

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

*I Have My Eye on You: Surgeon Sherwin Nuland knows that sometimes a chance encounter can be as important as an operation in saving someone's life.*

### **Tony Kahn:**

Hi, everybody, this is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. I've always thought of surgeons as the lone rangers of medicine. They come galloping in from out of nowhere, they save the day, and then they disappear before you even have the chance to say goodbye. And I speak from personal experience. A little over two years ago, a heart surgeon saved my life and no matter much I feel I owe him I can barely remember his name. We spoke only twice – I mean, once in the hospital, the night before my last-minute operation, and then once again six months later in his office, when he tapped me on the chest and with a big smile said, "Okay! No need to see me again."

Well, I realize I was only one of about 5000 patients that this guy has saved over the years, but I was struck by how little room there was in his life for gratitude, the kind that, you know, sometimes takes a bit of time to express and for somebody else to feel.

Well, the other day we had a visit from a world-class surgeon and author named Sherwin Nuland, who managed to complete my medical education about surgeons by sitting down and telling us the story of some of the people who have helped shape and save his life, to whom he is forever grateful. We call his story *I Have My Eye on You*.

[Sounds: interior of hospital, steps in hallway, intercom broadcasting, "Dr. Bruce, telephone please. Dr. Bruce, telephone."]

### **Sherwin Nuland:**

I became a surgeon by accident. [more hospital sounds: a cart being rolled, voices speaking] I had started as a third-year student on the surgical service. Then the Chief Resident said, "I've been looking for you." I had no idea he even knew who I was! And then he said, "One of the interns on the private service has a family emergency and we're looking for a sub-intern, someone to fill in for him, and I've had my eye on you," he said, "and you're the only one of the students who can do this. I want you to go over there."

[Sounds: beep of a heart monitor, environmental noise.]

The Chief Resident was this charismatic man who painted and sang, who seemed to have the same aesthetic sense that I could appreciate, and by the end of two weeks, I had been romanced into a surgical career. The way it felt, the way it looked, the way instruments felt in the hand and how one could use them. Fast forward twenty years – that fellow who said, "I've had my eye on you" is now the Chief of Surgery at Stanford

University Medical School, and I said, "You know, Bob, you're the reason I'm a surgeon."

And he said, a little embarrassed, he said, "Yes, I know. You realize, of course, that when I saw you that day I had never laid eyes on you before. Didn't know who you were. I [laughs] needed a warm body."

So [laughs] . . . ! Yeah. I became a surgeon by accident.

[Sound: traffic]

But what a lucky moment that was! Not just my being there, but being there with a person like that. [sound: quick footsteps going down a hallway] I would have had a wonderful, challenging life as an internist – I don't question that at all – but what a lucky thing it was, you know, to meet someone and you see yourself reflected there. A mirror of what you can be at your best. Your very best.

[Sound: meditative piano music.]

When I was in my late thirties, I developed a profound depression. By the time I was in my early forties I was virtually incapable of doing anything. I was admitted to an institution. Uh, people pretty much gave up on me.

"Maybe a lobotomy is the thing for this man."

[Sound: heavy steps down an empty, echoing hallway. ]

My case was assigned to a resident who just happened to be on the panel that day. He was twenty-seven years old, and he somehow, through all the fog of the depression and the obsessional thinking, saw someone whom he understood, and he went to his chiefs and said that "If you do a lobotomy on this man you will destroy what he is [piano music continues reflectively], and I won't let that happen." And he dug in his heels. He saved my life. [piano plays on alone, then fades out]

I had just gotten out of the institution and within weeks I happened to meet this young woman. She came to my brand-new surgical practice with some minor problem and she saw me at my best, and when I'm not sick I'm constantly at my best, and I'm very curious about people and I love an adventure and I love the anticipation of an adventure. And that's what she saw! As soon as I realized that I valued our friendship I let her know I have a pretty good-sized history of some big troubles in my head. My illness has taken, over the years, a couple of minor recurrences. It's very scary [laughs nervously], I must tell you, it's terrifying because you're sure you're going to be plunged back and lose everything you have, just as I did the first time. But I have found this woman with whom to share everything.

If there's a single thing we human beings want, we want to be understood. We want to find people, or a person, that knows you at your best and your worst who understands and values us for everything we are. [piano resumes] It's not reaching a goal, it's traveling to the goal that's the great contentment. [sound: rustling footsteps out of doors] You can't travel it alone. [sounds: climbing into a vehicle and shutting the door]

"I've had my eye on you. " [sound: rustling footsteps outside] "I've had my eye on you." [sounds: the quiet footsteps continue, birds twitter, piano fades]

**Tony Kahn:**

Dr. Sherwin Nuland, *I Have My Eye on You*. I'm sitting here in the studio with Gary Mott.

We got an email recently from someone in Sweden who pointed out one thing about podcasts that we tend to forget because we produce one a week, and that is that sometimes it's great to be able to re-listen. He writes:

"Although I subscribe to quite a few podcasts and often listen to audiobooks, I tend to get back to the *Morning Stories*. I don't mind listening to the same story more than once, which I guess is what makes them so different. Recently I've gone through some fifty of them or so, and it's a fantastic experience – joyful, sad, and thoughtful, in a great mix. For some reason, I need to be reminded over and over again that we humans have quite similar thoughts and worries, independent of background. The *Morning Stories* make that so apparent and it cheers me up, really. Coming from a country where public radio is sponsored by tax money, it just struck me: that's not what keeps you up! So please accept a little contribution from a happy listener. "

Actually, the fact that we don't get it does keep us up! [Tony and Gary laugh] So if you'd like us to sleep, gently and not under a deep general anesthetic, consider the, what this gentleman from Stockholm, Sweden says, which is that we are there for you in, in more ways than one, and we know you're there for us, 'cause a lot of you do this on your own – your own coin and your own inspiration.

**Gary Mott:**

From all over! Ah, there's Lorena from San Antonio. There's Neil from Annapolis, Maryland. There's Nancy from Laguna Niguel. We got Karen from Brisbane, Australia, Elise from North Hollywood, from Japan – Mitsujiro Suzuki.

**Tony Kahn:**

Your gifts are appreciated deeply.

**Gary Mott:**

Listen to our archive on iTunes. Go to our website: <[wgbh.org/morningstories](http://wgbh.org/morningstories)>. Dig in - we've got a hundred and twenty-six? -seven? Something like that now, Tony?

**Tony Kahn:**

Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

**Gary Mott:**

Um, hours and hours of great listening. And tell your friends.

**Tony Kahn:**

And if you're into listening in real-time, don't worry; we're going to have another *Morning Story* for you real soon. So, see you then. 'Bye-'bye.

[Piano solo resumes and quietly concludes.]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Georgia Buchert

Notes from transcriber: I loved this podcast episode when I first heard it. I can attest to the benefits of re-listening, just like the gentleman from Stockholm. Each time I replay an episode, I bring something new of my own to the conversation; it's never the same experience twice.

This time through, Dr. Nuland's story fits perfectly with what's been cooking in my mind recently. Part of my work this week entails preparing a lesson for some teenage girls on the subject of their individual worth. I'll be teaching it to them at church next Sunday. The so-called coincidences and the patterns of Dr. Nuland's life are fascinating, and reinforce for me that there are no accidents in life, even when events seem to occur randomly or even chaotically. There are no chance meetings either. It's as if the universe is there to try and teach us our value, show us our personal paths, and throw us together with others for the purpose of saving each other's lives. I really believe that. This isn't exactly what I'll talk about on Sunday, but thanks to this *Morning Story*, there's a little something extra simmering on the back burner of my brain, and I know it will end up being something tasty that I can share with my girls.