

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

*This Woman Saved My Life: Harriet Reisen holds on for dear life atop a mountain in China.*

### **Tony Kahn:**

Hi everybody. This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. Years ago, on a trip to China, my wife Harriet met a woman named Sarah. They'd been assigned to each other as roommates and, although they came from very different social circles, they made friends very quickly. Nowadays, whenever Harriet and Sarah run across each other at a party, Harriet tells me Sarah loves to take her around and introduce her to everybody saying, "This woman saved my life." Harriet says it's certainly a kick to be described that way and technically you could say that Sarah is right. But for Harriet, the experience that those two women shared going up and down a very misty and a very slippery mountain in China is a bit more complicated than that. You could say that the feeling is mutual. I asked Harriet to recall that story for me for today's *Morning Story*, *This Woman Saved My Life*.

### **Harriet Reisen:**

My roommate Sarah, we had made friends and we got ahead of the group. And suddenly we turned back and we realized we couldn't see the group any more. We couldn't find them. They must have taken a different turning. [sound of rainfall] It started to rain lightly and it's very - very misty - clouds, foggy. And suddenly, where, where we are going next, you can't see the edge. And Sarah stopped. She presses herself against the side of the mountain and refused to go further.

[Heavier rain and thunder] Where we are going next, you can't see the edge. You can't tell that it doesn't just drop straight off the cliff. She won't do it. She was scared. And it started to pour.

I had these little sneakers on that have no support whatsoever. It was getting slippery; my ankle started to go. Here we are and I can't see over the mist either. I didn't think I could lead Sarah. I had been counting on her to lead me. She was a frightened child. I really felt my life was in danger. What am I going to do? I walked all the way to the spot where you could not see beyond, took her hand, and I said to Sarah, "Will you come with me?" And I walked her up to the point where it had vanished for her. And I started to say, "You're doing great. We're almost there. You can keep going. . ." She was so scared. It went on for hours - down and down and down, holding her hands, singing, in some sense singing, singsong: "Now don't be afraid. We're really okay. Just look at the wall. We're almost there." Step by step by step by step. [sounds of voices] And then, lo and behold, there's this restaurant! There's this place; there's our group, having lunch, in, in, under a roof. [sound of applause] We did after that, after lunch, have to climb down another six hours or so, tired, but that was the end of our big adventure.

[Rain, thunder, and then a man in the distance singing in Chinese]

When I would be in wherever we were staying at night, and it would be very quiet, and it would be very dark, 'cause there were certainly no neon lights anywhere, not even in Shanghai, people there would just sing to amuse themselves. [flute plays under narrative] I would hear a voice and sometimes an instrument come out of that very nice darkness. I would be very moved. I really found it so exquisitely beautiful. I felt that although their lives were so bare bones, you know, so deprived of free time, pleasure, I thought it was just beautiful that they did that, just singing. Oh, when I was a child, on car rides we'd all sing. And I don't ever do that – once in a very blue moon. And this was something we've lost, just singing.

When Sarah panicked and would not go on, and I realized that it was up to me, frankly I had always wondered, I wondered what I would do, if in a dangerous situation I would have the courage not to abandon a person. When my life is in danger, how do I behave? And how do you know that until you're there? I kept calm, staying there at her side until the danger was passed. I found a part of myself on that mountain, you know that? I didn't know it was there. I discovered I was brave! Sarah helped me, too. I don't know what I would have done if, if she had not been able to hold my hand and accept my help. I am a quite impatient person, but at that moment, I could be patient, holding her hand and talking her up that mountain, singing, in some sense singing. I had something valuable to offer. Step by step by step by step. She was holding my hand, too.

[flute music continues alone]

**Tony Kahn:**

Just singing. That was today's *Morning Story* by Harriet Reisen, produced by her husband, Tony Kahn Reisen. [laughter] And I'm sitting here in the listening room with Gary Mott.

**Gary Mott:**

I have a story that comes to mind that involves singing, near death, and a relationship ...

**Tony Kahn:**

Sounds like a bad date at a rock concert. [Gary laughs]

**Gary Mott:**

1990, the Grand Canyon, around the rim, sheer drop-offs, [Tony murmurs in assent or interest throughout] one wrong step or one twisted ankle and that could be it. The Grand Canyon, seeing the grandeur, just moved me. One occasion, I said, "You know, I'm just going to sing. [laughs] I don't care who's listening." Just put me in a good place to sing, looking up at the full moon, beautiful night, the bubbling brook, the

creaking bridge over the bubbling brook. I'm walking over the bridge with this girl that I really dug. And I said, you know, "This is it. Something has to happen here." I turned to her – she was beautiful. And I said, "Can I kiss you?" Took my hand and said, "No." But now that I look back on it, now that I hear Harriet's story, now that I think about that time again, that, that was really a pivotal moment. It was, it was on that trip that I met my wife, Lori. If things had gone differently [Tony makes sounds of agreement] on that bridge, who knows what might have happened, you know. Saved my life.

**Tony Kahn:**

It was a kindness. She gave you the truth.

**Gary Mott:**

Never seen her since.

**Tony Kahn:**

You were connecting with yourself in a way.

**Gary Mott:**

To be honest, hearing Harriet's story and then telling you my story is really the first time that I, that I recognized that moment as being pivotal.

**Tony Kahn:**

This is great. We should celebrate a double birthday – two, two new stories were just born today. And the funny thing is, is that both of them come from moments that either one of you have looked back on and said, "Boy, that was, that was a silly moment. Somebody thinks I saved their life, right? and all I, all I did was I didn't run away from them.

[Music]

Well, wherever these stories end up taking you, and, and it's always a surprise, if, if you want to hear any more of them, you know where you can go.

**Gary Mott:**

<[wgbh.org/morningstories](http://wgbh.org/morningstories)> We have some video; we have all kinds of audio.

**Tony Kahn:**

Plus.

**Gary Mott:**

Plus.

**Tony Kahn:**

We have a very important new element – the transcripts that are being provided by this incredible group of, now, twelve, which means that they very soon will be done transcribing all of these stories in our archive. And as, as they become available, we make them available to you.

**Gary Mott:**

Please, drop us a line. <Morningstories @wgbh.org>

**Tony Kahn:**

And, wherever your travels take you, watch your step.

[Music]

[End of Recording]

Transcribed by: Susan MacLeod

Transcriber's notes: How nice to meet Tony's wife, and to know that Tony is giving her a voice on his series. When I saw the summary before I started listening to the story, I thought, "Tony's wife's name is Harriet," not expecting that this was she. (Harriet is my middle name – not a common name these days. I was named after my grandmother, whose name was actually Hattie, but she always told people it was Harriet.)

Note from Liz:

For those who are interested, *Home Alone* is another one of Harriet's stories.

My mother always sang on family automobile trips, too. As she spent her days in professional activities, and was not the sort of mother who did much playing with her children, this was one of the best ways we came to know her, and to know what sorts of things delighted her. My father would sing along in his thin, but in-tune voice. Singing remains one of the joys of my own life.