

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

***Taking it to the Street:** Somerville, Mass., resident Mary Kocol looks on as her neighbors experience the ecstasy of finding the perfect parking space and the agony of keeping it.*

Tony Kahn:

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening everybody. This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of WGBH's *Morning Stories*. Last week's podcast, if you remember, *Driving Dave Weiner*, was not only about Dave Weiner, it was about driving. Well we're going to stay with the theme of driving, I think, for today's podcast as well, but, driving of a, of a special kind, some might even say, a totally mindless kind, the kind of driving in Boston, our fair city. Based on my own experience as a driver and as a pedestrian, I've learned, and I, I'm sure you have too, that every town has its own personality, its own driving state-of-mind, like New York City. New York City – straight lanes, a grid pattern, it's all about precision; it's about speed; it's about straight lines. You drive from the gut there, with eagle eyes. It's about how close can you get before you smash into the taxi.

Now Mexico City, it's about the importance of accepting death, [laughs] at any moment. It's about how we're all in the hands of God, drivers and pedestrians alike, because, each group attacks the other and itself all the time. You've got pedestrians attacking cabs; you have cabs attacking other cabs; you have cars, of course, running over people. Sort of like Athens, except in Athens, it is more about intimidation, like with drivers and pedestrians daring each other to see how close they can come to a collision. In Cairo, it's just about sitting there and making as much noise as you can. That's what driving is. And in Paris, my own rather scary experience is that it's about punishing stupidity. It's actually about murder in the first degree. [laughs] It's about. It's about murder with malice aforethought. If you have poor reflexes, then any driver's entitled to run you over.

Now, now Boston, Boston, ach, what an exception Boston is. Because of the, the ridiculous layout of the streets, the unlabeled main thoroughfares, the unexpected one-ways that can lead you into a black hole, the [laughs] the, the tradition of allowing even the dead to renew their licenses by mail. It's about mindlessness. The only way to get from Point A to Point B in Boston, where ever Point B is, if you can find it, is to drive stupidly, without regard to signs, around blind corners like an idiot. In other words, the best way to get past a bad driver, Boston has proved to us, is to drive even worse. But Boston goes even one step further. Not only is the driving bad, the parking is even worse than the driving, especially during the winter when it snows hard. Well, Mary Kocol is today's storyteller. She lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, a town that calls itself America's hometown. It's very near Boston and it's very much under the sphere of influence – if you can call it that – [laughs] of Boston driving and parking. And her Morning Story today, we call *Taking it to the Street*.

Mary Kocol:

Five winters ago, I slipped on an icy sidewalk and broke my leg. In the town of Somerville, where I live, being confined to your apartment for the rest of the winter in a cast is not all bad news. For one thing, you don't have to keep shoveling your car out and losing the space the

second that you drive away. [sound of shoveling] With each snowfall, the games begin. People clear their parking spot with a shovel and establish title with, what I call, a territorial marker or TM – an orange highway cone, a table, or a broken-down beach chair from the summer of 1974. Sometimes the whole street looks like a frozen yard sale or an outdoor chair museum. [breaking glass and shoveling] I heard somebody in South Boston left a toilet to mark his spot. I personally like to use my discarded Christmas tree as a TM until the DPW truck collects it sometime in February.

[Argument between man and woman in background. “That is my spot.” “No, it’s not your spot” “I spent six hours ...” “Is your name on that spot?”]

One cold night when propped up in bed, I heard the muffled shouts of a confrontation outside. Soon blue and white lights began pulsating along the wall. I rolled over to lift my window shade and check out the action.

[Argument continues. Sirens. “My parents lived here.” “I have a right ...” “They parked their car here.” “Anyone and everyone here has the right to park anywhere they ...” “I’ve parked my car here for twenty years.”]

The angry pickup truck driver who lived upstairs from me was arguing with my neighbor, the SUV from across the street.

[Argument continues. “If you don’t get out of my space, I’m going to get my crowbar.” “Oho, listen to the big man.”]

The cops hauled away someone from SUV’s house. Pickup Guy and his girlfriend walked back toward the triple-decker where we live. They clomped up the stairs like a couple of tired horses, slammed their door and shook my wall, like always. More footsteps on the ceiling. [phone ringing.]

Man’s voice over the phone:

“Hey, you know, did, did you hear what was going on outside?”

Mary Kocol:

It was pickup guy calling to fill me in on his side of the story. It turned out that his girlfriend had parked in the shoveled spot of the SUV neighbor. So they scratched her car in retaliation. Then the cops took away the SUV Daughter since she became belligerent. SUV Dad was now very upset and making serious threats to Pickup Guy after the cops left. Pickup Guy and girlfriend were leaving for the night out of fear SUV was coming to get them. I felt like Jimmy Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, a professional photographer, incapacitated by a broken leg, in serious danger for knowing too much. I called some friends with a list of potential suspects if I were found dead the next morning.

[Music]

Five winters have passed since then, and I'm back in the parking game like nothing has changed. Actually, one new TM from Highland Avenue really caught my attention recently. It was a blue "Somerville Recycles" bin filled with sand or ice with an old broom handle staked in the middle of it. [sound of music and flag flapping] Atop the handle, a beat-up American flag flapped in the ice-cold wind. The crusty snow banks on either side added to the effect that it might have come from the archives of the Apollo moon landings. Whoever did this was taking over the parking spot in the name of the United States of America. "If you want to park here," it says, "you'll have to move the flag, and nobody messes with the flag."

[Background argument continues between two men and a woman. "Did he just throw a snowball at me? I'm calling the mayor." "He better not have thrown a snowball, because I'm coming over there with an ice pick." "I'm going to have you arrested." "Good thing I didn't have a hammer." "Get out of my face."]

Tony Kahn:

That was Mary Kocol with today's Morning Story, *Taking it to the Street*. I should say, *Takin' it to the Street*. We like to drop our g's here on *Morning Stories* podcasts. Podcasts of WGBH's *Morning Stories* are made possible in part with support from Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software. If you want more information about Ipswitch (who wouldn't?) go to their website, <www.ipswitch.com> that's I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H dot, oh you know how to spell com. Gary Mott, as a former resident of San Antonio, Texas, if there's one thing in particular that drives you nuts, it's the sign that you see on most Boston streets that says "No parking here during declared snow emergency." Now, what do you think that means?

Gary Mott:

Well, I know exactly what it means. It means that the thousands of people that live in my neighborhood are going to have to move their cars elsewhere. Where? Don't know. And, five minutes after a snow emergency is declared, you walk out; you see the meter maid out there writin' tickets, towin' cars. I mean, where's the justice in that?

Tony Kahn:

Right. Yeah. You know why I'm not worried by all this? – and you've seen this, Gary. I know you've seen this. I, this is the only way I can explain it, was born with a parking gene.

Gary Mott:

The parking gene, yes [eerie music] as displayed the other day when we drove to the Harvard Faculty Club, Cambridge, Massachusetts, worst place in the world to park.

Tony Kahn:

And what happened as we drove by?

Gary Mott:

A car pulled out.

Tony Kahn:

I can hear the music now.

Gary Mott:

Just long enough to fit your car. It was right in front of the Harvard Faculty Club. I mean ...

Tony Kahn:

This is the only reason why I've been able to live in Boston for thirty-five years. Doesn't have anything to do with my friends, my contacts, my career. I have a parking gene. [laughs] So I have not been forced to kill some neighbor nor have I been attacked by a neighbor because of it.

Gary Mott:

That's why I hang out with you. [Tony laughs.] Maybe some of it will rub off.

Tony Kahn:

Well, it's about time you started doing some of the driving. That's all I've got to say, Gar. Anyway, that's it for this week's podcast. Be sure to keep on downloading us, and we'll be sure to give you something to download, and ...

Gary Mott:

And don't forget our website, <WGBH.org/morningstories>, lots of good listening there. And also, we love getting feedback. Thanks so much to all of you who have written in to give us your praise as well as, you know, your gripes. We've gotten, you know, a few from folks that just haven't been too happy with what we've been doing.

Tony Kahn:

Yeah. Gary gets those. I, I keep the other ones.

Gary Mott:

<morningstories@WGBH.org> is our email address.

Tony Kahn:

See you next week.

Gary Mott:

All right.

Tony Kahn:

Bye-bye.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Susan MacLeod