HOW IT HAPPENED

by

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My experience pursuing the publication of my first novel is a tale of four countries, three children, two decades, and one relentless quest for U.S. stamps. In 1984 my husband, a journalist with the Voice of America, was transferred from Washington, D.C., to open a new VOA bureau in Geneva, Switzerland. I quit my job as economic advisor to a U.S. senator, we packed our things, rented our D.C. co-op, and moved overseas with a one-year-old son. It didn’t take long before I was at loose ends after leaving my job on Capitol Hill and staying home as a full-time mom. So in addition to finally learning French, I decided to write a novel. How hard could it be? I’d written non-fiction for years. I could knock this out in no time.

A year later our second son was born and I’d begun meeting my husband’s colleagues at the Palais des Nations, the UN headquarters in Geneva, which was also the international press center. By then I was picking up freelance work as a journalist and also writing spec articles—mostly features—for American magazines and newspapers. I continued working on the novel, but the new-to-me world of journalism exerted a strong tug, especially because I could ask as many questions as I liked about a subject—I’m nosy, er, curious, by nature—and someone would pay me to do it.

Freelancing in the 1980s was a different world; I wrote my queries and stories on a typewriter until we eventually splurged on an expensive Commodore 64 purchased in Switzerland. Although there were no more carbons and Wite-Out, the computer was only for writing since the Internet didn’t exist yet (although Tim Berners-Lee, a friend who belonged to the same amateur theatre group I did and worked for CERN, the European Center for Nuclear Research in Geneva, would invent the World Wide Web within the next five years). Last, but not least, in those days you never sent off a proposal or a query without an SASE—Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope—if you expected an editor to reply. For me that meant hoarding U.S. stamps every time I visited the States, or begging someone to mail them to me.

By 1989 our youngest son was born, I had several articles published in U.S. and Swiss publications, and I was writing the English content for Philip Morris’s in-house magazine in Lausanne, Switzerland. My novel was unfinished, but I had discovered *The Writer* and *Writer’s Digest*. Though my issues came months after they were out in America, I devoured them, reading and re-reading articles about and by many of the people who are now my friends. Then came the next assignment: Moscow, U.S.S.R.

The novel—*Piece of Mind*, a thriller with an improbable plot that involved the murder of an American living in Geneva who had invented software so computers could talk (it could never happen)—came with me to Russia and stayed in a drawer. In Moscow during the waning days of Communism and the end of the Soviet Union, good jobs in journalism fell off trees: it was the big story and everyone was writing about it. Within a few months, I became the Moscow correspondent for ABC Radio News—the only time I got a job without applying for it—despite the fact that the sum total of my experience in radio journalism involved being married to a radio journalist. The job with ABC was exhilarating; the work was non-stop and the days were heady and exciting. But for my family, it came to an abrupt end on December 7, 1990, when my husband contracted Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a rare but reversible paralysis that ended our time in Russia for good.

Back home in the U.S. for the first time in six-and-a-half years, I freelanced for ABC News in Washington; wrote regular features for *The Journal,* a regional weekly newspaper with a D.C. Metro area circulation; and thought a lot about writing a book on our life in Russia.

A New York agent sent a rejection for my non-fiction proposal with a scribbled note at the bottom: *Make it up. You’ll have better luck. Every Soviet general and former Communist Party official is trying to sell a memoir.* In other words, write a novel.

By then my husband was offered an unexpected overseas assignment when someone quit in the middle of a tour: London. I hauled *Piece of Mind* with me and eventually shredded it in England, chalking it up as a learning experience. But it was in the U.K. that I took the fiction writing classes that really upped my game—a week in Scotland with the Arvon Foundation and Robert McKee’s wonderful *Story* Master Class, which he taught in London, as well as New York and Los Angeles. Eventually I finished *Moscow Nights* as we were leaving England in 1998, and a Moscow friend living in London put me in touch with a friend who was a British literary agent. I was home in the U.S. when Piatkus Books, a small London publisher that is now owned by Hachette, published *Moscow Nights* in 2000. It would be another five years before I had an American literary agent and my next book was published. In between another fascinating job fell in my lap: freelance feature writer for *The Washington Post.*

Sixteen years is a long time to wait for a first published novel. But as I think back on it, I used the time to work on my craft, take classes, meet friends who write, and get connected in the business. I also wrote for anyone who would pay me—or occasionally pro bono—that gave me invaluable experience working with editors. I tell my now-grown sons that a career in the creative arts is not for the faint-hearted, nor are you likely to make a gainful living at it. Either you need a day job or you’re lucky enough to do what I did: marry someone who will support you.

But I am very sure that the journey has been worth it and I am blessed and lucky to do what I do. It’s a great life.