



SUSAN
LYTTEK

HOMESCHOOLING
CAN BE
MURDER



Homeschooling Can Be Murder

Susan Lyttek

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Dedication

To Kristi Best and family—you are the Best readers around and a true blessing. And to my editor, Lisa McCaskill.

1

I blame it on soccer. (If I didn't blame it on soccer, I'd have to blame it on me, and I'm not ready to go there yet.) So, you must understand that if it weren't for soccer, James wouldn't have picked out the house on his own. If it weren't for soccer, he wouldn't have needed my proxy at closing, and I could have avoided moving into our current abode. If it weren't for soccer, I wouldn't have found a fresh corpse in the middle of an ancient graveyard. And if it weren't for soccer, I would not currently be crawling around in the mud with my kids looking for clues to a murder.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me tell you the whole story.

First, you need to understand that I'm an Army wife. James has made the service a career, and I'm proud of him and what he does. But that means every two to four years, we move. To give our kids some stability and to pass on our beliefs, we decided to homeschool.

We are all *J*'s. When James and I met, he thought it was cute that both our names started with the letter *J*; so after we married, he decided that should be a trademark for our family. And it is, down to the dog. My name is Jeanine, my ten-year-old son is Justin, and his eight-year-old sister is Josie. Our dog? He's a slobbering but loyal bulldog we named Jelly.

I knew last year, as it was James's fourth year at

our current post, we'd move soon. Four years is a long time in one spot if you live the Army life. Often, we'd moved away from other areas I enjoyed after only two years. Still, I wouldn't admit aloud that the move date was approaching.

My kids had a life here and friends. Justin was in a soccer league he loved and on a winning team. Josie had a precious best friend who lived next door. The two precocious readers traded Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books back and forth. Her friend, Mary, even had a couple of the computer games. But after Mary lost several times straight to my darling Josie, they stopped playing the mystery computer games and simply played pretend detective instead. My sweet girl has a semi-photographic memory. Since she remembered all the clues in the game, she always won.

We also had a great church with lots of people who loved us and prayed for us there, along with a dynamic pastor who knew all of us by name. Both kids sang in the choir and went to AWANA. They'd grown up a lot in the last four years. All Josie could remember of our previous post she'd left at a tender four years of age were disconnected pictures and faces without names. That one seemed like a dream to her. To my kids and me, this post, this state, was home.

So when James came home with orders to leave Georgia, I found all sorts of excuses to ignore the upcoming move. Finally, when he said the house hunting had to be done the next week or else, he went on leave alone. Justin had a soccer game against his team's archrival. Their homeschool group was going on the coolest field trip to a potato chip factory. And my ladies' Bible study was having their annual tea. It was a week we couldn't possibly miss. Especially

Justin, though. As the star player, his team would never have forgiven him for missing such a crucial game just to look for a new house in another state.

James called after two days with more than his usual “I’m fine, how are the kids” update. “I’ve found our home, Jeanine. It’s perfect.”

I guess I could have been more supportive and enthusiastic. The least I could have done would have been to ask the right questions. “Mmm-hmm? You did?” — was my rather eloquent response.

“Sweetheart, you’d never believe it. It’s in a quiet neighborhood. I’d only have to drive five minutes to get to post. The house is big. Full basement, eat-in kitchen, three bedrooms, and two full bathrooms, one on each level. Even has a playroom for the kids and an enclosed porch that could become that sewing room you always wanted.”

I nodded as though he could hear that through the phone.

“Are you listening?”

“Of course I am. I can’t help wondering how something so great will fit in our budget.”

“Well...” He hedged.

Here it comes, I thought.

“It does need a little work.”

“Ah-ha!”

“Not that much. The sellers have even agreed to put on a new roof at no additional charge. Mostly cosmetic stuff like new paint and fixtures. Even I could do it. It’s a beautiful old house.”

Warning gongs should have been going off in my head when he said the sellers were so cooperative before he had even made an offer. And the word “old” might have set an alarm to ringing. But I was too stuck

in my I-don't-want-to-move mindset to notice.

"How much?"

He gave me a figure several thousand less than what the realtor said our current home would go for.

"See Neenie," he sweet-talked using his pet name for me, "we'd even make a profit that we could put in the kids' bank accounts for college."

That hit my weak spot, and he knew it. "Well, maybe..." Extra money plus a possible sewing room, and I became putty in his hands. Putty made me think of someone else I knew and loved, though. "But what about Jelly?"

"It has a large, fenced-in backyard." He was waiting for me to ask and was ready. After nearly fifteen years of marriage, he knew me all too well.

"OK, then," I said, sealing my fate. "Put an offer in on the house."

The two months until the move flew by faster than any months in my life. James continued to take care of all of the details while I ran the kids between their activities. In May, they received their AWANA awards and took their end-of-the-year testing for school. In June, James went to closing with my proxy because Justin's team had made it to the semi-finals. Josie wanted to join a swim team with Mary, but James put his foot down.

"We need to be wrapping up that life, Jeanine, not starting something new."

He was right, but I still hated to say no to her.

Justin has always loved preserving a bit of his life from various stages. I guess that's why he got interested in taxidermy in the first place. But now that school was over and soccer his only other focus, he began to find and stuff all sorts of creatures from our

neighborhood. (I avoided the garage like the plague if I knew he was out there with a latest find.) He also reread his comfort book on the life of Theodore Roosevelt for like the twentieth time. We each have our ways of coping with change, I guess. I only wish my son's didn't involve so many furry corpses. But T.R., who enjoyed the same hobbies as a child, would have been proud of Justin.

My friends from the Army wives' club kept me somewhat on task by coming over periodically and helping me box up some of my mother's china and such—anything they wouldn't have trusted the movers with themselves. Karen, whose husband was nearing the twenty-year retirement mark, spelled it out for me.

"You may not like it, Jeanine, but that doesn't stop it from happening."

"But why couldn't we stay here? Here is home. The kids have grown up here. All they know and remember is here."

"And it's close enough to your dad to visit on the weekends. I know. I've been there, too. But you are married to a soldier, so this is not home. Home is where he's stationed." Karen's husband was overseas now, and I understood her double meaning. She could not be home in the truest sense until he was. I was a spoiled child pouting that I couldn't have my way when my own beloved husband was heading with me, with us, to another stateside assignment. I was blessed.

So why did I feel so miserable?

July came too soon and with it, the movers. I hovered over them as they boxed our non-essential clothes, dishes, and the furniture. A week later, James left with Josie and Jelly to meet the movers on the other end.

"I wish you were coming with me, Neenie," he said as he kissed me.

I nearly caved. James's kisses never failed to weaken my knees, and they often penetrated my resolve, too. But then I thought about where I was and the people here. I wanted to be with James, but I didn't want to leave Georgia yet. It was so close to everything I grew up with. "I know you do. And I will miss you." He gave me a doubting glance. "Really, I will. Think of this as a parental temporary duty station. I'm on TDY here until Justin's team is done with the championship games."

He frowned. Normally James is cheerful and upbeat, so the frown threw me for a bit of a loop. "They knew he was going to need to move. I talked to the coach. They won't hold anything against him if he missed out on the final games. I know he wants to play, but I think this is just as much about you, Jeanine."

I shook my head and walked around to his back so I could do two things. Rub his shoulders, and not look him in the eye. He relished the back rub. I could count on it distracting him for a while. "How many times in his life will he be on the top team? I just don't want to deny him the experience," I insisted as I kneaded James's tight muscles.

"I don't buy it," he said. He reached behind and took my hands off his shoulders then turned around to restore eye contact. He put a hand gently on either side of my face and pulled me to him. "I'm praying that Justin's team wins in record time and that you get over this mood and I see my best girl walking up the steps of our home in Gentle Springs next week."

Next week seemed entirely too soon to leave this

town, this family that I loved. “That would be nice, honey, but I’m guessing two weeks. After all, I plan to stop and check in on Dad on the drive.”

He grumbled. He grumbled quite a bit. But I made sure to do everything he liked best other than cook his favorite meal (all the pans were on a truck or in a warehouse waiting to be delivered when James and Josie arrived at the new house). We went to his favorite restaurant. His friends from the church men’s group stopped in, just passing by supposedly, and gave him hearty handshakes and prayed over him. I fluffed his pillow and sleeping bag and gave him a kiss to remember me by before he pulled out in the van with Josie, eagerly barking Jelly, and most of our earthly possessions.

Justin and I waved for a long time. Then we went in, rolled up our sleeping bags, packed our clothes, his soccer gear, and Twinkle—a squirrel which had become Justin’s first taxidermy project. The creature was a little worse for wear because Justin rubbed his fur whenever he got nervous or upset. He was rubbing it a lot lately.

“Why can’t we stay here, Mom? I know all our stuff is gone, but I don’t want to stay at Miss Karen’s.”

I hugged his shoulder as hard as I dared. He was a touchy kid about physical affection. Sometimes, he craved it and would still come and sit on my lap. Other times, I wondered if I had some invisible cootie that made him cringe. Today, I read him right, and he leaned into me. “The house isn’t really ours anymore, sweetie. Now that Dad’s off to settle into the new house, this one is under Army control until they sell or rent this one. In fact, I have to go on post to turn in the keys before we go to Miss Karen’s, so you better make

sure everything is out.”

We walked through looking behind non-existent cobwebs in a home that was now Army clean—better than I ever kept it in the four years we lived there, but absolutely required by regulations. We knew nothing was there, but we looked all the same. Then, I locked the door on good years and headed into denial.

Justin’s team won in the most amazing playoff I had ever seen. Of course, not having participated in soccer as a kid, and not having seen him play in post-season matches, (none of his teams had made it this far before) it was the only amazing playoff I had ever seen. My terrific and nearly professional goalie (no motherly pride there) blocked what would have been the other team’s winning goal by throwing his whole body into the ball. Then, our forward kicked a low and driving point into the enemy goal in the last minute. I was on my feet and screaming.

But it did answer James’s prayer for an early finish. Still, I wasn’t totally ready to leave our warm, Georgian community for Gentle Springs. So, Justin and I did the next best thing. We went to Dad’s.

Driving to Dad’s house in the woods was my security blanket. His current residence used to be our vacation home. We would head out on long weekends or in the summer to escape the crush of people. If he could have figured out how to be a successful lawyer living miles from anyone, Dad would have done it. I bet he wished the Internet had been thriving during his work years. As it was, as soon as he retired and my brother moved out on his own, he and Mom sold the

big place in the suburbs and made the vacation house into their home with a capital *H*. Little did any of us know that Mom wouldn't have long to enjoy it.

I turned off the highway, and immediately the two-lane road began to wind through rolling hills and thick forests of pine. I remembered scampering along the soft pine needle carpet for hours as a girl, hunting for magical kingdoms. If you've never walked across pine needles, you might think they'd be sharp and pointy, and they are if they stick up. But a flat covering of them almost feels like a trampoline underfoot.

With the memories and the still coolness of shade, even on this hot summer day, I relaxed. Justin picked up on it. He put down his latest handheld videogame and began to reminisce about his role in the championship game, and how he would tell every detail to his Papa.

Then, as we turned onto Dad's street, if you could call the gravel path a street, Justin's mind turned to the things he and Papa would do together. "Remember when he helped me stuff Twinkle?" My eager boy asked, playing with the squirrel's tail.

Justin learned his animal skills from my father. Before Dad married, he traveled out west and hunted everything (or just about everything) that our country can offer. I grew up with a moose head on the wall and birds of all sorts perched on the mantles. Now Dad was passing that same love on to Justin.

The tires of our old jalopy crunched to a halt in front of Dad's home. I missed seeing a trail of smoke coming up the chimney, but even in the hills, August was too warm for a fire in the fireplace.

Dad must have been looking for us because he hurried out, and with the small key I had given him,

opened the old trunk before I could say “Hi!”

“Which of these come in?” he asked, pointing to our trunkful of luggage.

“Only the two cloth ones.”

He took them out, set them on the ground and slammed the lid shut, relocking it in one fluid motion. It was one of those things that I loved about my dad. He never acted old or achy or any of that, though I knew he had to be feeling some of his years by now.

“So how’s my girl?” I stepped from the car and into a hug. Dad could hug better and harder than anyone I knew. I broke off reluctantly only because Justin was waiting his turn. “Tell me about that game of yours, Justin.”

For his Papa, Justin went into a long play-by-play discussion of the soccer game. Somewhere into the first quarter, Dad held up a hand. “Tell me all about it while we work, Justin. Right now we need to get these suitcases and your mom inside before they melt.” He turned to me. “I made you a pitcher of my famous iced coffee. Sip some while you read a book or unpack.”

The iced coffee, which I loved, I knew to be my peace offering. Because when my dad and my son got together, they headed out to the workshop. Other than meals, they would pretty much live there until dark. Since Dad had known we would stop by on our way to James, he had already gutted a road kill raccoon he found nearby in decent shape. I would check on them when I had meals ready or needed to hear a human voice, but even growing up with it, I never got used to the smell of the solutions and the concentrations of animal smells.

When they came in for dinner—a savory stew Dad must have started in the crock pot that morning—he

asked me about the house. "Justin says you've never seen it."

"Only some pictures over the Internet that the realtor sent James."

"And you're OK with that?"

I nodded. "I'm having a hard time leaving Georgia."

"You left it to come here."

"But that's different. This is home."

My dad set down his spoon and looked me in the eye. "It may not seem like it now, but your new place will be home, too. I've always heard it said that home is where the heart is. I know your heart is with your family. So three-fifths of your home, if you include that slobbering bulldog of yours, must be up at the new place. As for me, since your mom died, half of my home is in heaven. That's why I live here. It's as close as I can get on this side of the grave."

"Dad..."

"I'm not getting any younger, am I?"

The conversation was getting uncomfortable in more ways than one. Dad had a way of reading me and getting to the crux of my issues. But he also sensed when I needed time. He didn't mention it again for the rest of the visit.

We were getting ready for bed on Thursday night when I got a call from James.

"You do remember that I have to report to work on Monday."

I did. I admitted as such.

"Someone needs to be here, Jeanine. Remember Josie? Remember your dog? You need to get over your procrastination, temper tantrum or whatever it is, and drive up here."

I tend to argue with every command I receive. I didn't this time. I knew I was in the wrong. I just didn't understand it myself. The soccer excuse no longer had any weight. I swallowed hard. "Yes, James."

"I've sent the directions to your dad's e-mail. Print them and use your minutes on your cell if you get confused or run into any problems with the jalopy along the way. It's mostly a straight shot up 85 so you shouldn't have many issues."

With that, I prepared for us to leave the following morning. If we got an early start, we could make it to James and Josie by dinnertime. I bid my dad a tearful goodbye, and he promised to come up for a visit in between his bowling tournaments. I had no idea when that would be, so I nodded. With my dad it's always something. He likes to keep himself busy. Even so, he manages to stay one of the calmest people I know. Nothing rattles the man. Nothing except missing Mom, that is.

The sun was setting as we drove into Gentle Springs. The town seemed peaceful, with all the necessary conveniences like fast food and one of those huge all-in-one stores with groceries, clothes, and anything else you could think of. Only two turns away from the new house, we drove down Spring Street. Obviously, it was the main drag through town. I saw several quaint stores, government-type buildings with flags out front, and some huge homes that must have been from the town's founders. In addition, it was lined with several churches, and I wondered if any of these were included in the two that James and Josie

had tried. I should have listened better when they described life up here.

Without James's precise directions, I would have missed our street. Turn right, it had said, and then drive three-tenths of a mile. Turn left on Lost Ridge Lane, and we are the second lot on the block.

I would have missed it because he neglected to mention that the first lot had quiet tenants. Real quiet tenants. The dream house my honey bought for a steal was next to an ancient cemetery.

I pulled to a stop with my heart stuck in my throat. Justin jumped out and looked around without a care in the world. "This is our new home? Next to a graveyard? Cool!" He ran off to explore. "Hey Mom, this guy died in 1862!"

It had been a long drive and my brain was not processing images just right. The cemetery and my son's hobbies melded in my brain, and I had to shake off an image of him using his taxidermy skills to make soccer balls out of corpse heads.

"Jeanine!" James rushed out and hugged me. "You made it! Isn't the house great? Look at the big backyard and the huge side yard where Justin can practice until he hooks up with a team. And Josie already met a girl her age farther down toward the cul-de-sac."

I nodded, not looking at the house. I was still staring at the cemetery. He tracked my gaze where Justin continued exploring. "Isn't that neat, too? A piece of history right next door. Most of those graves are from the Civil War. I thought maybe you guys could research some of the names during school time."

My tongue finally connected with my vocal chords. "A graveyard? A graveyard was next to your dream house, and you didn't mention it to me?"

He steered me towards the house. "Wait until you see the inside. And the porch. Remember your sewing room?"

What could I do? We owned the place. I had even signed the papers to prove it.

An old man walked the sidewalk across the street from our house slowly, leaning on a crutch. "Stay out of the cemetery all you heathens!" he shouted.

If this was any indication of the rest of my neighborhood, I was going to be spending a lot of time within the house's four walls. I called Justin back under the pretense of unpacking his things before I hurriedly followed James inside—away from the crazy man, to let my darling show me the sights.

A week later, I had gotten semi-used to the house. The way the building was situated on the lot, only two rooms had windows looking over the cemetery—the room Justin claimed and the kitchen. Justin had no problem with the view, so we left the curtain that came with the house on his window. He would even gaze out his window at the graveyard and imagine the lives of the people whose remains found a resting place there. But in the kitchen, I covered the window with narrow, vertical blinds to let some of the light in, but absolutely no visions of graves.

James was right about the inside of the house. It met every need we could imagine. Pleased by my arrival and grudging acceptance of the situation, he had used the past two weekends to add insulation to the outside wall of my sewing room. I used the time to slowly unpack. Very slowly unpack.

After my initial encounter with the bizarre old man, the remaining neighbors that I met seemed nice and friendly enough. The mother of Josie's new friend, a woman by the name of Ann Selkirk, came by with cookies one day. A couple two doors down and on the other side of the street were also Army, but with no kids, and they were renting. Still, they had an energetic German Shepherd that hit it off with Jelly. We arranged for weekly "play dates" for the canines to burn off some of their excess energy. We met a few people walking or gardening. But I noticed one peculiar thing. Other than the Army couple, no one walked on the sidewalk in front of the cemetery. They might follow the sidewalk all the way down until our house. Then, they crossed Lost Ridge Lane at our driveway.

On Friday, exactly one week after I had arrived, just as I began to think I could get used to this, James came home with news. "They're sending me TDY, sweetheart," he said as he handed me an exquisite bundle of roses and carnations to soften the blow that the Army was sending him on temporary duty. My favorite flowers always cushioned any bad news he had for me.

I gulped. Alone with the kids? In a new town? Next to a cemetery? "How long?"

"It depends. They need me to learn some skills to fit the position in the office. At least four weeks, but it could be as long as three months. This training might be the ticket, Neenie."

He had been trying to make Major for a while. I knew it was important to him and to the future of his career. But I wasn't thinking of how much it meant to him. I was thinking of me.