

Meeting Robert

A question you often get is “How did you end up in Mallorca?”

I always say, “Do you want the long version or the short version?”

The short version is that I lost my teaching job on Long Island and was working as a night watchman for Lavery Detective. Kent State had just happened. Having published a few science fiction stories, I got the bright idea I could perhaps support myself with a typewriter. I told a friend I wanted to leave the country, and he pointed me to a neighbor's house in Brooklyn Heights.

“She has a property for sale on Mallorca,” he told me.

She showed me a black and white photo of a stone house with a tile roof, an arched doorway and a couple of windows with wooden shutters. The price was exactly what I had paid into my retirement fund. I withdrew it from the Teachers' Credit Union and the next day I gave her the cash. She put it under her stockings in a chest of drawers. Then she gave me a page torn from a spiral notebook with the name of the person who had the house key, a painter named John Ulbricht. I didn't know where Mallorca was, but by Christmas we were there to have a look. By summer we had moved in, setting the house up supposedly only for vacations.

That's the short version. It usually gets me at minimum a glass of *vino tinto*.

For the long version, I always say, you will have to stick around for a couple of weeks.

Cheers!

I first heard of Mallorca in 1960 in Toledo, Ohio, from an American sailor with whom I was competing for the attentions of the woman who would be my second wife.

“I jumped ship and went AWOL. There was a little town in the mountains where I hid out for a while with a girl. A famous poet lived there. Robert Graves?”

I had never heard of Mallorca or Graves at that point in my life. Who would have guessed it would become my home for half a century?

When my third wife and I left to take possession of the cottage in Galilea on the island of Mallorca, the friend in Brooklyn Heights presented me with *Ficciones* by Borges. By a coincidence you would never believe in a piece of fiction, three of the five translators of that book lived in the village or nearby, and the fourth in the capital city, Palma de Mallorca. Eventually we were to meet these all.

The first we came to know was Tony, an American who lived a few kilometers down the mountain from us. He and his family had lived a long time on the island. They helped us become

oriented – which plumber, mason, or electrician to use, who had good wood for the fireplace, and so on. We met often to read music together, amateurs all.

“Watch out for that guy,” Tony told me. “He has a reputation.”

That guy was a Scottish poet, another of the translators of the Borges book. He owned an old farm house up on the Mola just beyond the edge of the village proper. He had just arrived for the summer. It was inevitable that we meet, since the hamlet where we lived had a population of not more than two hundred, a dozen of them *extranjeros*.

Alastair was of average height, and while he was not what you would call muscular, he was well built, verging on the stocky in what I judged to be middle age, forty or forty-five years old. He had long blond eyelashes which in some men would have seemed feminine. He wore khakis like Alec Guinness in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and on his feet rope-soled alpargatas. He told endless stories in his hypnotic reedy voice. He knew Borges, and Neruda, and by his own account most of the Latin American writers of note.

He was known as a Don Juan. Reputedly he took off with the wife of the Time magazine correspondent in Brazil, and several other husbands in New York and London were known to have been irate at his interference with their mates.

By an unfortunate coincidence, we named our daughter Allison. There are still some who think she might be Alastair's daughter. But we had not yet met him when she was born.

The third translator lived next to the post office, and it became my custom to drop in on him when I went to see if a manuscript had been returned, or if a check had arrived. There was little else to look forward to in the mail, out of sight, out of mind being the New York rule. Ruthven was another Scottish poet, advanced in years. Most of the day he sat at his typewriter by the window overlooking the road which climbed up to the village. Beyond the road there was a long view down the valley toward the sea twelve kilometers away. It was impossible to get by his window without being seen. Whenever there was any mail for him, Esperanza would ask me to drop it off on the way back to my house. Hers was a perfect name for a mail clerk, Esperanza being Spanish for hope.

Ruthven had within reach a glass of red wine, whatever time of the day you happened by. While eating he often read from his extensive collection of cookbooks. He had shelves of Chinese corned beef, bought by the case, which he heated in a cast iron skillet. He liked to imagine he was partaking of the gourmet recipes, not a bad trick if you can do it.

Often his fingertips bled from whacking away at the keys of his Smith Corona.. Mostly what he wrote were letters inquiring about royalties, though occasionally he negotiated for lectures

in American universities. The royalties came not from his volumes of poetry, but from a series of children's books, well ahead of their time, called Space Cat. Perhaps that is why he took a liking to me, for when I arrived I had published a few science fiction stories.

Saturdays he took the bus to Palma, where he held court in the Café Formentor, only a few blocks from Gina's, where writers from around the island met for the inexpensive menu of the day. At one end of the table was Ruthven, and at the other was Australian author Mark McShane. The rest of us filled the chairs between them. They chaffed each other and we all put wine away like it was water.

At the end of the meal, Ruthven often rode with us back to the village, dozing in the back seat. On this particular day, as we pulled up in front of his door, he climbed out of the back seat and leaned into the window on my side.

“Robert has invited me to visit him tomorrow. He suggests you and Lois and the baby should come along.”

By now I knew, of course, that he referred to Robert Graves, the famous poet living in Deya, mentioned all those years ago in Ohio. I had never read anything of his. Well, maybe “Juan at the Winter Solstice,” in an anthology I found in the house when we moved in.

The next day was Sunday, and we had nothing planned. Normally I spent three hours in the morning writing, or trying to write. But any excuse to avoid the typewriter was welcome. I had written more than a dozen stories since arriving on the island, but nothing sold. I seemed to have lost the knack. I had the feeling that the abrasive life in America had struck the stories out of me, each one having an axe to grind. Mallorca was by contrast bucolic. Church bells, sheep bells, the cuckoo down the valley, Vicens yelling at his mule or scolding his wife. On the horizon the haze of the coastline and the blue Mediterranean. I put my typewriter in the room where formerly the farmers hung their hams to cure. There were no windows, nothing to distract me from work. And that's what it had become. I had to force myself to stay at the desk whether or not words came. If you sit long enough, something happens. But lucky you are if an idea inspires you to discover where it will take you.

Alastair came by to join us for a glass of wine. He had been in town already a couple of weeks, and had become a regular visitor to our house. Once in a while I would pick up the guitar and improvise songs in a pseudo folk style, most often about my relatives back in the hills of West Virginia. Uncle Brownie was a favorite. *He rode the rails from here to Abilene. He was wiry, lean and mean.* After a couple of joints and a glass or two of wine, Brownie's adventures tripped off the tongue.

This evening in the course of our conversation I told him we would be visiting Robert the

next day. He bunched his fingers together in that way he had when he was about to give a little discourse, touching fingertips and looked down at his hands.

“Let me give you a piece of advice, if I may.” He glanced up from under his lashes, first at Lois, then at me. “Whatever you do, don't tell Robert I'm your friend.”

We pressed him to tell us why, but he put us off.

Of course the reason Ruthven had invited us was because he needed a ride, but that didn't matter. As I said, any excuse to get away from the typewriter. We took the back roads, through Puigpunyent and Esporles, passing through Valldemossa, a beautiful excursion.

We entered the Graves house by the kitchen door. His wife Beryl made a little fuss over the baby before leading us into the living room. Ruthven was already there talking to the person I took to be Robert. A great mane of gray hair, intense eyes, and the slight stoop of a person used to spending many hours at a desk. His cheeks were flushed. His wife explained that he had just come up from his daily swim at the Cala.

There were other guests, and Ruthven greeted them familiarly and introduced us around the room. Ramon was the son-in-law, a percussionist, married to Julia, a fledgling writer and translator. Beryl Graves led Lois with the baby to a bench beside the fireplace, and I took the seat beside her. It would be very cozy there in the winter, two benches facing each other with sheep skins on the seat. Another couple came in whose names I didn't catch, and then a few single men and one tall thin woman in her forties. Robert's blue eyes lit up when she offered her cheek for a kiss.

Gradually we came to understand it was Robert's seventy-fifth birthday. Beryl and Julia gave us all fluted glasses. The pop of corks gave rise to an Olé! and when we had all been served we raised our glasses to him. He began making the rounds giving a moment of undivided attention to each person. When finally he came to us, he sat opposite Lois and the baby in a basket at her feet. He glanced at the baby, but let his eyes linger on Lois' face. I have noticed that when blue eyes meet blue eyes there is a certain glint of genetic recognition, so to speak.

When he turned to me after some soft words to Lois he put out his hand. “Ruthven tells me you live in Galilea. Do you know Alastair?”

“Yes.” I blurted it out, reaching out to shake the hand he offered. “He was with us last night. An amazing guy...”

The hand was withdrawn without touching mine. His eyes seemed to darken, as he stood up without a word more and turned his back on us.

“What was that all about?” I asked Alastair the next time he came around.

This is what he told me, in a nutshell, for he took his time, in fact giving a full discourse on

the Graves theory of poetry and woman.

Graves, as the whole world knows, except me and Lois, of course, surrounded himself with muses. Apparently this did not disturb his wife, who I suppose was in the beginning one of them. One of his most famous books is entitled *The White Goddess*. Alastair spoke at length on that book. Pointing out that when Graves and Nancy, his first wife lived together with Laura Riding, Riding attempted suicide. This prompted Graves to leave Nancy and go off with Riding to Mallorca. Eventually she left him, and when he published *The White Goddess* she said he had appropriated her ideas.

“OK. But what does this have to do...” Lois wanted to know.

“Wait. I'm coming to it,” he said “So Robert has all of these muses around him at all times. He claims his poetry would dry up without their presence.”

Alastair loves the sound of his own voice, and can not resist enumerating various chippies adorning the great gray eminence's historic harem. Finally he came to the point.

“His favorite of all time was Margot Callas. She had shapely figure, long legs, challenging grey eyes.” His eyes lit up with remembering. “She was irresistible, I was young, Robert was fifty-five. He charged me with taking letters to her in New York, in watching over her in Madrid. We fell in love. She and I ran off together, to Greece. He never forgave me.”

Several years had passed since then, and still Alastair was not welcome in the village, which Graves considered his personal patch. If Alastair visited friends there, he crouched in the back seat under a blanket, for anyone seen entertaining Alastair would be ostracized.

Not long after Alastair recounted this story, my own wife left with him for St. Andrews in Scotland. Indirectly, then, he was responsible for sending me to live in Deya, where I stayed for over forty years. That's a long, involved story to be told at another time.

During all those years, Graves never once greeted me when we met in the street, nor did he ever attend any of the concerts in my music festival. Once we met in the living room of Bud Flakoll and Claribel Alegría. She was known locally as the poet laureate of El Salvador. I occasionally commissioned a musical work for the festival, and hoped to find a theme in her work. Robert was already slightly gaga, and when he was presented to me in her living room, he pulled a large white handkerchief from his pocket and shook it in my face, as though whisking away a fly.

When you live in Deya, you often meet visitors who come to the village because it is a haven for artists, writers, and more recently, rock musicians or composers of popular musical comedies. If you have lived long in the village, the visitors eventually ask you about this or that famous or notorious personality.

Inevitably, they ask “Did you know Robert Graves?”

“Do you want the short version, or the long version?” I ask.
