

Reno, 1950

by Camilla Lee

In 1950 I lived in Manhattan, went to a private girls' school, had a television set, and roller skates that clamped onto my brown oxfords. My Chapin school uniform was a light green jumper with a white blouse. All the girls in my second grade class were pretty. In 1950, the summer between second and third grade, my mother went to Reno to get a divorce. She lived there for six weeks, long enough to become a legal resident of Nevada. In those years, getting a divorce in New York, as well as other states, was a complicated procedure and could take months. But in Nevada the process was quick. The divorce rush to Reno in the 1950's was something like the Gold Rush to California one century earlier. Dude ranches out there were doing a brisk business serving as domiciles for the soon-to-be divorcees. Once the six week residency was up, all you had to do was hire a lawyer from a long list of attorneys, and go to the courthouse for fifteen minutes to sign some papers. Nevada was having a heyday.

My mother stayed at the Flying M.E. Ranch, a dude ranch outside of Reno that accommodated many East Coast divorce seekers. As though a sorority house, it served as a shelter for women sharing a common bond. If "going to Reno to get a divorce" was explained to me, I couldn't have paid much attention. I realized my mother was going out west, but I'd thought it was to "get" something tangible. What I'd hoped for was a collie. At the Flying M.E. she rode horses. At least, there's a black and white photograph of her leaning against the fence of a corral, facing the camera. A dark horse stands behind her, seeming to pose as well. He is large and friendly-looking, with a white

patch on his face. In the picture my mother is wearing blue jeans and a denim cowboy-style jacket.

The June of 1950 I turned seven. For my birthday in New York, I had two friends come over; mother took us to Schraffts on 79th street for lunch, and then to a movie. The next day she flew to Reno while I moved in with my father for a couple of nights – until he took me to Grand Central Station, kissed me goodbye, and put me on a train to Camp Runoia in Belgrade Lakes, Maine. It wasn't as though it was a surprise to me that I was going away to camp. I had, after all, packed my trunk with my mother, and watched the man from the Railway Express Agency come pick it up. Mother and I had packed it together, careful to check off all the required items on the camp list (six pairs of cotton socks, 1 rain poncho, etc.). But it did seem a surprise when the reality of my father bringing me to the station actually took place. Grand Central terminal on that steamy June day was airless; the heat and humidity didn't move. The huge main concourse was filled with clusters of children, heading for girls' camps and boys' camps, with each cluster marked by a placard stating the name of the camp: Cheowonki, Brown Ledge, Teelawooket, Kieve. I took an overnight train in a sleeping car full of other Runoia campers. I didn't know anyone. Some of the girls in my car were already friends – they laughed and carried on until all hours of the night. They sang camp songs. My older sister Holley, who was nine, went upstate to Glens Falls to spend the summer with my aunt and uncle and older cousins.

After a few grippingly homesick nights when my chest felt like a boulder had fallen on it, I pretty much glided along through the rest of the summer at Camp Runoia. The screened-in barrack that was my home had about eight cots lined up in two rows. In

spite of my loneliness, I loved the piney smell of the woods; the crickets in the evening and the birds at dawn. I was not keen on tennis and archery, but was pretty happy making lanyards out of gimp or weaving potholders in arts and crafts. Once or twice I spent the night in the infirmary which I found extremely pleasant. The young nurse was attentive and kind; I liked relaxing in a bed with clean sheets and listening to nature outside the window.

When camp was over, I did not go back to Chapin. My mother had returned from Reno, now unmarried, and while she was there at the Flying M.E. Ranch, she had fallen in love a wrangler named Frank Bishop. The name sticks in my mind. As soon as the divorce became final, my father married the woman whom he'd been seeing since the previous summer. My sister understood about the affair, that it was the cause for the divorce, which she explained to me. Mother made a decision to move out west permanently.

That September, she sublet our apartment on 72nd Street, bought a second-hand Ford, loaded it up with suitcases of clothes and my sister and me, and we drove across the United States to Reno, Nevada. I brought my turtle who sloshed around in a plastic bowl with a palm tree in the center of it. The turtle stayed on the ledge inside the back window of the car.

The trip took about a week. There were no highways, just roads with route numbers, traffic lights, diners, motels and single lanes. My assignment was to look for motels with the "AAA" symbol. "AAA" meant the room would be clean. The turtle died in Utah, most likely of dehydration from the sun beating through the back window.

The city of Reno had a neon sign stretching across the Truckee River saying “The Biggest Little City in the World.” I understand the sign is still there, standing as an historic landmark. When we arrived, my mother found a furnished two-bedroom apartment to rent in a square brick building. There were two apartments, one upstairs, and the one down, which was ours. The room I shared with my sister had the most disgusting dark maroon bedspreads made of a satiny material, with matching satiny curtains and dark orchid lampshades. It was that lush Hollywood decor of the 50’s. Our landlady must have had aspirations of becoming an actress; glossy photographs dotted the walls of her in glamorous movie-star poses. In the hallway there was a small arched niche designed specifically to hold a telephone. I was enchanted by this alcove, and used it as a special stage for my new turtle. By now it was October; I was enrolled a month late for third grade at the Washoe County elementary school – a large cement structure that was a four-block walk from our apartment. The walk, however, was not a straight line and I often got lost on my way home. Sometimes I would get really lost, but I’d memorized my address, and could ask for help from mothers on the sidewalk, while my voice would tremble and my eyes welled up. In the mornings I walked to school with my sister, but came home by myself ; we had different dismissal times as she went to Middle School in a different building. If I was late, I would have to pick up a “tardy” slip at the principal’s office. A peculiar word, “tardy.” Even now, when I hear it, (which isn’t too often), it conjures up an image of handing my room teacher the “tardy” slip in front of a class filled with children. Mother found a job working in an office in downtown Reno.

The idea behind the move was to meet up with the wrangler named Frank Bishop who had captured my mother's heart. But, by the time we arrived, Frank Bishop was not there. He had moved on to another dude ranch somewhere else in Nevada.

Here was my mother, age 33, clueless about survival. She had not gone to college; nothing unusual about that. Her career, in fact, had been serving on committees with other young wives to plan benefit fashion shows and charity balls. I have a frayed scrapbook of hers, filled with crumbling yellowed clippings from the Society pages of Herald Tribune and other magazines, having lunch at the Stork Club or Plaza Hotel with one co-chairwoman or another. She wore small black hats, tilted at angles. In one picture mother is modeling a leopard skin coat – the highlight for a fashion show by a prominent furrier. Any notion of having to support herself while trying to live on a limited sum of alimony was certainly nowhere in my mother's imagination. She barely knew how to drive, and here she was driving across the country, making a desperate stab at a new life.

My mother and father had met one summer in Narragansett, Rhode Island, where my mother's family had a big shingled summer house. My father was a junior at Princeton. They fell madly in love, and got married a week after my father's graduation from college. After the wedding my father held several jobs; they moved from apartment to apartment in New York. Life was now getting serious. My mother's picture no longer appeared on the society pages of the newspaper. One daughter was born, and then another. Rent had to be paid. While my mother spent the summer with her young

daughters in Narragansett, my father cavorted with other summer bachelors in New York City. In his mind, infidelity was acceptable behavior.

I never did get used to my new school. I only had one friend, named Francie. In the daytime, Francie's father was a card dealer at Harold's Club, a gambling casino in downtown Reno. Her mother worked there at night. Sometimes I'd go to Francie's apartment after school for milk and cookies. Her mother would call out from a darkened bedroom, "Is that you Francie?", and that would be it. Francie had brown tangled hair that touched her shoulders, and a sallow face. As for television, which I'd mentioned before, it was then a new sensation in New York. But television had not yet come to Nevada. Francie had no idea what I was talking about when I tried to explain a box with a screen that you could watch movie-type things on. There it was not possible to receive airwave signals on account of the mountain range. Reno was seeming more and more like a wasteland to me. Francie did have a pair of roller skates, and we skated up and down her sidewalk, but I didn't have the same freeing joy I had felt in New York. One nice thing about school was I got very good grades. At my old school, I was a pretty average student and fell into the middle level of reading skills. At the Washoe County Elementary School, I was a star. The class was huge. A boy named Walter sat at the desk in front of me, and spent most of the day with his head swiveled backward, studying me with curiosity. If I said something friendly or polite, he would turn around and look straight ahead at the blackboard. Walter had red hair and a small mouth.

We spent Christmas that year at Squaw Valley in Lake Tahoe. The newly built Squaw Valley Lodge, a simple, rustic structure, had a big reception room with a high ceiling and exposed wooden beams. It had a large stone fireplace, and always a cozy fire burning. The new ski resort had one chair lift and two rope tows. Today Squaw Valley is a huge sprawling “Olympic Village.” When we were there in 1950, the United States Figure Skating Team was also staying at the lodge with their families, practicing for the Olympics. I made a friend named Robbie; we sledged and built snow forts together. About a decade later, all the members of the skating team would be killed in a plane crash flying across the Atlantic Ocean. Robbie and his father were both on that plane.

The next thing I knew was that we were moving back to New York. This time we flew on a noisy, comfortable plane with big propellers. I gave my turtle to Francie. We got to move back into our apartment on 72nd Street, and I was back at Chapin in April, in time to finish my third grade year. Mother enrolled in a six-week secretarial course; my grandparents paid our tuition. At school a big class project was underway when I arrived – the creation of a mural depicting the sale of Manhattan Island to Peter Minuet by the Indians. I picked up a paintbrush, and started working on an Indian headdress.

The End.