

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

*Behind the Blue Ribbon:* Erica Ferencik couldn't find anything nice to say to eulogize her mother. Thanks to her mother's friends, she didn't have to.

### **Tony Kahn:**

Hi everybody! This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories*, from WGBH, in Boston. A word that we hear a lot these days, especially in the news is "closure." People seeking closure because of the hurt that was done to them by others and what people usually mean in a situation like that by "closure" is revenge. But, if closure means in, in the biggest sense putting an end to the suffering that's brought by others, is hurting back the only way? Does comfort only come from getting even?

Erica Ferencik is an old friend of *Morning Stories* and she joins us today with a story of a kind of closure that she reached with her mother. A kind of closure that came to her very much by surprise. We call her story: *Behind the Blue Ribbon*.

[Thunder]

### **Erica Ferencik:**

A year ago after cutting my mother out of my life for many years, we made a truce. We decided that we'd both try to be civil to each other, partly because of her lymphoma and partly because, well . . .

[crow cawing outside]

The problem was, I was sure she had demonized me with her friends. The daughter that wouldn't visit, wouldn't write, wouldn't call.

[Background sounds of conversations in diner] At the Blue Ribbon Diner (my mother's home away from home) as we waited for a table, I met eight ladies clutching their purses. There was Mom's best friend Hannah who had worked at Victoria's Secret for twenty-two years, Sheila who retired with Mom from G.E. in 1984, and then Sue who went with Mom to Fussbudgets, an investors' club for penny-pinching seniors, all gathered around hanging on her every word. So we had lunch together, all of us, the routine was a trip to the Dollar Store, where she'd complain about the prices, then over to the Blue Ribbon for lunch where they'd wave for endless refills on coffee, tip badly and leave.

[Sounds of thunder, rain and windshield wipers. Thunderstorm underlays following paragraph.]

And then I'd come back to Boston wondering if there was any connection between my mother and me ... at all. [creaky door opens, another boom of thunder]

When my mom died, we all stood outside her room at the nursing home. The women surrounded me, a weepy circle of white haired ladies. And then when I told them Mom wanted no ceremony, no services of any kind, they just looked at me, lost. It was her last selfish act. There was only one thing to do: one more lunch at the Blue Ribbon, in honor of Mom.

[Background sounds of conversations in diner] The following weekend while flags at Dollar Stores flew at half-mast, we ordered our eggs and bagels and coffee. Hannah started to talk about my mom; she'd actually written something up. Things to remember about Mom, her favorite color, her favorite movie, ice cream. I began to panic; I'd shown up with nothing. No eulogy, not even an idea of what to say. I, I was totally quiet.

Hannah turned to me, she touched my hand, her tiny one so light. "Don't worry. You don't have to say anything." "I don't?" "Erica, your mom always said she was a terrible mother." The table grew quiet. "There's nothing that you have to explain to us," Sheila said. "She always knew she wasn't a good mother and that she never understood how she ended up with such a wonderful daughter." "You didn't know that?" Sue said. I shook my head, staring at my eggs. "Maybe it's okay with her [that] I tell you that now."

[Birds singing]

There was this beautiful terraced rose garden behind the Blue Ribbon, where the ladies would go for a stroll after lunch. And that's where we buried Mom's ashes, next to a bench where they would always stop to rest; so that Mom could listen to them talking and laughing and they could keep hearing her, as long as they were on this earth.

Maybe it's okay with her now, if I tell you that. [pause] Mmm, hmm.

[Music; birds singing]

**Tony Kahn:**

That was today's Morning Story, from Erica Ferencik: *Behind the Blue Ribbon*. I'm here in the studio with Gary Mott. Gary, it's a somewhat different story for Erica to be telling, isn't it?

**Gary Mott:**

It is so refreshing to hear Erica in this mode. I mean, she is such a funny lady.

**Tony Kahn:**

Yeah.

**Gary Mott:**

You know, she's got a great blog ...

**Tony Kahn:**

Right.

**Gary Mott:**

...Wake up and Smell the Blog.com. [This is now <<http://smelltheblog.typepad.com>>]

**Tony Kahn:**

Mmm, hmm. Mm, hmm.

**Gary Mott:**

We've always known her as this incredibly funny, witty ...

**Tony Kahn:**

Standup comedian.

**Gary Mott:**

Standup comedian, I mean a real estate agent...

**Tony Kahn:**

Yeah, and here she is, you know, I guess when standup comedians sit down and they, they talk about some of the stuff that they build their own routines out of, well, you don't have to go terribly far, before they, you know, they come up with some unfinished business. It sounds to me from this story anyway that, what got finished in her relationship with her mother was hearing her mother say the truth.

**Gary Mott:**

This story's gonna resonate with so many people...

**Tony Kahn:**

Yeah.

**Gary Mott:**

...because all of us have, let's say, a complex relationship with our parents.

**Tony Kahn:**

Uh, huh.

**Gary Mott:**

I hope that by telling this story that Erica has found some sort of, you know, peace within herself.

**Tony Kahn:**

Her mother apparently was someone who could never say "I'm sorry." But she finally heard it, Erica did, through her mother's friends and that gave Erica an opportunity to understand her mother. And I think from that, forgiveness just naturally comes! You know, that's closure, yeah, just the ability to say, "That's all right, everything is fine. You did the best you could. I really appreciate it." Funny how rarely that gets said and how important it is to hear that.

We got a letter, you know, an email from someone recently who has a wonderful story to tell about a relationship with a parent. I just wanted to read that, it's a, it's just another side of the things that a parent can leave you with, that maybe you don't quite appreciate at the time. This is a letter that we got about a relationship of a boy with his mother. His name is James, he lives in Taiwan, he's all grown now, but he writes to us about something that happened when he was fourteen and going on a drive with his mother.

He says: "I was fourteen. We're on the way to school. At the time I was attending a small Catholic school up the peninsula near Palo Alto, California. This was a fifty-minute drive and we would regularly grab breakfast in the morning on the way to school. On that day we were going to McDonalds to get pancakes. This is still a breakfast I will get quite often because sadly, McDonalds is one of the better places to get pancakes in Taiwan.

Well, after I grabbed both of our breakfasts and headed back to the car and we pulled out of the parking lot and headed back towards the freeway via surface streets, I decided I would tell her then, what I needed to say. So I said, "Mom? Pull over the car. I have something to tell you and you shouldn't be driving when I say this." I think she heard the seriousness in my voice and pulled over. When the car was safely parked, I began to tell her. Yes, I was very scared but I felt that I could tell her anything. I said, "Mom? I'm gay."

It was as simple as that, no long explanation, just a simple statement. There was silence in the car for some time. The silence made me worry, but she was just thinking about how she could respond to that. Her response still surprises me to this day. What my mom said was, "Jim? That's okay ... but you still have to do your homework."

She was one of the most nonjudgmental people I ever knew and no matter what, she said she would love me. Later, she did ask me if it was just a phase but when I told her "no," she accepted that. I know many gay men do not have a positive story like this when they told their family. But I was just lucky enough to have such a loving and supportive one."

Here's a case where hearing your parents in their own voice can make all the difference in the world and sometimes you can be lucky enough to hear it when you're fourteen and sometimes you have to wait until, till they're gone.

**Gary Mott:**

Parents, boy. [Tony and Gary laugh] There's at least, you know, another fifty *Morning Stories*.

**Tony Kahn:**

Parents: the obstacle put in our path on our way to becoming a human being. [Tony and Gary laugh] Bless 'em and I hope my son feels the same way. Anyway, that's all the time that we do have for this week's podcast but we don't want to close without...

**Gary Mott:**

Without reaching closure.

**Tony Kahn:**

...without reaching closure and we hope we never do, and certainly one of the organizations we hope never to reach closure with is Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software. People who help make this podcast possible. Thanks a lot, guys, for all your help. You can check them out at their website <[ipswitch.com](http://ipswitch.com)> I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H.

**Gary Mott:**

And spend some time with our website too, <[wgbh.org/morningstories](http://wgbh.org/morningstories)> and we love hearing from you <[morningstories@wgbh.org](mailto:morningstories@wgbh.org)>

**Tony Kahn:**

Keep writing, keep listening, we'll be with you next Friday. Bye-bye.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Lynn Relyea

Notes from Liz:

Erica's story reminded me of a cartoon in the *New Yorker* I saw years ago: Two women are standing in a park, staring up at an equestrian statute of a military hero. The plaque on the statue reads something like, "Soldier, statesman, hero, champion, defender, and still a disappointment to his mother!" (I know Erica learned that her mother had actually admired her, but while the mother lived, Erica might have empathized with that soldier.)

As our fellow-transcriber Bev has said, it's important to tell those you love that you love them today. So easy to do, and so important.