

## When the Water Speaks: A Memoir of Ibiza

Jaime's "*casita*" had no architectural charm whatsoever, except for romantics like me who prefer unrendered stone walls to tidy ones made with cement blocks. True, they were too thin to keep out the heat. But the place cost less than a hundred dollars a month. We could just afford to rent it through the summer and still hold onto the apartment.

In the end, it was the land that seduced me. Old Jaime's *huerto* was a short walk away. I remembered the white chamber of the spring glowing in the moonlight as I crept through the garden gobbling cherries. No doubt that is why, our first night in the new house, I promised the girls an excursion to my secret place.

We had been playing house all day. First we made furniture. Shelves: throw ropes over the ceiling beams and knot them around a tier of boards at both ends. Closet: more ropes, then a bamboo pole for hanging clothes, suspended between them. Chest of drawers? Toss your socks and oddments into baskets.

We munched sandwiches, admiring our work, then hiked down to a *tienda* to buy a ladle and some buckets. For the kitchen, Jaime had given us one bench, a table and chairs, and a stove out on the patio under a small roof. We created the rest. Plumbing: a bucket for spring water on the table, covered with a pot lid. Two other buckets (one for washing, one, rinsing) set on a bench, as the sink. For a drying rack, the rest of the bench. Last, I waved my magic wand and presented our new toilet: a roll of paper on the windowsill, a garden hoe on the patio, and any distant spot.

At some point as we were finishing, Eulalia appeared in the doorway. She must have been near sixty then. Years of farming had weathered her face; her body was the same, erect and robust. Politely, she refused the invitation to come in. Then, rather formally, she kissed me on both cheeks, piercing me with such a straightforward gaze, I felt quite humbled taking her gift. It was a simple basket of tomatoes, offered as if it were so much more than food, with a dignity of bearing that was her trademark. Rectitude enveloped Eulalia, even when she was feeding chickens in the cactus.

That night, full of eggs and Eulalia's tomatoes, we set off, stumbling through the brush behind the *casita* toward a path leading uphill. Happily, the moon was nearly full and rising behind us, like a lantern. As we reached the top, I spotted the trail I was looking for. Well-worn by centuries of water carriers, it clung to a stone wall that crossed the slope and turned downhill at the spring.

We followed it all the way and were just rounding the corner by the spring, chattering, kicking up pebbles, when, from somewhere deep inside the chamber, a troll spoke. Vedra and I jumped. Birdie swung around and clutched my legs. "*Buenas noches,*" boomed the voice. "*Buenas noches,*" I said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible, for the girls' sake.

It was Pep, unmistakably drunk, wallowing in the fright he was giving us. He emerged from the spring, jug in one hand, staggering. “*A dónde vas?*” “Where are you going?” The words rolled around his mouth, as it spread out in a leer.

I mumbled something, finished with a definitive *adiós* and, grabbing the girls' hands, turned toward the house as if the conversation were now concluded. The voice rose in pitch. Didn't I like the casita? Wasn't it *he*, Pep, who had told me about it? And so on. He must accompany us home, he said.

All I could think to do was ignore his innuendos and carry on politely while I worked on a better idea. The *casita* was not far away. We headed firmly in that direction. Pep followed.

As we got closer, I scanned the terrace - where on earth had I left the hoe with the hammer head? Mercifully, when we arrived at the wall alongside the patio and I declined to “show him the house”, as he put it, he stumbled off.

For the next fifteen minutes or so, I fumbled madly with the bits of metalwork that were supposed to lock the door. At least I had located the hoe. Before long, Vedra had to make a trip to the “toilet”. I grabbed the weapon and we braved the dark. As I feared, there was the glow of a cigarette up on the hill, maybe a hundred metres away. As soon as Vedra finished, I backed into the doorway and stood there in the light, weapon in hand, waiting.

At long last he laughed. A rollicking bellyful. Then, muttering something about a jug at the spring, he vanished.

Next day Pep stayed away, but not far enough. All afternoon his voice enveloped us, bellowing orders to his sheepdog, Celia, from a field near his house. Sunday morning a different Pep appeared at our patio: scrubbed face; dirty hair neatly combed and tidied under a new cap; clean, yes *clean* trousers. Polite as could be, he explained that he was on his way to buy bread from Eulalia, and would we like some. “No. Thank you,” I said, ushering the children inside and shutting the door.

That afternoon I walked up the hill and across Eulalia's courtyard of flowerpots to knock on her door. After the customary drink (chamomile tea, on this occasion), I asked her what to do. Were we safe, with Pep around? Perhaps Jaime, now the “man of the house”, could speak to him, and so on.

Eulalia laughed, with more than the usual *gusto*, it seemed to me. “*Señora*,” she said, “you have nothing to fear from this man. He is harmless, *nada*, so long as you” (here she straightened her spine and peered, it seemed, into the depths of my soul) “make it absolutely clear where you stand.”