

nostalgia

ON HER OWN

In 1970, Lily Tuck headed off to a legendary dude ranch in Nevada for a divorce. She never expected to have a wonderful time.

I wear a very short bright-yellow cotton dress and dark glasses to hide my red-rimmed eyes on the plane on my way to Reno, Nevada. I am dreading this trip, and during the flight, a scene from *The Women*—the movie adapted from the Clare Boothe Luce play—where Paulette Goddard and Rosalind Russell wind up at a divorce ranch and come to serious blows keeps unspooling in my head. The month is April, the year 1970, and earlier, before leaving, I had telephoned to check the median temperature in Nevada and was told that it was 90 degrees. They must have meant Las Vegas because when I land in Reno, it is snowing. No wonder I am apprehensive.

Joan Drackert, a good-looking, practical blonde who was a former Powers model and, more recently, is the Nevada ladies' singles trap-shooting champion, picks me and my two young sons up at the airport in her Willys Jeep. Right away, with hardly a word and without giving me time to complain, she drives us to JCPenney, where we buy cheap but serviceable green parkas. We are headed to the Donner Trail Guest Ranch, which Joan runs with her husband, Harry Drackert, an ex-rodeo bronco rider (he likes to boast that he has broken every bone in his body) who has leased the property since 1959.

The 2,800-acre ranch is located in Verdi, Nevada, ten miles west of Reno, where the Truckee River, Dog Creek, and the historic Donner Trail Road meet. "There, in November of 1846," Joan tells me as she drives—the wipers barely clearing the windshield of snow—"the ill-fated party attempted to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and since the winter was so relentlessly harsh, half of them perished."



DESERT BLOOM
FRANCO RUBARTELLI
PHOTOGRAPHED
VERUSCHKA IN THE
DESERT FOR *VOGUE'S*
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"Perished how?" From the back of the Jeep, one of my sons wants to know.

"They didn't perish, stupid," my other son answers. "They ate each other."

Right—I think. Welcome to six weeks at the Donner Trail Guest Ranch with two squabbling children.

The reason we are here is that in 1970, most states—including Virginia, where I had been living—require divorcing spouses to prove that one of the spouses is a criminal, impotent, or guilty of adultery, while a divorce based on "irreconcilable differences" can take three years. However, in more liberal Nevada—the state having already legalized gaming and prostitution—only a six-week stay is necessary to meet the residency requirements and acquire a divorce.

Speaking of irreconcilable differences, my about-to-be ex-husband and I did not always have them. But we married young—too young. Straight out of college, we were barely in our 20s; in love, yes, but without a plan. We spent the first few years of our marriage living in a bougainvillea-framed house next to a canal in Bangkok—our rent was \$75 a month. We explored the yet unexplored Thai up-country, smoked opium, drank local whiskey, kept a mean gibbon as a pet, and had a very good time. When we returned to the States, life became less glamorous and more complex with work, small children, cold weather, and we stopped having such a good time. At some unexamined and unspecified moment, we also stopped being in love.

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A HAPPY DIVORCE

Strangely enough, at the outset, I don't remember being overly aggrieved that I was getting divorced—although my children and my parents understandably were. Instead, in a vague and unformed way, I was looking forward to starting a career as a writer. (Already, I had sent a story typed single space on both sides of onionskin paper to *The New Yorker* and had gotten an encouraging rejection letter back with the suggestion that I type the next story double space on bond-strength paper.) My husband and I settled relatively amicably—our most heated arguments were over the dog—and not until I was actually packing up and getting ready to leave did it occur to me in a sudden sickening instant that from now on, except for my children, I was going to be on my own. Then I did cry.

The next morning on the ranch, the sun is shining, and discarding our green jackets, we go to have a breakfast of pancakes, sausages, bacon, and eggs in the main lodge. Afterward, Harry, who walks with a pronounced limp, shows us around, then outfits us with boots, hats, chaps, and takes us to meet our horses. My sons and I lived on a farm, and we know how to ride—albeit not Western style. My horse is a spirited chestnut quarter horse with white markings named Boots who turns on a dime—the first time he does, we are going through a gate and I have to quickly grab on to the pommel not to fall off, which makes my sons laugh out loud.

“Can we gallop?” one of them says.

I have never been west of the Mississippi before. Everything here looks much bigger, brighter: On one side of the ranch, the desert unfolds borderless like a mirage; on the other, the Sierra Nevadas tower dark and forbidding. The countryside looks both dangerous and exciting. Virginia, by comparison, seems too green, too pretty—quaint almost. I take a deep breath. For the first time in months, I feel better.

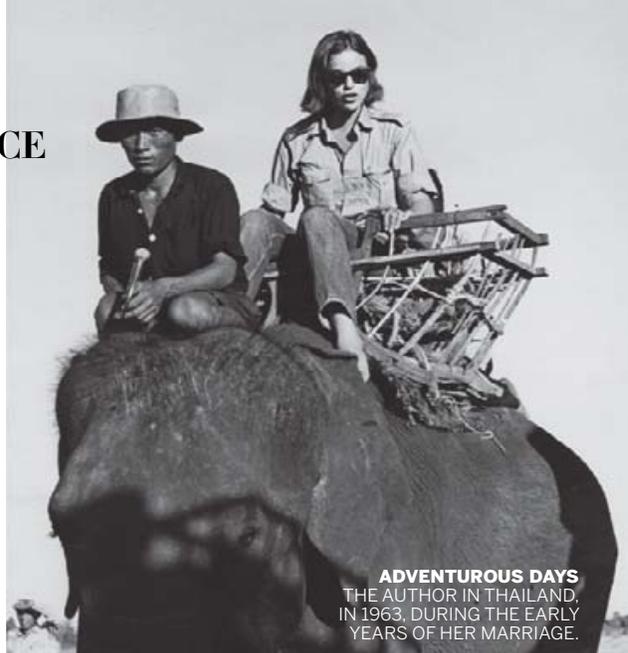
“Yes, let's gallop,” I say.

Karen, another guest at the ranch, has come along on the ride with us. She wears beautiful green alligator boots.

“I'll take you to the store,” she promises.

In her late 20s, Karen is a starlet, living in Los Angeles. She, too, is getting divorced—divorced for the second time, she volunteers. Karen swears, smokes, and takes an assortment of pills to sleep, to lose weight, to feel happy. Karen and I become fast friends. We go to Reno together to do our laundry. While the clothes wash, spin, dry, we gamble. I play the slot machines, Karen plays baccarat, she wins and I lose. The atmosphere in the casino is casual and nonthreatening—the woman playing next to me is 90 years old if a day and sits in a wheelchair—several men make good-natured jokes and try to buy us drinks. Karen also takes me shopping, and I buy a pair of black cowboy boots with red roses embroidered on them. The boots cost a fortune, but by then I don't give a damn.

Mary (Mrs. Nelson) Rockefeller got her divorce while staying at the Donner Trail Ranch in 1962. She rode every day and was popular both with the ranch hands and with Joan and Harry, who made sure to protect her privacy. According to an article in *Time* magazine, her friends who came to



ADVENTUROUS DAYS
THE AUTHOR IN THAILAND,
IN 1963, DURING THE EARLY
YEARS OF HER MARRIAGE.

visit raved about the family-style ranch and about the hearty meals everyone ate seated together at a big table. In addition, her friends said: Mary looked wonderful. Saul Bellow and Arthur Miller stayed at the Drackerts' previous ranch while they were getting their divorces (rumor has it that Marilyn Monroe made several secret visits to Miller during his six-week stay); so did du Pont and Johnny “Tarzan” Weissmuller. The list of famous and infamous guests at the ranches is a long one.

Nothing remotely like the catfight scene in *The Women* occurs at the Donner Trail Ranch. The other guests are friendly, relaxed, supportive; in the evening, we play cards or board games. My sons and I go trout fishing with Harry, skeet shooting with Joan; we tour the abandoned Ponderosa Mine in Virginia City; we take in a local rodeo. I try more or less successfully to keep up with their school correspondence courses, and one time, I do get thrown off Boots, but I climb back in the saddle, slightly bruised but not hurt.

One night, not long after I arrive, Mike, one of the wranglers at the ranch, asks me to have a beer with him. Across the Truckee River—into which, traditionally, the new divorcees are supposed to throw their wedding rings to celebrate their freedom—is the Verdi Inn. The bar is a lively place; on Saturdays, it boasts a band. I have several beers with Mike on several nights. I like Mike. He is a handsome, tall, lean cowboy who likes me as well. His eyes, I notice right away, are the exact same color blue as Paul Newman's.

The six weeks in Nevada fly by. At the risk of sounding like a cliché, for the first time since I have been married, I feel independent and strong. Better yet, I feel good about myself and that I have managed to keep my sons safe and relatively unscathed. When the time comes and I am officially divorced, I am very sorry to leave the ranch. But it turns out that I don't really leave. A few weeks later, I fly back out West and rent a house in Squaw Valley, only a few miles from Verdi. I will live there for the next four years, during which time I make lasting friendships, learn how to shovel myself out from under a six-foot snowstorm, and begin work on a novel. I also see Joan and Harry Drackert again. We celebrate Thanksgiving together, and sitting around the table with my sons, healthy and happy from their morning of skiing, I am reminded of the line in a letter sent to Joan by a guest: “Thank you again for a wonderful divorce!” □