

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

The Arithmetic of Nurses: Essayist, poet, and registered nurse Veneta Masson describes a complex relationship between an elderly patient and his caregiver

TONY KAHN:

Hi, everybody, this is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston, and we are outside. We call it our Studio O, for outside. Kinda noisy, but I think you can hear me, and anyway, podcasting should be about doing what you really like to do for people who really want to hear it no matter where you are. Right, Gary? "Yes," he nods. Thumbs! I'm even getting a thumb up.

I was in Greece recently on a birthday trip. I was sitting in a café, and I happened to overhear a conversation that was going on at the next table, among a bunch of nurses. They were there in Athens, talking about all of their years' worth of experience nursing and the relationships that they had with different patients that really mattered to them. Well, they were telling amazing stories about what makes nursing a healing craft. That's what today's Morning Story is about: a very specific relationship, a very specific moment in a relationship between a patient and a nurse. It's called *The Arithmetic of Nurses*.

[Music]

JEANNIE CHAISSON:

"Sssssss . . ."

"Sssssssss . . ."

"Sssssss . . ."

Bennie Smith is trying to speak. I am counting out cookies from a faded blue tin.

"Sssssss . . ."

"Sssss . . . sssssss . . ."

Twelve. Are twelve cookies enough to hold a sick old man for thirty-six hours? Twelve cookies and one can of juice? Twelve cookies, wrapped in a towel, tucked under a pillow, where roaches ply a brisk trade in crumbs?

"Sssssssix." He blurts it out, face lit up by the restless flicker of the television

screen.

"No, twelve," I muse. Unless someone comes, that's all he'll have till I get back again.

"Ssss-ssssssix th-thousand." He strains under the weight of the words. Clearly, he has something important to say, but I am caught up with my own calculations: the number of minutes it will take a rivulet of urine to reach the screaming bedsores on his back; the number of degrees his temperature will rise as infection sets in; the number of days it will take him to let me call the ambulance; the number of times I must walk the long hall to this dim little room, the width of a bed. His stiff body straddles the low bed like a piece of plywood on a sawhorse. Push down on the feet, up comes the head. I tilt my ear toward his mouth to catch the stutterings.

"Ssssss-sssix thousand nurses on ssstrike today. Mm-m-minnesota." Half his face breaks into a grin, for if there's one thing Bennie understands, it's the arithmetic of nurses and old abandoned men.

[Music concludes]

TONY KAHN:

That was today's Morning Story, *The Arithmetic of Nurses*, and **[laughs]** we have a lot of people to thank for this story. In fact, there is a wonderful story behind this Morning Story. It began as a poem which got turned into a Morning Story by Madge Kaplan, one of the producers here at WGBH, then, it got offered as the track to a wonderful woman named Liz Dubelman, who does Flash animations, and she turned that into a Flash animation with visuals on her site, <VidLit.com>, then she sent us the soundtrack, the changes that she had done in our Morning Story, so that we could air it as a podcast, because it had all cleared music!

GARY MOTT:

Exactly. And her partner, Paca Thomas, composed the music that was used in this piece and we said, "Hey, you know, buzz him an email. He's been very pleased to give us permission to use his stuff before, so . . . "

TONY KAHN:

He does wonderful stuff. Liz Dubelman is just a superior artist in Flash animation. She does things in so many different styles and she's exploring all the different ways that Flash animation can have an impact on people, not just on the internet, but in bookstores and other sites, and it's . . . one of these wonderful examples of how new media incorporate other media, and here you have podcasting, which is giving birth to all new forms — ways in which to use video,

and with audio, and then take somebody else's audio and change that around, and, and let people collaborate with each other. I think that's terrific.

GARY MOTT:

It's absolutely terrific and this is some high-quality stuff. The website, once again, is <VidLit.com>. that's V-as-in-victory, L-I-T DOT COM. Please check it out; you'll be happy that you did.

TONY KAHN:

You know what I think, Gary?

GARY MOTT:

Ah, what do you think, Tony?

TONY KAHN:

I think that our experience with Liz Dubelman encourages me to approach other people who may not even be thinking that they can produce radio and ask them to produce radio. I mean, I think choreographers, animators, film directors, musicians, can also really do incredible pieces with just words, if they're invited to do it. Public radio would benefit enormously from having creative people like that who love public radio but don't normally think that they can produce for public radio.

GARY MOTT:

Oh, I definitely think so. I mean podcasting is the great equalizer. I mean, we've talked about the need to not necessarily be a pro when you're in podcasting, and there are so many people out there with creative energies that could be channelled in this direction.

TONY KAHN:

That's right. I love the fact you call it "the great equalizer," because that was the term they used to use back in the days of the old West for the Colt 45 pistol, right? There was a weapon, something that was designed to kill, and here we're saying that podcasting, which brings people together, is as good an equalizer. So, . . . well, anyway . . .

GARY MOTT:

Anyway . . .

TONY KAHN:

One other place that all of our gratitude goes on a regular basis, of course, is to Ipswitch, leaders in file transfer technology, who have been supporting these podcasts for lo, these many months, which in podcast time is virtually an eternity! So, thanks a lot, guys. If you want to know more about them you can

get to their website: <www.ipswitch.com>. I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H.

GARY MOTT:

And one more website to put on the tip of your tongue and your brain is the WGBH *Morning Stories* website at <wgbh.org/morningstories>.

TONY KAHN:

If they put it on their tongue and it's got a slash in it, I worry. Why don't you just write it down?

[Laughter]

GARY MOTT:

Or you could just send us an email . . .

TONY KAHN:

That's a good idea.

GARY MOTT:

. . . at <morningstories@wgbh.org>.

TONY KAHN:

Great. We really would love to hear from you, so keep on plugged in, and we'll be with you next Friday. Take care. 'Bye.