

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Learning to Drive: Morning Stories producer and director Tony Kahn takes a lesson in driving – and life – from his father.

Tony Kahn:

Hi everybody! This is Tony Kahn the producer and director of *Morning Stories*, [door opens] and what I'm doing, actually, is leaving *Morning Stories* right now (the office), and headed toward the parking lot so that I can get away; come back renewed, full of lunch, ready to do another *Morning Stories* podcast.

Anyway, the last couple of podcasts [car door opens] were about peoples' relationships with cars. And one aspect of cars that really amazes me: "car space." Car space is the thing of course that happens as soon as you open that car door [car door closes] and then close it on yourself. All of a sudden you are in a different galaxy. Your behavior is completely different inside a car, have you noticed? You know, your relationship to other drivers, your relationship to pedestrians, I mean think about the things that you do inside a car, which is really 90% glass, where everybody can see what you're doing, that are the kinds of things you normally wouldn't do if people were looking at you on the street.

You become kind of invisible inside a car; you sing to yourself; you perhaps adopt [a] style [of] dress which you might not adopt in public, you may even see to your (well, let's see, how we can put this) nasal hygiene, in a way that you wouldn't if you were standing with, with people all around you at a street corner. But there's another aspect to car space that really amazes me and that is that it's, it's a personal space, it's a space that's very much a part of our own biographies.

We all have a lot of memories of first things that happen to us inside cars; the first time we drove a car, legally, [laughs] the first time we, we became the main driver in the family, the first time that we explored all the things that you might be able to do in the back seat of the family car, as well. In my case I can't sit behind the wheel of a car and turn on the ignition and get ready to drive [sound of engine starting, with seatbelt reminder beeping] without thinking about my relationship with my father and how a long, long time ago he got the crazy, misbegotten idea that he was the guy to teach me how to drive. Here's today's Morning Story: *Learning To Drive*.

Tony Kahn:

The day my father bought the car, my mother blew her top. "A car? How could he buy a car?" Had he forgotten how little he was making these days? Or how much it cost to send a kid to college? I was busy looking through the window on the driver's side. God! It was gorgeous! Red leather seats, a walnut dash and a gleaming gearshift on the floor. For all his problems with money, my father was a classy man.

I realized I could help him out. I'd just remind Mother how educational that car was; he could teach me how to drive.

The lessons started the next day. I can still hear him screaming. "Don't strangle the steering wheel! Cradle it, cradle it! Don't yank the choke, ease it! Don't stomp the brakes for God's sakes, pump them, pump them! You're gonna wreck the car!" I felt terrible. I knew his doctor had told him to avoid stress; there were days his heart condition would barely let him work. This was a car we couldn't afford to fix.

I worked hard to get better, even when he was too tired to take me out. I'd practice driving in my mind, till that car started to feel like a part of me. The only thing I couldn't get was the clutch. [sound of car grinding its gears] "Concentrate!" he'd shout. But I couldn't. "**WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU?**" he'd yell. And, I wouldn't know. It drove us both crazy. It was the last thing standing between me and a driver's test and I just couldn't get it right.

One afternoon as we were bucking and grinding to a halt, he turned the key in the ignition, [car door opens] got out on his side and stood right in front of the car. "All right," he said grimly. "Start again." I sat there waiting for him to tell me the joke was over, but he just stood there with the hood aimed right at his chest. "Look at me," he said. "And do it right."

[music begins, slowly]

I started the engine, eased the car into first and slowly lifted my foot. I could feel the heavy, oily teeth of the gears engaging and slowly, smoothly, moving me and the car forward. I was doing it! I was really in control. A foot from the wall, he raised his hand and I stopped the car. He looked at me from the darkness of the garage, [music ends] nodded slowly and with a little smile, walked back into the house. That weekend I took my driver's test and five days later got my license in the mail.

If I thought that meant I could finally get the car, I was mistaken; except for short errands on city roads in broad daylight, he wouldn't even let me touch it. He was still treating me like a child.

One afternoon on my way back from school, I saw him stopped at a light. I was surprised, he was supposed to be at home resting. The light changed and as he lifted his hand to shift, I saw the cigarette, something he'd sworn he'd given up. Then with that little smile, he continued on his joyride; his gaze a million miles away, looking more happy than I'd seen him in a long, long time.

[Rain and thunder]

That Saturday we had a fight. I told him I needed the car to get to a meeting of the Honor Society, and he told me it was too dark and rainy to be driving. I stormed out of

the house. The truth was I'd arranged to show some friends I could take the car from zero to sixty [mph] in seven seconds. He drove for fun. Why couldn't I? An hour later as he lay sleeping, I stole his keys. The kids met me by the highway, then piled into the car with a pack of beer. Ten minutes later the police stopped me for speeding, arrested us for illegal possession, and took us straight to the station.

[Sounds of police radio in background]

My father got to the inspector's office around ten. Under the fluorescent light he looked old and pale and sick. His gray thinning hair wet from the rain, his fingers moving restlessly by his side. He needed a smoke, of course, and couldn't do it in front of me. He seemed almost more a prisoner than I was. The inspector called us in and since I hadn't bought or drunk the beer, he let me go.

[Sounds of heavy thunderstorm] My father drove back. I sat there watching the darkness, feeling like a total fool. My whole relationship with this car had been an absolute flop; I probably be grounded for a decade. [storm continues] We stopped outside the garage and he turned off the ignition and looked at me. [storm stops] Then, he smiles and hands me the keys. [soft piano music begins]

"Here, kid," he says, "Why don't you take us for a spin." We're back in the rain now, coasting down the highway, I'm shifting effortlessly, confident and watchful; aware of what a good driver I really am. What a wonderful thing he's done for me, I'm thinking, after all our fights, to trust me like this. Does he have any idea how much I admire him?

Other fathers are younger, healthier, more able to make a living than he is but every day as his world's gotten smaller, he's done his best and always kept his style. We haven't said it in years (not since I was small and he was well, but before it's too late) "I love you Dad," I tell him. "Son," he says, "I love you too."

[Music stops; rain and thunder continue]

Our ride never happened, of course, this was the '50's, after all, and we were men. He just closed his hand around the keys; we both looked at our shoes and silently walked single-file back into the house.

So that was today's Morning Story: *Learning To Drive*. As you know right at the end of every single *Morning Stories* we render due credit to our funder and since I'm behind the wheel, and should keep my eyes on the road, Gary would you mind doing that for us?

Gary Mott:

Oh, sure! Yeah! Podcasts of WGBH's *Morning Stories* are made possible in part with support from Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software. Further information is

available at: <ipswitch.com> that's I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H dot com.

Tony Kahn:

Be sure to keep tuned and keep on downloading us and we'll give you something to download every Friday and we should also remind people, what Gar?

Gary Mott:

Oh! We should remind people about our website at <wgbh.org/morningstories> lots of good listening there. Also our email address, please let us know what you think about what we're doin' or if you have some crazy ideas...

Tony Kahn:

Or stories about what happened to you inside a car.

Gary Mott:

...for stories in your own life at <morningstories@wgbh.org>

Tony Kahn:

Great! Thanks a lot! See you next week.

Gary Mott:

All right. Bye.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Lynn Relyea