

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

I Got Her Back: Cambridge, Mass., resident Dan Watt, the son of a Spanish Civil War veteran, makes a surprising discovery that brings back to life not only his soldier father, but also the mother he never knew.

TONY KAHN:

Hi, everybody, this is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. We were thinking about what we could tell you by way of a Morning Story for Memorial Day. Well, war is what Memorial Day is all about, and if the lesson of history in fact is that once you learn it you don't repeat it, well, war is one lousy teacher. We go to war again and again and again. In a sense, war really never stops because it keeps on having repercussions in people's lives, many of them bad, but every once in a while some of them surprising and good. And that's what our storyteller today is going to tell us. His name is Dan Watt. He tells us a personal story about the Spanish Civil War, which his father went to fight in over sixty years ago, a war that brought Dan a hidden treasure. Not only did it bring his father back to him alive, but it brought a mother that he never knew back to life as well. We call his story *I Got Her Back*.

[Music in Spanish: "El dieciocho dia de Julio, en el patio de un convento . . ."]

DAN WATT:

My father went to fight against the fascists in the Spanish Civil War. His very first engagement, one of the men next to him was wounded.

"I rushed over, tore his clothes off, and started bandaging him when I felt a sharp sting through my left hand and right shoulder."

A bullet grazed his chest and went through his left arm, and he used to show me the scars, both of those scars — I must have been four or five — as a way of saying, "They couldn't kill me. Nobody can kill me."

[Music: "Viva la Quince Brigada, rumba la rumba la rumba la, que se ha cubierto de gloria, ¡Ay Manuela! ¡Ay Manuela!"]

DAN WATT:

I think he felt fighting for freedom in Spain was the most important thing he'd ever done in his life.

"Ruth, I had taken the test of fire, and passed."

When he came back from Spain, about a year and a half later, I was born, and my mother, Ruth, died five weeks after I was born. They never mentioned her. They

never talked about her. And I grew up thinking my stepmother was my mother. My father put all her things into a box, a box that he never mentioned to me and put my mother, Ruth, out of his life.

[Music: "But for us there is no complaining, winter will in time be passed, one day . . ."]

DAN WATT:

I have a home in New Hampshire. In 2001, some members of the state legislature wanted to put up a plaque, honoring twelve men from New Hampshire who had fought in the Spanish Civil War. The conservative newspapers in New Hampshire put out editorials against this. I wanted to make the case that these men deserved to be honored, and my wife came up with the idea, "Well, maybe we can find some of your father's letters, and we have a friend who's a folk singer, and he knows the songs of this era. You could read some of your father's letters and sing some songs."

[Music: "There is an old cookhouse not far away, where we get sweet damn all three times a day . . ."]

DAN WATT:

I was not prepared for what I found. Not only was there a very, very large collection of letters that my father had written that my mother, Ruth, had saved in a scrapbook; there was a stack of copies of letters that Ruth had written to George in Spain:

FEMALE READER:

"Around midnight, I wake up. My toes feel cold. I crawl under the blanket, explain all my troubles to you, and then fall asleep."

[Music: "And we are gradually fading away . . ."]

DAN WATT:

She had kept copies.

FEMALE READER:

"When I got to the office I found the package you sent me from Valencia! Oh, how well you know the things I'd love. That textbook, those fairy tales — really, I'm speechless, and I love you till I ache. I feel a little at a loss . . ."

DAN WATT:

She wrote about the books she read. She wrote about her political activity. She wrote about seeing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which she loved. You know, she wanted to give my father a sense of what he was missing out on back home,

what he would have been experiencing if he'd been home. They'd only been married six months.

My father was . . . he did not express emotion much. He did express emotion in his letters.

"I want you to know how much I love you, how much I loved you out there under the fire when every "tzing" and "pang" of a bullet and cannon told me how much I loved you. You share in everything I do and feel."

I believe now that my father was so traumatized by the death of this woman that he'd loved so much that he had to shut her out of his life.

[Music: "To you, beloved comrade, we make a solemn vow . . ."]

DAN WATT:

The letters reveal my mother as a living, breathing, expressive person, someone that lived a full life.

[Music: "The fight will still go on, like you, beloved comrade. We make this solemn vow . . ."]

I've got her back.

FEMALE READER:

"And then I get out all your letters and gradually, as I go from beginning to end, I begin to thaw, and my heart starts singing, and my head clears up."

[Music: "The fight will go on. The fight will still go on . . ."]

TONY KAHN:

So that was today's Morning Story from Dan Watt. You don't remember the Spanish Civil War, Gary. Believe it or not, it was over before I was born. But when I was growing up in Mexico, many of the veterans of the Spanish Civil War were cooling their heels in Mexico because they'd fought the Franco side, and they were not returning to the United States, which was a pro-Franco country. I remember *¡Ay Manuela!* especially. A beautiful song! You know, [sings] "Luchamos contra los moros, rumba la rumba la rumba la . . . " It's got that wonderful [sings] ya-da-da-da-da-da . . . really touches your heart. So, for me the Spanish Civil War is still kind of alive.

GARY MOTT:

Mm-hm. I'm a sucker for history and particularly this story about, you know, love letters that were put in a box and forgotten about. I mean, the modern age,

the digital age, you know. Think of all the communication that is going to be lost in the . . .

TONY KAHN:

That's true . . .

GARY MOTT:

. . . the bits and bites of time. We've got to get back to a written sort of history. I mean, what a gift that would be to give our children — letters about what we're feeling and, you know, wouldn't that be great?

TONY KAHN:

If only our children could read!

[Laughter.]

TONY KAHN:

No, it would be. You know, there's something about a letter as an artifact. It is an expression of not only your heart, but your hand, and there's a physical presence. I've read letters that were left behind by people that I did not know, and it was a way of getting to know them, to just see the paper that they chose, and even the way that they scented the paper.

GARY MOTT:

That's the thing about electronic communication, you know. It's rather heartless. I mean, it lacks some soul there that is really translated through ink on a page, and . . . just a thought, a thought for the day.

TONY KAHN:

A thought for the ages, Gar'. I was talking to some people at the Conservation Center at the Getty Museum, when they study this whole business of what lasts through time? Well, if you really want to hold onto something — your best bet? Paper. Put it on paper, take away the oxygen, take away the sunlight, put it in a landfill, something like that, it will last thousands and thousands of years. Bits and bites? Poof! Gone.

GARY MOTT:

So for a complete transcription of today's podcast, please send \$400 to Gary Mott at WG . . .

TONY KAHN:

[laughing] And printed, as a matter of fact, on the smallest piece of paper you have handy; sometimes you'll find them in your wallet, uh, they can be green and they often have numbers on them and lovely pictures of presidents.

GARY MOTT:

Cashier's checks are fine too. Really.

TONY KAHN:

[chuckling] And while we're waiting for that kind of support, let's express our gratitude to the money that is in fact in hand and that we get by way of support of *Morning Stories* from Ipswitch. Ipswitch is a leader in file transfer software; you can reach them at <www.ipswitch.com>. We thank them this week; we thank them every week for helping us bring this podcast to you.

GARY MOTT:

And if you're looking for a great way to kill some time during your lunch hour, please surf on over to our website at <wgbh.org/morningstories>. We'll be delivering another downloadable file full of wealth and meaning and a savory blend of, um, . . . Tony, help me out here.

[Laughter.]

TONY KAHN:

Oh, I was kind of wondering if that sentence would ever end. Well, let's just cut to the chase. Goodbye and thank you, and . . .

GARY MOTT:

I was envisioning what I'd write if I were to write some of this to you.

[Laughter.]

TONY KAHN:

There isn't enough paper! Well, in any event, thank you very much for listening and we'll see you next Friday. 'Bye.

[End of Recording]

Transcribed by Georgia Buchert

Georgia's Comments (made originally in an email to Liz):

I'm glad I transcribed "I Got Her Back." Letters, the real ones which have been touched and folded, stamped and sent by human hands, are precious things to me. I am one who saves important letters. I'll even print out emails that strike me as having lasting emotional value, just so I can beat the ephemeral system and

have something tangible to hold and keep. I shake my fist at all other sorts of paper piles (please say you deal with them too), but letters? They need never apologize for the space they require. They are my precious things.

I have letters from my mother, a big binder full of them. She died in 1994. When I read her letters, I can hear her voice talking to me. I remember. I have only a few letters from my father. He's gone too. His letters are more painful for me to read, and yet I do pull them out now and then, when I'm lonely for him and feeling strong enough.

One of my most treasured possessions is a small wooden "magic box" my husband made for me several years ago and gave to me with a promise that it would magically produce a letter for me at least one time every month. I write to my husband on about the same schedule as well, and we have by now two large collections of not only sweet love letters and notes, but also poems, deep thoughts, jokes, and even a few well-placed apologies to show for our seventeen-plus years together. We always did write letters to each other, even before the advent of the magic box. While decluttering our basement recently I came across a box of our early communications, from our courtship days to our newly-married ones and beyond into times that were very difficult and very wonderful, by turns.

Occasionally I will take a mental inventory of my most cherished belongings and ask myself, If something happened, some disaster that drove me from my home, apart from safeguarding my family members, what would I be most concerned about saving? Hands down, it would be my letters. My letters and my magic box.

If we are ever blessed with children, I want them to have our letters. I want them to come to know their mother and father better by reading and touching hand-written, ink-smudged, and occasionally misspelled love. I want them to know the grandparents they'll never meet, and how can they do that, how else can they learn to recognize those voices, if not by reading and re-reading the few words they left behind? And along with all of this wanting I also want my children to get acquainted with pens and paper and discover the secrets of the magic box for themselves.