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Essay published in *Steam Ticket*, 2004

SIMULTANEOUS SUBMISSIONS:
FROM MANUSCRIPT TO PRINT

1. 1993

In October, a good friend told me she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She was 39, the first young woman I knew who had the disease. We lived in the same town, and I visited, tried to help. One day, her husband said to me, “It’s so goddamned banal. You go to a doctor, and he tells you that you have cancer.” His words gave birth to images in my mind, to a story. At home, it seemed as if someone was dictating to me, as if I had exhaled the story whole. I felt the rush of pleasure as I wrote and titled the story, “The Journey.” My friend underwent treatments and survived.

My three children were young then and I squeezed writing in between mothering. I had begun to write in my late thirties, and I was uncomfortably aware that I was an “older” beginner. At the time of my friend’s cancer, I decided to approach writing with greater commitment. I set aside specific times to work, organized a notebook to record submissions. I wanted to do the best writing I could, and if a story was accepted by a journal that would be a bonus. One of my stories had just appeared in a journal, my first publication. I was thrilled.

I joined a writers group, too. Many members were accomplished authors. At a meeting, I nervously read aloud “The Journey.” When I finished, there was uneasy

silence. I dreaded the comments and wondered how I could have misjudged my work. But the group agreed the story was gripping. Members made suggestions, which I incorporated. Later, I showed the story to another writer friend. He said, “Be careful about making a disease the focus of fiction. It takes over. Too sentimental.”

But I decided to leave the story as it was and submit it. I secretly hoped it would be published right away. Or perhaps an editor might give comments that could help me strengthen it.

I sent “The Journey” to five journals, one at a time. When I received a rejection, I sent the story out again. The rejections contained no comments or signatures. Though I was disappointed, I knew rejection was part of the writer’s life. I was determined to persevere.

2. 1994

During the course of the year, I submitted “The Journey” to sixteen journals, one at a time. Often, a rejection returned to me two weeks after I’d sent the story. I began to wonder if anyone was reading my work. I didn’t have many writing credits or an MFA. I had always believed good work would find a home, but my resolve began to waver. Two other stories of mine were accepted by journals. I had submitted each a few times. I considered “The Journey” a stronger story, but it sat on my desk, a neglected orphan.

That summer, at Bread Loaf, I showed “The Journey” to my reader. “It’s not multi-layered like literary fiction should be,” she told me. “Put in more layers. And the title is too generic.”

3. 1995

I added a layer to “The Journey” and changed the title. Perhaps the story was still not literary enough, I thought, but it conveyed what I wanted to say. I sent the manuscript to three more journals and received three form rejections.

4. 1996

In February, I spent two weeks at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, my first experience at an artists’ colony. I was exhilarated by the time to work. I shared the breast cancer story with a fellow writer. “It’s seamlessly written,” she said, “but has no plot.”

I re-read the manuscript and decided not to change it. Writing the story had helped me deal with my friend’s illness; perhaps that was enough. At home, I looked at my submission notebook. The breast cancer story had been rejected 24 times. Maybe this was a practice story, and would never be published. I put the story in a drawer where it stayed for three years.

5. 1999

While cleaning my desk, I found the manuscript of the breast cancer story. I still believed in it, and in a burst of renewed enthusiasm, I sent it to fifteen more journals. I decided to send some submissions simultaneously. I wasn’t pleased by this strategy, but it seemed the most logical one, considering my age, the age of the story (six years) and the 24 rejections. If I sent the piece to one journal at a time and each journal held the story for four or five months, which I’d found was not unusual, it might take years for the

story to make the rounds. Still, I felt vaguely deceitful, as if I were dating a lot of men at once.

Most rejections were impersonal, but a few contained comments. *It's a rare story that makes it to an editorial meeting and this one did.* My heart leapt. They liked it, I thought. *Good writing, but too predictable.* Not enough twists and turns. *The transitions are sloppy.* Not polished enough, I thought. *You'll find a publisher for this one.* Then why didn't *they* take it? I wondered.

One editor sent a lengthy e-mail and told me the story was beautifully written but began with the last sentence. Re-write it, he advised. Read Flannery O'Connor and add symbolism. I read the stories he suggested but kept mine as it was. I put it in the drawer for two more years.

6. 2001

Amused by my persistence, I decided to submit the breast cancer story one last time. Again, I submitted it simultaneously -- to thirty journals over the course of the year. I had never done this with a story before. I should have started to write when I was in my twenties, I decided. I didn't have unlimited time to wait for responses anymore. This was how I rationalized simultaneous submissions. A friend once told me that one goes into writing for the long haul. But this seemed like a very long haul for one story.

In this round, I received some letters. *I gave your story to one of the best outside readers. The reader is absolutely right about the breast cancer theme; we get too many stories from young writers dealing with the disease that basically affects more old than young people. For some reason, young writers seem to be obsessed about cancer.*

I was tempted to write to the reviewer and tell him that I wasn't a young writer in chronological years, that I knew many young women who had become ill with the disease.

Another editor sent a handwritten note. *Thank you for letting us see your story, which is beautifully written and deeply moving. We admired a lot about this, but to be honest, my husband and I have suffered from cancer losses so often this year – 10 close friends including a brother and best friend – that I haven't the heart to deal with this subject at the moment.* I was touched, and wrote to thank her, grateful that a reader had been moved. In the end, this was all a writer could hope for, and I felt satisfied.

Then in December, eight years after writing the story, I received an acceptance. I was thrilled.

7. 2002

In January, another acceptance arrived. After all the rejection and contradictory advice, the story had been chosen by two journals now. I had been so caught up in the excitement of the first acceptance that I hadn't written letters of withdrawal yet to the few remaining journals that still might be considering the story.

Both journals that sent an acceptance were small literary publications, but I preferred to place the story in the second one. This seemed like an ethical dilemma. I had already made a commitment. But how committed must one be to an acceptance? What was the etiquette of withdrawal? Was this like breaking an engagement? Sleeping around? I didn't respond to the second acceptance for over a month, distracted by other events, procrastinating. Finally, I decided to withdraw from the first journal and accept the second.

However, it occurred to me that I needed to contact the editor of the first journal out of courtesy and also to make sure the story hadn't been published, that the editor was comfortable with my decision to withdraw. I had recently become Fiction Editor of *Bellevue Literary Review*. Though the submission process had always seemed so coldly impersonal to me, I was learning first-hand how much effort and care went into producing a literary journal.

I wrote an e-mail to the first editor, and told her I wished to withdraw my story. I received no response. Days later, I telephoned. When the editor answered, I was surprised to hear a human voice. I explained that I wanted to withdraw the story.

"Oh no," she replied. "It's not been published yet, has it? We're already in layout stage."

I quickly told her it hadn't been published. I wouldn't withdraw it now.

She said, "No, let me think about it. I'll get back to you."

The editor of the second journal left a voicemail message a few days later. "I'm still hoping we can print your fine story," he said. My heart sank. I hadn't responded to his acceptance yet. It was difficult to write; I was distracted by the indecision.

A week later, the first editor left a message. "We've discussed it, and though we would love to publish your story, we will respect your wishes." Relief washed over me. Yet, I felt it wasn't *right* to withdraw when the journal was so far along in production. I phoned and told her I hoped she could still publish the story. She told me she'd be pleased to.

The next day, I telephoned the second editor. I explained that the story was already taken. I mumbled a genuinely regretful apology about simultaneous submissions.

“I’m a writer, too,” he said, “I know how long it takes to hear from a journal. But that’s too bad. I was so impressed with your story that I was going to give it a prize for the best in the 2002 issue plus two-hundred-and-fifty dollars.”

I hesitated, tempted. Then I told him I was honored, but I had already made a commitment. My voice was shaky with disappointment. I had never won such a prize.

“Send me another,” he said kindly. “I can’t promise anything, but I’ll take a look.”

After we hung up, I took a deep breath. I had moved from rejected to rejector. That was the gamble of simultaneous submissions. I opened my submission notebook, aware of the irony. I had submitted the breast cancer story 69 times, and it had finally won a prize that I couldn’t accept.

When I told a writer friend what happened, she said, “You were too honest. Never call an editor. Be impersonal. Write an e-mail or a letter. The story is yours, after all. You gave up a prize. If you believe in your work, do what you want with it.”

As she and I debated the etiquette of simultaneous submissions, I remembered an interview I had read years ago. A prize-winning author was asked how he continued writing during years of obscurity and rejection. He replied that a writer couldn’t worry about publication or prizes or reviews. What was important was to shut out the world, go to your desk each morning, and work.

He was right. ###

