

“From Polished Editor to Hippie Traveler, Allegra Huston Asks: 'What Happened to the Old Me?'"

I need a clone. It's my own fault—I never intended to get sucked into my husband's business. Hell, I'm not even married to him. But Cisco and I have been together for ten years, we have a six-year-old son, we've built a house, so what's mine is his and what's his is mine: specifically, three storage units of old junk, the most wonderful stepson in the world (an older brother for my son), and Los Rios River Runners, New Mexico's oldest whitewater rafting company. Cisco founded it when he was twenty-five.

In my old days, in London, I wore tailored trousers and high heels and worked as an editor in publishing. If you'd met me then, you'd never think I would 'end up in a single-wide trailer with the wheels still on, in a dusty patch of sagebrush beside the highway, fielding three phones, while a bunch of long-haired, waterlogged river guides in the kitchen boast about their lines through Ski Jump and Enema and the Dead Texan Holes and the Punk Rock. Some of them – the guys, that is – are painting their toenails blue as they discuss world politics on the porch

I started hanging out at the boathouse because it was fun, I was in love with the boss, and I got to raft a world-class stretch of whitewater whenever there was room in a boat. I never wanted to be a guide: if I had people's lives in my hands

I'd never sleep again. But I can follow instructions, especially when there are only four of them—Forward! Back paddle! Right back! Left back!—and, because you sit on one side of the boat, in fact only three will apply. It didn't take long before I experienced a new and delicious sensation: I felt adventurous and even, on a good day, buff. Not something I'd ever felt as a publisher.

Here's how the slippery slope begins: One more phone line is ringing than there are people to answer it, so I pick it up and take a reservation. Then there's a morning when we—oops, it's not "we" already, is it?— are short-staffed. Then I realize how many mistakes are being made. Then comes the fatal day: I get a good idea. "But we've done it that way for thirty years!" Cisco says. Here, honey. Let me help you.

So there it is, the new me: office queen of Los Rios River Runners, with loose skirts and wide hippie feet and a giant bottle of water to stave off the effects of altitude. It's fun. I laugh a lot, I'm never bored, we stay solvent, and ten thousand people a year get to experience nature in all her wild glory. But wait a minute: what happened to the old me? Wasn't I once an editor? A writer? Someone with my own bank account, which I'd like once again to put something into? A person with my own life?

So I carved out the time to keep a hold on the self I had four decades invested in. I'd been writing screenplays, but one morning I woke up with the desire to write a

memoir: the story of my nomadic childhood, my fractured family, the mother I lost when I was four. I could write it, finally, because now it has a happy ending.

My book is being published in April. Uh oh—that’s right when rafting season starts. I’ll be traveling to promote it in May—the high-water time of year. And in July, I’m going to London for the UK publication—the busiest month of all. Now I’m lying awake at night, haunted by visions of bookings lost, seat allocations exceeded, emails answered badly, complicated paperwork done wrong. I’m the only person I trust to get things right. From my point of view, getting the boats down the river is easy; it’s getting the right vehicles in the right place at the right time that’s hard. But what about those days when my vehicle logistics went south, when I let us be underbid by another company, when the phones were so busy I forgot to drink enough water and ended up with a splitting headache. Am I really as perfect as all that?

Cisco isn’t worried. After all, the company survived for over twenty years before I came along. He’ll manage. But I know that the second I finish talking to a journalist about swimming with Jack Nicholson or playing frisbee with Ryan O’Neal, whatever side of the Atlantic I’m on, I’ll be on the phone to Los Rios: “Did you snag all the pool seats from the BLM? Check if that 400-pound guy will fit into a 60-inch-chest life jacket! Is the trailer hitch on the Indian van fixed yet? And you know that Mormon church group on the overnight: DO NOT give them Liam as their guide!”

