits of denial had bought for sixty-three hundred dollars. In 1948, that was a good deal, even for a house that was forty years old when the Civil War started. It had a tiny, little bit of electricity, about a quart of it, but had had those ice cream parties with the dancing and then the swimming in the river, much better than electricity.

Mama grew up on a farm with cows, chickens, horses, and a garden that produced enough for grandma to sell her vegetables and send the money to Korean orphans. Imagination could help children in Korea. A farm had possibilities--that was one thing mama learned from her childhood of being out in the middle of nowhere. Daddy learned that fifty miles from Richmond, fifty from Charlottesville and a hundred and thirty from Washington that he would have to go to the next county, twenty-three miles, to find the state liquor store. He did find bootleggers who still were in business in the 1950's.

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**Susan Pepper Robbins** lives in rural Virginia where she grew up. Her novel was published when she was fifty (*One Way Home*, Random House, 1993). Her fiction has won prizes (the Deep South Prize, the Virginia Prize) and has been published in journals. This summer a collection of stories was published by Unsolicited Press. She teaches writing at Hampden-Sydney College.

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