

## MISERY ABROAD

By Fred Hobbs

During the 47 years of our marriage, my beloved wife and I enjoyed several great vacations. Sadly, our last journey together was the one spent battling or coping with the effects of Alzheimer's disease, which ultimately took her life.

Although this journey lasted several years, it seemed to end suddenly. I wasn't really prepared for living alone. Children, grandchildren, friends, even neighbors were helpful. But as everyone who has experienced the death of a loved one knows, the individual affected must deal personally with the consequences of the loss.

After about a year of experiencing various levels of the grieving process, I decided to take a vacation "to get away from it all." Good friends in Connecticut, Washington, DC and a niece in New York City had invited me to visit.

Barbara, an "old flame" from nearly 50 years ago, also resurfaced. We had met in Germany where I was stationed in the army and she was a young secretary. She contacted me when she learned of my wife's death and told me her husband had died a few years ago. The conversation led to the question: Could we, should we meet again?

I mentioned my intention to visit my family and friends back east. Half joking she said something like: "If you are going that far, how about extending the trip to Europe and we could meet somewhere?" I was conflicted. Wouldn't that be something really silly for an old man to do? I said I'd get back to her. My kids took the position that it was okay with them. "Mom would have wanted you to go."

So, we met, spending most of the time in Vienna. From the moment I left New York, the whole project turned sour. I missed my connecting flight from London to Vienna. The next flight was five hours later. Barbara had no cell phone. She was furious at the delay and refused to take a taxi from the airport. We rode a city bus to the hotel. Wisely we had agreed to pay for everything separately, to stay in separate hotel rooms and not count on any storybook romantic encounter.

Because she knew Vienna, we agreed Barbara would book the hotel accommodations. My room was slightly bigger than a broom closet, the mattress on my bed was harder than an army cot, the shower was modern but the water kept turning from freezing cold to boiling hot.

I didn't know she was such a tight-wad. We were both on a limited budget but she carried it to the extreme. I offered to pay for some amenities like an occasional taxi ride, but she insisted on going everywhere by city bus or street car. That idea has some merit (a chance

to do as the Viennese do), except that Barbara wanted to take charge and often didn't know the right route to take and declined to take suggestions lightly.

She was mostly surly and uncommunicative, even in recalling old times. She reluctantly agreed to go to the famed Mozart Orchestra concert, saying she had done that before and it "cost too much". At mealtime, she had little to say and berated me for my "American manners". Conversations generally turned to arguments over trivial subjects.

Most likely, Barbara suffers from some kind of personality disorder, a Jekyll and Hyde" maybe? She said at home she orders a case of wine every week. Alcoholism may be a factor in her behavior. Over the 50 years since we first met, life may have dealt her many sorrows and problems. Who knows what happened to her? At one point, in a moment of candor she said: "You know, some people think I'm a witch." One could have spelled the word with a "b" instead of a "w".

I don't know why she wanted to see me... or why I decided to take the trip. I just know it was by far my worst vacation ever!