

Living, Though Not Sleeping, with Susan

*When the movie is better
than it has any right to be*

Roger K. Miller

Some movies are so beguiling that you could live in them. Not necessarily great movies, but good ones, nice ones. Such movies obviously mean something to you personally, though the reasons they do are likely to be less obvious, even indefinable. Their attraction is insidious, like that of a wicked drug, luring you back again and again. To revisit them is to hope to rekindle that original piercing stab of joy that C.S. Lewis describes in *Surprised by Joy* and which he first felt on discovering Norse literature. Indulging in them is mostly harmless—except to those you live with (“Oh, God, not *that* again!”)—though the inability to resist that opium pipe to la-la land is not a pretty sight.

For me that movie, or one of them, is *Susan Slept Here*, a 1954 sex comedy—if by *sex* is meant *no sex*, which, in 1954, it did—starring Dick Powell and Debbie Reynolds. I don’t know how many times I have seen it. Fifteen or eighteen, maybe more. Not every year; years have gone by without my viewing it, but lately, with my remaining years looming fewer and fewer, I am reluctant not to catch it at least annually, usually at Christmas, its nominal setting.

Oddly, or perhaps not, it usually is an obscure movie such as *Susan*, and not a prominent one, that inspires devotion like this. No one, for instance, wants to live in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (do they?) or, say, *On the Waterfront*, to choose another film from 1954. Books can operate on you in the same way. Few people besides scholars, other intellectuals, and Tolstoy enthusiasts will read *War and Peace* more than once, but lots of people have returned again and again to popular novels such as Grace Metalious’s *Peyton Place*, which, while not especially obscure, is in roughly the same relationship to *War and Peace* that *Susan Slept Here* is to *On the Waterfront*. I could live, however warily, in Metalious’s Peyton Place, New Hampshire, but spare me Tolstoy’s Russia.

The first time I saw *Susan Slept Here* was in early 1966. I was at my sister’s house in upstate New York, staying overnight to report

to the Armed Forces Examination and Entrance Station in Syracuse, where they prodded, probed, and punched me to see if I was suitable material for the army. (Turns out I was.) I was charmed by the movie then—compared with the serious military consequences I was facing, its bubbly inconsequentiality must have soothed my anxious soul—and ever after I would search the television listings wherever I might be, hoping to catch it again. And then, *mirabile dictu*, when the VCR came along, I was in a heaven comparable to the one in the song “Hold My Hand,” which Don Cornell sings in the movie (“So, this is the kingdom of heaven”). And then, when God or the profit motive led Ted Turner to develop Turner Classic Movies, I was in a transport of delight because I could tape it without commercials. I now have two copies and am thinking of keeping one in the safe deposit box, in case the house burns down. There is, or was, a commercial VHS tape available, but I do not have it. I am not obsessive.

The foregoing should establish my belief that you do not have to abandon critical faculties in enthusing over movies you could live in; what follows should demonstrate that I have not. Based on a play by Steve Fisher and Alex Gottlieb, *Susan Slept Here* was turned out by RKO as routinely as it did dozens of others each year. It achieves no great heights as comedy, yet it has numerous moments of humor and even wit and is suffused with charm. I have said that its pull—and that of any movie that affects anyone in such a manner—is well-nigh inexplicable. Nostalgia may be involved, and escapism. But it also involves some potent brew of storyline, dialogue, setting, characters, and the actors portraying them. Something makes you want to get in there and engage the characters in what they are doing. The one malleable-iron rule I can think of is that any such movie will probably be light, not serious. I cannot conjure the title of a single obscure dark or serious movie I like that I would want to live in. Dana Andrews and Dorothy McGuire’s *I Want You?* Don’t want to go there. And there are obscure light movies I like but do not necessarily want to live in. An even younger Debbie Reynolds in *Two Weeks With Love?* Thanks, but I’ll stay on this side of the screen.

Some have called *Susan Slept Here* a live-action cartoon. I believe they extrapolate that from the fact that the director, Frank Tashlin, spent his early years directing cartoons, rather than from any cartoonish qualities—other than bright colors—of the film itself. (Tashlin spent his later years directing Jerry Lewis movies, and so he is admired in France and overlooked here.) Admittedly the plot, while not thin, is not exactly thick. It involves Reynolds and Powell in a May-September (or, more accurately, early-April–mid-October) romance. Reynolds, two years after her triumph in *Singin’ in the Rain*, plays seventeen-year-old Susan Landis; Reynolds was twenty-two, but she could play teenagers into her thirties. Powell plays thirty-five-year-old screenwriter Mark Christopher and looks every one of his actual fifty years. (This would be his last film as actor; after it he concentrated on directing and television production.) Mark has an assistant/gofer named Virgil, portrayed by Alvy Moore, the pencil-necked, eternally grinning Everygoof who, on his way to becoming county agent Hank Kimball on CBS’s *Green Acres*, portrayed an endless string of sidekicks, pals, and buddies in movies and on television. Mark also has a black maid, Georgette (Maidie Norman); a secretary, Maude Snodgrass (the great character actress Glenda Farrell); a girlfriend, Isabella Alexander (Anne Francis, hubba hubba personified); a lawyer, Harvey Butterworth (mustachioed Les Tremayne, the poor man’s Franchot Tone); and a big problem: Though he has in the past won an Oscar—the statuette narrates the film, probably the only incidence of that in screendom—all he can seem to write now are light, frothy comedies, and he desperately wants to write *serious*. Actually, as Oscar informs us, Mark has two problems, the other being Isabella, the imperious socialite daughter of a prominent senator, who wants to marry Mark more than vice versa.

But I said this movie is so nice you could live in it. So let’s do just that. Reversing the process in Woody Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, where an actor walks off the screen and into people’s lives, we will step through the screen into the actors’ lives. Not like the

1950s television screen that absorbed Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon in 1998's *Pleasantville*, for there they came to bury the decade, and we are here to praise, or at least admire, it—our little bit of it, anyway. More like 1924's *Sherlock, Jr.*, in which Buster Keaton, as a projectionist, walks into the screen and takes part in the detective story. And why not? To paraphrase a statement from the opening of another 1954 movie, the musical Western spoof *Red Garters*, though some say that movies should be more like life, the wise man knows that life should be more like the movies.

First, though, we have to get past the credits, which in those days were at the beginning and mercifully brief, giving us no clue as to who the caterers or statuette wranglers were. We have to push aside a silvery satin pillow atop which float the pink (shocking pink, they would call it) words of the title. And we have to flee the jouncy, sing-songy title tune (“There’s a kind of special house / With a kind of special room / With a kind of special atmosphere. / With a clickety old clock / Going ticka-ticka-tock, / Susan slept here!”) the lyrics of which, I finally realized on one of my viewings, bear absolutely no relationship to the story.

That done, here we are in Mark’s Hollywood high-rise apartment. Look around at this sumptuous bachelor pad, to use a term now dated but then barely coming into use. It is pre-Hefner in both taste and, for all intents and purposes, fact (the first issue of *Playboy* came out in December 1953). Mark clearly lives like a man of the world and not a hedonist. It is Christmas Eve and there is a frosted white Christmas tree standing in the living room not far from the baby grand piano. The stately gray stone of the fireplace, in which a fire burns presumably to keep off the chill of the December rain that later will briefly fall, covers much of one wall. The walls are done in a variety of soft colors, but overall the film, like so many of the period, gives off a sense of vivid, intense colors. (In *Red Garters* the colors positively vibrate—as they do in *Far From Heaven*, director Todd Haynes’s 2002 re-creation of and homage to 1950s melodramas.) Mark has a curved, well-stocked bar, of which Maude, no stranger

to John Barleycorn, will make frequent use. A large aquarium filled with the azure water found only in movie aquariums sits not far from the bar, the brightly colored tropical fish lazily and happily swimming about (until the day Susan, practicing her golf, sends a golf ball into the side of the tank). Some of the woodwork is post-war blond, some is painted the color of the walls. Room dividers do double duty as shelves, to which at one point Susan clings desperately with her loafer-shod toes when she believes she is being hauled off she knows not where—possibly to that fate worse than death. A large, trapezoidal, beatnik-era metal frame hangs on one wall, enclosing two comedy/tragedy drama masks. One of those combination radio/television/record players that in that era were advertised as not just appliances, but pieces of furniture, has a place of honor in the living room amid the squarish couches and matching chairs. Some of the closet doors are mirrored. This was the time when AT&T, which legally owned your phone, would let you have one in any color as long as it was black. So tasteful people like Mark, or more likely the decorator he surely must have hired, bought colored plastic shells to fit over them. A large glass “window” decorated with Miro-like fish separates the apartment from the veranda. (When I was a kid growing up in dingy tenements in a small city in upstate New York, I would see places like this in movies and think, “That must be how *real* people live.”)

This quiet domestic scene is broken by the arrival of Susan. She is dragged, kicking and screaming, into the apartment by two Los Angeles cops, Sergeants Monty Maizel and Sam Hanlon, played, respectively, by two veteran character actors, Horace McMahon and Herb Vigran.

“Ya liar!” she shouts at her escorts, her rain hat fetchingly askew. “Ya double-crosser!” And that ultimate early-1950s insult: “*Communist!*”

Mark knows the policemen from the time when Sam was technical adviser on a film that Mark wrote. Then they were homicide detectives, but now they’re on the vice squad, where you meet

a better class of clientele. They've brought Susan because Mark had mentioned to Sam that someday he'd like to write a movie about, in that quaint phrase of a half-century ago, a juvenile delinquent. However, this movie, and Debbie Reynolds, is too nice for Susan to be a delinquent even by the *Blackboard Jungle* or *West Side Story* standards that are laughable to us today. Her father is dead and her mother has remarried and gone off to South America on a combination honeymoon/work assignment with her engineer husband. Susan has insisted on staying behind so that the newlyweds can get a good start on their new life without a kid in the way. The cops picked her up for bopping a Shore Patrol sailor on the head with a bottle and for possible vagrancy. (The matter of how she is subsisting all on her own is never raised, thank goodness, thus avoiding a possible dent in the fantasy.) Not wanting to send her to the "work farm" over Christmas, the cops bring her to Mark for "research," figuring Maude, the secretary, could stay with her until after the holiday.

MARK: What could I possibly use her for?

SUSAN (*angry, suspicious*): Yeah, what?

VIRGIL: I pass.

Virgil the assistant gets his fair share of good lines. When Mark, searching for a way to keep Susan around, suggests to his lawyer that they could try to get the court to make her his ward until she turns eighteen, Virgil dryly observes, "Any judge who starts handing out seventeen-year-old chicks to thirty-five-year-old bachelors will become president next election."

To cut to the chase, that chase being one of Mark after Susan—though naturally, poor boob, he doesn't know it—and of Susan willing to be pursued: The course of true love doesn't run any smoother in Hollywood than in Shakespeare. They get married, but it's not a real marriage, or so Mark asserts. Isabella raises a stink. Harvey the lawyer tries to get the marriage annulled. Virgil's intentions toward Susan—that is, Mrs. Mark Christopher—come into question. Until

the fadeout, when all is happily resolved and the two lovebirds are perched in, literally, a large birdcage, happily swinging back and forth as the title song lilts us to the end.

Who would not want to hang out with this merry band? Take Maude, for instance. Born in 1904, Glenda Farrell, who portrays her, is an actor of exactly Powell's vintage. Her career was spent playing hardboiled, wisecracking dames (the newswoman Torchy Blane), but here her brassy heart has been alloyed with gold. She is obviously a woman with considerable experience, not only of the world, but of movie scripts, as her writer's-blocked boss Mark ruefully admits. Not only that, but despite the years on her, and despite Mark's and Virgil's curling their lips at the chance to buss her under the mistletoe, she's still clearly capable of showing a guy a good time—if only they can get outside the constraints of a romantic comedy movie. She deserves more than the tiny Christmas present Mark gives her. ("Mer-ree Christ-mas to Maude," she says, reading the accompanying card. "Oh, now that's clever writing.") Her personality and sarcasm are a lot like those of the man-hungry comedy writer Sally Rogers played by Rose Marie on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. A guy could learn a lot from Maude, and not just how to make a martini (one bottle of gin to one drop of vermouth). So could a woman, and Susan does—mainly, not to abandon (as Maude did) the man you love. Sentiment, yes. Cheap? Not necessarily.

The two cops, now: Surely, despite their putative backgrounds in homicide and vice, they are too nice ever to have arrested anyone for anything more serious than jaywalking. Sam, with his rubbery, cheery, aged-cherub's face, fits in everywhere with everybody. He must: Herb Vigran, who portrays him, had small roles in at least seven other films released that same year. Monty we would do well to be warier of; he fits more comfortably in the criminal milieu. (In fact, both actors began their professional lives by studying law.) Horace McMahon, who portrays him, had a Hollywood past strewn with practically nothing but cop, crime, or similar tough, streetwise roles, and he would go on to win an Emmy as Lieutenant Mike Parker in

ABC's *Naked City*. Monty can get steely when necessary: "Lay one hand on her," he growls at Mark when leaving Susan behind, "and that's all, brother!" Still, here in Susan's little world, he seems as guardedly friendly as the basset hound he resembles and as cheerfully mournful as the comedian Brad Garrett, whose grandfather, going by looks, he well could have been. Neither of the cops ever takes off his overcoat. It's a 1950s cop thing.

As for Virgil, he's a puppy dog, a great guy to pal around with, I have no doubt. Ain't nobody don't like Virgil, except Isabella, and she doesn't like anybody—including, possibly, Mark, whom she seems to regard as a possession. At one point she drops a large picture frame on Monty's toes and, while watching him wince, coos, "Oh, I am sorry. But then, they *were* flat, weren't they?" Like all puppy dogs, Virgil can be a pest and is pretty much useless, but you'd miss him if he weren't around. Actor Alvy Moore's proto-geek looks belie his own history: He served with the Marines on Iwo Jima in World War II. As Virgil, he reverses the image: He was Mark's commanding officer in the U.S. Navy. We are meant to smile at the thought of this ineffectual nonentity having been the boss of his boss, a more impressive male. But sparks fly between Susan and Virgil, who has been given the task of keeping an eye on her while Mark goes off to a cabin in the mountains to finish a script and Harvey works (unknown to her) on an annulment to what Mark regards as a marriage of convenience. "Who needs you?" Susan jeers at Virgil. "Not Mark. He's got a cook to cook and a secretary to secretary. You can stick around in a phony job he made up for you, but not me. I'm not going to be a phony wife."

Mark? Frankly, as played by Dick Powell, Mark's a bit of a cipher: necessary, but not sufficient. Powell sleepwalks through the part, which essentially is that of straight man. He's animated enough that you might want to talk to him about his adventures in the screen trade—which, internal evidence suggests, go back to the 1930s, when he'd have been in his teens, if he's now really thirty-five—and about

his time in the Navy. He wrote a novel based on his Navy service, *The Gob and the Geisha Girl*. When Susan, who has read the novel, discovers that Mark is the author, she expresses her excitement in clichéd 1950s fashion: "Crazy!" To which Mark deadpans back: "Real nervous." The writers, Steve Fisher and Alex Gottlieb, are having us on. Later her unlettered enthusiasm for popular literature provides an opportunity for the filmmakers to take a shot at the middlebrow concept of book-of-the-month clubs. (That's pretty rich—Hollywood mocking middlebrow.) There's no question that Powell evokes a measure of sophistication and intelligence, but as a foil for Debbie Reynolds he's a bit too unbending. It might have been better had Tashlin gotten someone else for the role. Maybe Powell's slightly younger (and younger-looking) contemporary, Joel McCrea, who would have added a touch of endearing confusion.

Or maybe it's simply that I'd be jealous of *anyone* next to the ever-scrumptious Reynolds, who is reason enough for any male to want the 1950s to go on forever. She's the reason for the movie, too, of course, and she's as velvety tough here as she seems to have been in real life. Susan swoons over Don Cornell's crooning of "Hold My Hand" (so mock overcome that she has to stick her head in front of the refrigerator's freezer compartment and fan herself with the compartment door), but is tough enough to insist on the validity of her marriage to the man she loves and who, she knows, really loves her.

Admittedly, that characterization of Susan sounds sappy enough to justify all the indictments of dumbness made against 1950s (and 1960s) romantic fluff films. But her behavior (and Mark's) is a thin cover for a putatively non-sex comedy. Susan, after all, in batting her big blue eyes, does so not just innocently, but suggestively.

How lightly they have to tread. Mark and Susan go off to Las Vegas for a wedding that he, but not she, sees as merely a way to provide her a temporary home until after the holidays. "It won't be a *real* marriage," Mark tells Harvey and Virgil. "Just an expedience."

HARVEY: You can't marry her, Mark. Why, I've got a daughter her age.

MARK: I'll get a lawyer with an older daughter.

After the wedding at a Vegas chapel, they dance all night. Message: Older gent did not commit what looks like statutory rape by taking a seventeen-year-old girl to bed, yet you are free to imagine all the frisson-inducing notions you want.

How slyly they get their point across. Susan, looking at Isabella's photograph, admires her dyed hair.

MARK: Isabella is a natural blonde.

SUSAN: You're sure?

MARK: Mmm. We're good friends. She told me.

Message: They are far more than good friends, and thus Isabella didn't have to tell him.

Slyness, underplaying, and indirection: In such manner is the weakness of pandering to prudery turned into strength. In such manner did Preston Sturges get away with broadly winking at salaciousness in a hilarious story about an all-night party at which Betty Hutton gets pregnant and forgets who's the father in 1944's *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*. In such manner does Susan indicate what she has on her mind when Harvey tries to get her to sign annulment papers. He painfully explains that it has to be an annulment, not a divorce, since they aren't really married "because you and Mark were never—uh—alone together." Susan, bless her stiff spine and spunky soul, replies, "I expect to stay *unannulled* until I'm divorced." If you still haven't twigged to what they're hinting at, catch Susan at the end of the movie, and seemingly her tether, when she tells herself, "A woman has her pride." Pause, remembering: "But I'm not a woman. Yet." And she marches determinedly into the living room to sweetly badger her lawfully married husband into making her a woman. At this point, with Susan pressing the willingly wilting Mark backward toward the bedroom door, we must discreetly take our leave of our

cinematic friends, thinking as we step back into our drab noncel-luloid lives, that, really, this is more intriguing than the buck-naked coupling of Cruise and Kidman in *Eyes Wide Shut*. It's a 1950s thing.

Susan Slept Here is a time capsule in more ways than one.

When Susan describes clothes as "real george. Cool. All gone. Low cut. You know, clothes that are really with it," she is both invoking and parodying slang that is, in parts, extreme and marginal for the time. To indicate her advancing age, Maude draws a square in the air and says, "Get me. I'm ready for television." Which was Hollywood's way of getting in a dig at the new medium, still perceived as the film industry's enemy, not the wave of its future. Most of all, though, the film preserves as if in amber the image of cozy domesticity (albeit one fraught with sexual tension) that prosperous postwar America promised, if it did not quite deliver.

There are other movies it would be great to live in, some also from 1954. *The Long, Long Trailer*, a middle-class, middle-of-the-road road movie starring Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, shares the same pleasant, pastel world with *Susan*, as well as a few actors. Herb Vigran has an uncredited role as a trailer salesman. And the actor Oliver Blake, who plays a trailer park manager in *Trailer*, in *Susan* is the manager of a motel to which Mark tries to take Susan on Christmas Eve—purely to get her off his hands.

MARK: We'd like a room. For her.

MANAGER (*looking at Mark, then Susan, suspiciously*): How old are ya, kid?

SUSAN: Seventeen.

MANAGER: [*a silent stare at one, then the other, as they slink away*]

I'd also gladly move into the tear-jerking *Young at Heart*, even though I know I wouldn't have a hope of winning the lovely Doris Day, Dorothy Malone, or Elisabeth Fraser (later Sergeant Joan Hogan on *The Phil Silvers Show*) away from Gig Young, on whom their lovestruck young hearts are set. And to go to sea in the *Nautilus* with

Kirk Douglas and James Mason in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* would be its own kind of cool. But if it's all the same to you I believe I'll just climb back into *Susan Slept Here*. Virgil has decided to go back into the Navy, leaving Mark with the parting advice, "Admit that you accidentally married the right girl." Then, with Mark and Susan off in the bedroom presumably putting their conjugal relationship into the state nature intended, Virgil goes about the kitchen, turning off switches and generally making sure things are in order. With a final look-round, he leaves. I hate to see Virgil go. He looks terrific in his naval uniform, which has erased his sexual ambiguity. Mark's zaftig neighbor, Marilyn (played by Mara Lane), who never used to give Virgil a tumble, now gives him a long wolf-whistle. But duty calls and for Virgil, glancing first at her nose-cone breasts and then at his wristwatch with obvious regret, there's no time for that sort of thing. Anyway, that means a good job has opened up as Mark's—and now Susan's—gofer. Pardon me while I go see if they can use an aging movie buff. I think they're going to need a babysitter any month now.