

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

October 2008

Tommy, It's Chuck: Tom Cottle is held hostage by his dearest friend.

Tony Kahn:

Hi everybody, this is Tony Kahn, with another Morning Story from WGBH in Boston. Have you ever heard the phrase, "You never step into the same stream twice"? For me the same is true for a really good story. Its meaning keeps changing, probably because if it speaks to something important in me, then hopefully it's speaking to something that's also changing, with experience.

Today's story is definitely one of those stories for me. I first heard it about four years ago when *Morning Stories* was just getting started. It got lost in a rush of other stories that seemed much more dramatic. Now, though, with just a few weeks before I leave these studios for new projects and a change of scene, it has an awful lot more to say. We call it *Tommy, It's Chuck*.

Tom Cottle:

I was a sophomore in high school, in Chicago, at a basketball game. One of the guys on the opposing team steals the ball and has a easy lay-up. There was only one way to stop this kid. I ran as fast as I could and just as he was about to shoot, I pushed him - flagrant foul - into a stage at the end of the thing. He came back, enraged.

After the game, by his side is his mother. And his mother says to him, "Don't you know Tommy Cottle? Tommy's mother and I walked the two of you as babies."

We become friendly and get admitted to the same college. We end up being roommates for four years. He becomes my dearest friend in the world.

Chuck eventually moved to San Francisco and he married a wonderful wonderful woman. He was just a gem, the kind of a guy who would call me periodically and he would say, "Tommy? It's Chuck. (almost whispering) Tom, Tommy, it's Chuck. We just want to know, are you flossing? Your mother and I are very worried. Are you flossing?"

"Chuck, I'm flossing."

"That's all, I don't want to hear any more, because I know you're gonna be depressed and it's gonna bring me down and I have to get on an airplane, so just keep flossing. Just keep flossing."

That's, that's what he would say. He was wonderful.

About a year ago, October, I had to give a talk in Chicago and I stayed an extra day just to see him 'cause he was back and forth between Chicago and San Francisco. And we had lunch...we're talking back and forth and so I said, "Incidentally, how are you? You look...are you in good health?"

He says, "Actually, no."

I said, "What's wrong?"

He says, "Oh...I've been having fluid build-up in my lungs."

"But you gonna be OK?"

"Well, I hope so."

The weeks and months go on (Tom takes in a deep breath.) The phone rings.

"Tom? ... Chuck."

He's in a car. He's driving home with his wife to Stimson beach, his beloved Stimson beach...and they're kind of giggling. He says, "We just came back from a wonderful meal. We had some great wine. So, I just, I wanted to tell you, ah, what I found out. About what's bothering me."

"Oh yeah, what, what is it...?"

He says, "It's something called amyloidosis. Yeah," he said, "um, there's apparently there's a woman in Boston who's an expert at it (pause...) Uh, they're not really giving me much time..."

And he says, "Uh, we'll talk." And he hangs up.

A blow to the gut.

Two o'clock in the morning. I'm sound asleep. Phone rings.

"Tommy? Chuck." (Tom takes a long pause) I owe you a tremendous apology. That was a terrible way for me to give you this news. I, I ask your forgiveness."

We talked a few more times. I'm on the East Coast. He's on the west coast. He found out about amyloidosis. I found out about amyloidosis. And every doctor that I spoke to said it's a horrible death.

His family created a website with updates and he was in and out of the hospital and I'm going on the website five times a day. I'm like a guy checking stocks. He lost his voice. I had to talk through Nancy, his wife.

And then one day, there's this beautiful shot, a beautiful beautiful shot - a long vista of the beach, a man, and behind him, his dog. A gorgeous shot of Chuck walking with his dog. Didn't even see the words at the bottom of the page, "eleven o'clock that night Chuck passed away."

And, um... um (pause...) so much of me is gone. So much of me quit. I know that when I say that it's not about my work. It's just that he knew pieces of me that that... very few people know. And what were his last words to me on the phone?

"Chuck, it's Chuck. Are you depressed? Cause if you're depressed, I can't talk to you. You've got to do something about that depression." And he said to me, his final words were, he said, "Don't worry, I'm taking all your secrets with me."

[Soft guitar music begins to play in background]

Tony, I did do something in my life, which he knew about, which I can never reveal. And he knew about that and had comforted me. I think Chuck was able to give me a certain affirmation of my goodness that I'd never gotten from anybody else. You know like, "You're flossing? You're a good guy. As long as you're flossing, you're a good guy."

When your heart is absolutely exploding with confusion, almost always there is someone in our lives that we go to and how that person reacts to what you're deliberating on, what the consequences are, will weld them to us forever. Look in their gaze and you'll see that you're safe. That was Chuck.

There's something mammoth that left with him. Something very very significant. If he took it, will it still be there? I don't know that it'll still be there. I am the story that I tell. And those stories are all that I am.

[Music comes to an end.]

Tony Kahn:

Tom Cottle with today's *Morning Story*, *Tommy*, *It's Chuck*. Here in the studio with me, it's Gary. How are you, Gary Mott? (Tony and Gary chuckle softly.) Someone entrusts you with a secret. What, what does that mean to you?

Gary Mott:

You know, it's the truest form of intimacy. Violating that, that agreement is

among the worst things I could possibly do. I mean there are things I haven't told my wife and I would like to think that there are things that she hasn't told me.

Tony Kahn:

It's very hard to make a generalization isn't it, about secrets, you know whether even a life without secrets is possible.

Gary Mott:

I can think of a handful of people who I know things about that I will take to the grave.

Tony Kahn:

Tom said, "When you are trusted by somebody else, you are held hostage." By hostage, he means they have given you a place where you can be at home, in them. It binds you to them. And it can bring out the best in you.

Gary Mott:

Hmm. He seems to in one sentence say that when Chuck died, did I lose part of myself? but then he says no, the stories that I entrusted to Chuck are still who I am. I am my stories.

Tony Kahn:

Mm-hm. I'm here until I go! (Both Tony and Gary laugh)

Gary Mott:

It's interesting to hear that it took four years for the story to percolate in your mind....

Tony Kahn:

I remember you were there as Tom was leaving the recording session.

Gary Mott:

Yeah, I remember Tom saying, "Tony, good luck with, you know, finding any--anything out of that!" (Tony laughs) And you said, "Well, you know it's, it's a process and it's a..." You bet, it's a four-year long process!

Tony Kahn:

Tom's story, the first time that I heard it, really didn't mean anywhere near as much to me as it does now, as I'm thinking about making changes in my life. Some people are sorry to see me go. Some are absolutely delighted! (Tony laughs with Gary)

Gary Mott:

But they act sorry, right?

Tony Kahn:

No, I mean the ones who are delighted are delighted because they see what I'm doing as, as a new adventure of the kind they're hoping that they'll be able to have. I heard from one of our storytellers, Betsy Bunn, who worked for quite a long time in hospice, you know, which is the business of learning how to say goodbye with grace. And she said, "Well, my dear, I think chapters end and you get another, if you're lucky." And I've been lucky, so far. (Both Tony and Gary) chuckle.

There is another chapter, as a matter of fact, for telling these stories and one that I mentioned in the last podcast and just want to mention again. I've set up a new website called "Hi, Tony!" and the URL is www.tonykahn.com. You can go back to the archive at wgbh.org/morningstories if you missed any of the stories or you want to hear them again. We have over 170 of them in audio and in video and if you want to hear new stories, the stories that will be coming my way that I can tell you and that people tell me, you can go to "Hi, Tony!" at www.tonykahn.com. And one of the things that you will hear there, both old and new, is Gary Mott, a trusted friend and an honored guest at tonykahn.com, where we can continue our conversation.

Gary Mott:

I'll, I'll be stopping by, no doubt!

Tony Kahn:

Free pizza! (Tony and Gary laugh and guitar music begins under their conversation)

Gary Mott:

Tony, you didn't need to twist my arm.

Tony Kahn:

Thanks, Gary.

Gary Mott:

Absolutely, Tony.

Tony Kahn:

Take care, bye.

[Music comes slowly to an end]

End of recording

Transcribed by: Kate Magovern