

BY THE WAY

FREELANCER ENVY

BY TONY BECKWITH



Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He came to Texas in 1980 and now lives in Austin, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist. E-mail: tony@tonybeckwith.com

In the late 1960s I worked at an advertising agency in Madrid. It was a multi-national shop and I was the account executive for the international accounts. It was a great job, and a good fit for me. I was the daily liaison for my clients, which was rather like being a project manager. I had to keep up with any movement on the account, shepherd projects through the agency, interpret the client's brief to the creative department and, of course, take my clients to lunch.

I was twenty-something, and by my standards at the time, life was pretty sweet. And yet I was consumed with a most unseemly envy. In the agency world at that time the account directors and account executives wore suits, or at very least a smart blue blazer, preferably double-breasted, and sharply pressed charcoal-grey flannel trousers. This set us apart from the creative department—the writers, illustrators, storyboard artists, and assorted trend-setters, most of whom wore cool (occasionally outlandish) outfits and loafers with no socks. I had not yet learned that, with a bit of luck, we can be anything we want to be if we are prepared to work for it, and I longed to be someone who could come to work dressed as I pleased. I also longed to be someone who wrote things for a living, even if it was jingles for laundry detergent. I was truly living a life of quiet desperation, though perhaps not quite as Thoreau meant it.

And then one day it got worse. One of my clients, a French car manufacturer, commissioned a campaign to introduce a new model, and the ads were to feature gorgeous full-color photographs of the car in a variety of exotic settings. The art director called in a well-known photographer to join our account team and we all spent a few delightful days in those exotic locations. Just as in movies about actors on location, even our very modest version of that scenario involved long, often intense hours of work, followed by late nights talking about Hemingway and Pamplona over cigars and brandy (“leave the bottle, por favor.”) As the two foreigners on the trip, the photographer and I bonded, and gradually told each other the story of our lives. My new friend was an American freelancer who came to Spain on assignment for a magazine many years ago and never went home. He and his American wife lived in a spacious apartment in a very nice part of town; he took only the assignments that interested him, and charged huge fees for his work which was highly sought after by all the top agencies in the country. His time was his own, it appeared to me, and he never wore a suit. That was when I realized that what I most wanted to be was a freelancer.

About twenty-five years later, after a varied career in various parts of the world, I was living in Austin, Texas working at a job that was not a good fit and doing some translation on the side. Employed and self-employed, I had one foot on either side of the line and felt ready to make my move. I asked veteran translator Harvie Jordan what one needed most to become a successful freelancer and he said, “A wife with a real job.” I luckily met that qualification, and one day I let go of the safety net that was the ill-fitting employment and struck out on my own as a newly minted freelance translator. That was twenty years ago, and I’ve never regretted the decision.

It was like going back to school, and led to a crash course in survival skills that showed me more vividly than ever that—like it or not—I was master of my own domain. I never want to stop being a freelancer, but the experience has not been exactly as I had imagined it. How could it be? It was the journey into the unknown that every freelancer has taken, a journey of exploration and resourcefulness, of nerve-wracking highs and lows (Harvie was right!) It was a journey into a new reality.

I thought back to the photographer in Spain. He was always relaxed, and made freelancing look easy. He never seemed concerned with chasing a paycheck, but he too had his nerve-wracking highs and lows. What freelancer doesn’t? Late one night, in a bar on the outskirts of Granada he confided that, for him, the thrill of the freelancer’s ride was the unpredictability, the lack of guarantees, the

sudden appearance of projects that materialized out of the blue. He wagged his finger and said, “You must never panic—remember that making money is like catching a cold; you just have to stand in the draft.”

During the years that I coveted the freelance life I entertained a naïve yet insistent fantasy that it entitled one to work as much or as little as one wanted, whenever one wanted. As every established freelancer knows, that amusing fiction is entirely dependent on things like a mortgage and putting food on the table. Fishermen know that you put out your nets when the fish are running, and you keep working the nets until you’ve caught all the fish and it’s time to go home. And when you’re not fishing, you’re mending nets and painting the boat.

As a freelance translator, I mend my own nets and paint my own boat, which has gradually turned into a fulltime job that sometimes keeps me busy seven days a week. It is a solitary occupation, involving long hours in front of a computer. But, much as I like people, I enjoy the solitude, and appreciate all the time and energy that I don’t spend interacting with others in a workplace of almost any kind. This is a precious gift, for I think the greatest lesson I have learned from freelancing is that time really is of the essence.

