

A new page in an old friendship



Before we sit an exam, we revise. Before we appear on *Any Questions* we get ourselves up to speed on the latest news. Before we dine with some grand personage previously unknown to us, we find out about them in *Who's Who*. But before we go to stay with a friend we've known for more than 20 years, would we expect to read a book on them? A curious assignment; but that has been my task in the first few days of 2011 — and it has proved a moving one.

I first met Allegra Huston in about 1988, when she was an editor at the publishers Weidenfeld & Nicolson. We were seated proximately at a lunch party given by the publisher George Weidenfeld (whom I had never met before) in a cavernous Chelsea apartment which was as one imagined the apartment of a senior cardinal in the Vatican might be. At 38 I was beginning again as a fledgling writer on the *Times*, and my parliamentary sketches had got off to a good start.

In the manner for which I later learned he was known, Lord Weidenfeld gestured to me over the lamb cutlets and said, 'You must write something for us.' I asked what he had in mind. 'Oh, I don't know. An encyclopaedia of world conflict, perhaps? It would be useful. Or something else. Maybe a novel. Talk to Allegra...' (he waved a hand in her direction) 'and we'll work something out.'

And so it came to pass that in 1990 was published my first book, *Inca Kola*. Due to a paucity of travel writing on the Andes, it has proved the most successful I've ever written. It is still in print, but would not have reached the final manuscript stage in publishable form without Allegra's deft guidance: as purposeful as it was pleasant. She's been a friend ever since, though a friend only seen occasionally since she left Britain many years ago.

I remember her then as a beautiful woman, fair in a Pre-Raphaelite sort of way, with a light American accent and a strikingly ambivalent alloy of diffidence with determination — sometimes seeming anxious to defer; then unexpectedly firm, even with a hint of imperiousness. My impression was that she knew

her own judgment, but was less sure of when to impose it. I also wondered if she was lonely, which seemed strange for the accomplished daughter of the film director John Huston.

At least I assumed she was Huston's daughter; she called him Daddy. But she referred to his other daughter, the actress Anjelica Huston, as her half-sister. Different mums or different dads? I'm not a nosy person and didn't enquire. She tells me now that among those who did, or anyone who read Nigel Dempster's diary, it was known that her father was an aristocrat: the writer, anthologist and broadcaster John Julius Norwich, Duff Cooper's son. But she herself made nothing of that, or I would have known. Invited once to dinner with John Julius and his wife Molly at their house in Little Venice in London, I wondered why the invitation had come through Allegra, who was there, and seemed on very close terms with the family. But again, I didn't ask.

Before long, of course, I found out. But it was only near the end of last year, at dinner again with John Julius and Molly, that Allegra mentioned her recently published memoir, *Love Child*. Apparently it had been serialised in the *Sunday Times*. Ashamed of being so out of touch, I didn't admit to my ignorance, but bought the book.

I began it on the plane last week to Salt Lake City, Utah. My partner has ancestors in Utah and some family still in the American south-west, and we, along with two friends, were to stay with them in the Wasatch Moun-

tains, and later find his grandfather's and great-grandfathers' graves. After that (I thought) why not hire a car and drive down to New Mexico, where Allegra, her partner Cisco and their son Rafa live on the mountain plains near Taos — and stay in the adobe house that Cisco built with his own hands?

Starting, then, on the plane, and afterwards in snowy wildernesses of the national and state parks of Utah and Colorado, I've been reading the life story of a friend I thought I knew, told in the most candid and unaffected way. Allegra is not a confessional writer in the Oprah Winfrey sense, just honest, and her life so far has been extraordinary.

But this is not a book review. There have been many. I share with most of her reviewers only the judgment that hers is an affecting and exciting story, and beautifully written. I cannot agree that it is ultimately 'affirming', and wonder if they have read the same book as me, even though with Cisco and Rafa the story has a happy ending. Though it is a tale set amid wealth and celebrity, its keynote is (to me) sad and curiously solitary, if not lonely.

Murmuring '*The Moon's a Balloon*' (the bizarre title of David Niven's best-selling autobiography), the literary agent Ed Victor is wont to remind authors who agonise about titles that a successful title is the title of a successful book; and, anyway, *Love Child* is a clever and appealing choice of title. But in my mind, Allegra's book is called *Dislocation*.

Here in Taos, in the snow, in the desert, on earth as hard as iron, in a state that is America and isn't, and is Mexico and isn't, in country where D.H. Lawrence tried to make a new life, in a mud-brick mansion with Duff Cooper's diaries on the bookshelves, from which the view at night is of so many stars that the sky looks like black lace drawn across light, and at dawn is of so many horizons that your bedroom is the cockpit of an aeroplane, staying with a woman whom I first met in the velvet plush of a Chelsea Embankment apartment, and I now see taking a little boy by the hand to school across the frozen sage-brush of New Mexico... *Dislocation* is the only word.

