

DOING THE HEIMLICH IN KANSAS CITY

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It was the fall of 1999. I was traveling for the paperback of my second novel, *Reservation Road*. After a couple of weeks on book tour, I was exhausted and a bit numb. In a midwestern airport, from a distance, you might have taken me for a businessman who traveled a lot for work, city to city, meeting to meeting; except that, well, because I was a writer out promoting my own work, my natural face probably suggested rampant self-absorption more than any company line. Each city had begun to appear much the same to me, at least inside my own head. I'd arrive, be ferried around to bookstores and an interview or two, give a reading, and the next day, at the crack of dawn, move on to another town, neither wiser nor better than I'd been before.

On the day in question, I flew in to Kansas City early in the morning. It was my first time in that mini metropolis on the banks of the Missouri River. My "media escort" – a quiet, self-effacing, middle-age local named Dick Brown – met me at my hotel. Dick wore a tweed sportcoat and brown sensible shoes and had a neatly trimmed gray moustache. He also, I noticed, walked with a slight limp. He met me around ten o'clock, and for the rest of that day drove me back and forth between suburban bookshops to sign stock.

Quite naturally, along the way we exchanged information about our lives and the very different cities we lived in (New York, in my case). I asked Dick questions about himself and what we were seeing and he answered with an endearing (and, I would come to understand, typical) mixture of humility and thoroughness. Back and forth we traveled, drawing a visual spider's web over leafy suburban neighborhoods of impressive docility and calm, taking in the ordinary sights, all of which seemed to be connected to Dick's life in some way or other. In his unassuming manner he pointed out the house that he and his

wife were moving into the following week; the house that they had just sold; the public school that his ten-year-old adopted daughter from Colombia attended. Later, over lunch at a Pan-Asian restaurant in town, he told me -- still in the same quiet, self-effacing voice -- about his time as a soldier in Vietnam, when, after surviving a tour of duty, he was mugged at gunpoint on his final night in Saigon and shot in the thigh. He'd returned home with his shattered leg and started a small printing business, which hadn't fared too well. Eventually he'd found his way into the rather offbeat business of shepherding neurotic authors around for a living, and at this he'd excelled.

Dick and I spent the entire day together. At seven that evening, he took me to my reading at a bookshop on the outskirts of the city. After the questions and signing were finished, the couple who owned the bookshop invited us out to dinner, and Dick drove home to fetch his wife.

We arrived at the restaurant around ten o'clock -- late, for Kansas City. The place was almost empty, and we took a table in the far corner. I sat with my back against the wall, tucked in behind the table, facing Dick and, behind him, the rows of unoccupied tables. Ann, Dick's wife, sat to her husband's left. A waiter came over with water and a basket of bread. He was about my own age. His name was Greg, he informed us in a deep, affected tone, and along with waiting tables he did radio voice-overs for money. We congratulated him, and then he went away.

We were talking about books and drinking wine and eating crusty pieces of baguette when in a small, frightened voice Ann Brown suddenly said, "Dick?" And Dick said nothing. I looked across the table at him. His round, kind face was tinged with blue. He was an extremely polite and modest man; probably he'd been choking in silence for a minute already. Asthmatic, wheezing noises gurgled out of the back of his throat. His hands were white-knuckled, pressed flat against the table, and he was staring blindly into some deep middle space. His eyes bulged. For about five long seconds we stared at him, unbelieving, as the rattle from the back of his throat grew more savage and his face began to

turn from blue to gray. "*Dick?*" Ann said again, almost shouting. Dick's hands scrabbled at the table edge, knocking over a glass. He stumbled backward, the chair toppling behind him. His gasps were growing deeper, inhuman. The color seeped from his face. And we sat gawking, a choir of stunned idiots, still rooted to our chairs.

Finally, a voice in my head spoke up. It was very simple, really. It said that if I did not do something, anything, to help this man, I would never be able to live with myself. (Yes, even then, a word of self-interest.) Before I knew it, I'd slid out from behind the table and was standing behind him. Flashing through my brain were fractured images of all the HOW TO AID A CHOKING VICTIM posters I'd seen countless times in restaurants and movie theaters but had never really *looked* at. I stood trying to put these torn shreds of knowledge together while Dick, gasping and unable to draw breath, began to shudder violently, his arms outstretched as if pinioned to the air.

Desperate now, I shot a glance at Greg, the waiter who did radio voice-overs for money (and who, legally, like all waiters, was supposed to know HOW TO AID A CHOKING VICTIM): he was standing off to the side, back against the wall, mouth agape, an expression of ignorant terror ruining the actorly splendor of his handsome face. No help there. Only partially conscious of what I was doing, I put my arms around Dick's chest at the level of his sternum. I made a fist with my right hand and capped it with my left and without pausing drove my fist at a slight upward angle into the soft area above his ribcage. He heaved and bent over, but otherwise his suffering did not abate. The terrible, scorched sounds continued from the back of his throat, and the side of his face that I could see out of the corner of my eye was as gray as stone. Worse, I found myself looking over his shoulder at Ann Brown. The look of terror on her face was one of the most painful things I had ever witnessed. I was failing. Dick Brown was going to die, in my arms, in front of his wife.

It was after I'd just jackhammered my fist into his chest for the fourth time (I was wired enough to lift a VW) that Dick was finally able to draw breath enough to cry out, half-distinctly:

"PLEASE...STOP...DOING...THAT!"

Of course I released him at once. Apparently, I'd been on the verge of breaking his ribs. Dick fell to his knees and was briefly sick. (Being the sort of man he was, he looked mortified at this involuntary physiological reaction.) Once he'd recovered, it was Ann who told me that my very first try at the Heimlich maneuver had sent a large crust of bread shooting out of Dick's windpipe and onto the floor.

A little while later, we were gathered around the table again, as though nothing had happened. Except that when the food arrived, brought by a sheepish and silent Greg, nobody touched it. We simply drank. We were like survivors in a lifeboat, parched with an overwhelming thirst. Ann Brown stared at her husband as if, any minute, he might disappear. Every so often she'd turn to me, shake her head, and murmur, "You just saved my husband's life." Then she would fall to staring at him again.

The Browns drove me back to my hotel. In the spectral darkness of the car Ann recounted how Dick had driven home to pick her up after my reading. On the way to dinner, she said, he'd suddenly turned to her and declared how much he loved her and their daughter, and how excited he was for the rest of their lives together – not the typical sort of speech that quiet, modest Dick Brown was known for making, even in private. And then, said Ann, they'd arrived at the restaurant, sat down, and a few minutes later he was choking to death.

While Ann talked, Dick was silent. But he was nodding, as if to say, *Yes, that's how it was.*

He'd been with me, a total stranger, all that day. He'd been courteous, generous, a perfect guide, pointing out to me all that there was to see in Kansas City. And among those sights were certain intimate symbols of his own life,

certain places, certain people, certain things whose meanings only he could know. He had shown me those, too, and told me their stories. And in so doing, I believe, he'd come to see his life, almost inadvertently, for a day, through a stranger's eyes, and had been filled, quietly, with feelings of gratitude and wonder.

That, in brief, is what happened to me one day in Kansas City, while on book tour. It's safe to say that it's the only time I've ever truly known why I was on book tour. And so it remains in my memory: a small story of one writer's self-absorbed, humdrum travel disrupted by an act of genuine connection; that rare occurrence when the ordinary proves to be anything but, and a place you'd already marked as forgettable turns out to be a place you'll always remember.

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