

RETIREMENT IN BLACK AND WHITE: CRISIS POINT

“I’m going to follow in the footsteps of writers like Hemingway. I’ll become a flâneur, or rather a flâneuse, walk the city and write,” I boasted.

Of course, it was a lie.

We were in Paris. While my partner, Bonnie, drew nudes in the first studio of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Baroque sculptures in the vaulted galleries of the Louvre Museum’s Cour Puget, I sat in our rented apartment, my head aching, my heart pounding, my intestines twisted in knots, afraid to step out into a city where I had trouble speaking the language and where, thanks to urban planner Georges-Eugène Haussmann, the streets all looked the same.

Even as I write this, I realize that, to most, the chance to spend nine weeks in Paris, alone, free of timelines and schedules, would be a dream, a fantasy, a lottery win.

Not to me.

Leading up to the trip, I had nightmares. Hemingway spent a great deal of his time in Paris drunk. While that might be one option for calming the rising panic I felt just thinking of travelling alone for the first time in Bonnie’s and my thirty-five years together, I didn’t want to admit my apprehension. I knew my retirement looked ideal, but I was not coping.

“What are you going to do?” is a malicious question, one I heard over and over before I retired. If I had said “nothing,” would that have been acceptable? Of course, that was never an option – not for a goal-oriented person like me. My answer remained steadfast.

“We’ve got it worked out. Bonnie is going to paint, and I’m going to write.” I had no reason to believe otherwise. I had taught English for thirty-one years and co-authored thirteen English textbooks. I took creative writing courses, even studying with renowned Canadian novelist Timothy Findley twice. Wasn’t the transition to freelance writing a natural progression?

And it wasn’t like I hadn’t prepared myself for the end of my career. Retirement seminars were strongly recommended for educators. There were always rumours that teachers – especially those who taught English – could expect to live only two years after they left the classroom. Just in case we outlived those odds, Bonnie and I attended two evening retirement sessions.

The first session examined financial challenges we could expect to face. While some money specialists prophesy doom and gloom after retirement, others assure us we can retire on less than we think.¹ Bonnie and I were lucky not to have a mortgage, and our two daughters were grown with families of their own. We were down to one car. No more “work clothes” either. We had seniors’ discounts to look forward to and, for once in our lives, the government would be taking less money in taxes.

I remember seeing a t-shirt touting “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” It was quite the opposite in our house. We were constantly foisting off our stuff on friends and family.

The second seminar we attended focused more on what we were going to do post-retirement. We were given an exercise to start. “Describe your dream retirement. Don’t hold back – anything you dream, put it down,” the leader said. A buzz rose from the tables with occasional explosions of laughter as people fantasized with their partners or friends. Bonnie and I got to it. We had talked about this many times. First we wanted to win the lottery. Then anything became possible. We were ready.