

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Mother Duck: Tony Kahn tells of a devoted mother duck who led her babies down the straight and narrow path – to disaster.

Tony Kahn:

Hi, I'm Tony Kahn, Producer and Director of *Morning Stories* on WGBH radio, Boston. Today's story is close to home for me. Well, actually it happened right on my front porch.

Tony Kahn:

My wife and I took time off the other day to sit on our porch in the suburbs and watch the world go by. We were amazed at once by the sight of a mother duck leading her ten ducklings in an orderly waddle down to the pond at the bottom of the street. The other end of our block intersects the town's main commuter lane running east and west. To get this far, we'd realized, she'd had to negotiate four lanes of rush-hour traffic and the babies still couldn't fly.

[Sounds of traffic]

We were marveling at the accomplishment as she led her brood along the curb and over the grate of the gutter opposite our house. Three of the ducklings, no bigger than your palm, dropped right through the openings into the sewer. Sensing the loss, the mother stopped at once and, sweeping her babies behind her, retraced her steps up the street and back over the grate. In horror, we watched as the remaining seven ducklings, every last one of them, fell into the sewer, too.

It took the mother a moment to realize she was alone. In confusion, she looked first one way down the street, then the other. And then by instinct, up at the clouds -- the home of hawks and all calamity for a duck. And in a heart-rending shriek, she let out the cry of every mother who has ever seen her babies ripped by the sky or swallowed by the earth.

[Sound of a baby crying]

My wife rushed inside to call the animal rescue league and I ran to the garage for an old golf driver to pry off the sewer lid. As the mother squawked in circles around me, I jimmied the club into the cast-iron opening and felt the shaft snap in my hands. In anguish, I looked up at the sky myself and saw two men approaching from the apartment across the street. It's the cheapest rental property on the block. The two men were strangers to me, in their mid-forties their eyes red and bleary from a night of hard work or hard drinking. If I'd seen them coming any other time or place I'd have crossed to the other side of the street. I told them what happened and a second later we were on the ground,

our thirty fingers wrapped around the grate and pulling hard. As the mother duck circled us, alternately squawking her encouragement and shrieking at the sky, we yanked off the lid and stared into the black, silent hole of the sewer.

The taller of the two men, at around six feet, lowered himself into the hole, bracing himself against the sides. The sewer was about ten feet deep there and the ground around him relatively dry. He squatted slowly and felt around in the dark, and then gingerly he found and lifted every one of the lost ducklings up to us on the street.

As soon as their feet touched the ground, the ten cheeping babies plugged back into line behind their mother like an extension cord and without missing a beat resumed their trip to the pond at the bottom of the street.

[Birds chirping]

The three of us looked at each other in silence, stunned by our success and sudden bond. I noticed tears forming in the bloodshot eyes of the man who had gone into the hole. "I love animals," he said.

[Birds chirping, and cars driving in the distance]

That evening I went back on the porch. The apartment across the street was dark and quiet again, but the incident that morning had left me with a gift; a temporary heightened sense of awareness that I was eager to experience before it faded away. Like an enhanced sense of touch it seemed to bring everything closer, opening a new dimension of sights and sounds hiding in the wrinkles of ordinary things. With it I could sense that the apartment across the street, though dark, was warm with life and the sky above me rippled with invisible wings and the pond at the bottom of the street, already thickening with cold, had a voice, speaking in short sounds and long silences of the vastness of the unknown and of small miracles at the dead end of the street.

[Ducks squawking]

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[End of recording]

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