

Dick (1991)

Dick Konik was my mom's boss at the Holiday Inn on Lake Road in Vermilion. When my sister Kathy died in 1961, Dick provided motel rooms to our out-of-town relatives, and he catered the funeral reception, all for free.

Dick was Polish, passionate, stubborn, handsome and assertive as a bull. He was a world-class off-color storyteller, and a natural leader. Men who knew him from the Korean War, or who came to him as a kind of godfather to the Polish émigrés of Cleveland in the 1950s and 60s, knew his word was good, and his commitment absolute. A handshake was all the contract he ever required or engaged in, and it was good enough for most everyone that mattered to him.

He was a fabulous teller of jokes. Here is one I remember from about 1986. I will tell it the way he told it:

A man named Charlie is sitting on a stool. In comes his friend Harry, who notices he has this big, black shiner. He says "Charlie -- what happened?"

"Oh, says Charlie, I got it in church. You what? Yeah, I was in church, and we was singing this hymn, and I looked in front of me, and the dress of this woman kind of crept up, you know, so it was kind of stuck up in there. So when I pulled it out, I got this."

"Oh Charlie," Harry says, "you gotta promise me you'll never do that again. So next week, in comes Harry, and Charlie's got two shiners. "Charlie, what happened?"

"Well," says Charlie, "I did just like what you said. I was in church, and the same woman was standing in front of me during the hymn. And I looked at her dress, and it was hanging down straight and normal, and I knew she liked it tucked up in there, so ..."

And when he was done he would positively howl with pleasure, a high-pitched, red-faced, apoplectic laugh like he experienced the whole story again himself, and how could you possibly not love it

at least half as much?

Dick was above all a generous man. Since, apart from his stories and barked-out orders, he was pretty inarticulate, giving was how he showed people what was in his heart. He was a good man, but he spoiled everyone he loved, including us kids, rotten. All my life he was there for me, usually silently, pressing a secret wad of twenties into my hand when shaking it.

In the late early 80s, during the recession connecting the Carter and Reagan administrations, when I was struggling to get by in New Haven, he gave me a heavy duty pickup truck, for hauling broken cement. I had no broken cement to haul, but I sensed the intent behind his gift and sold the truck for \$700. When he asked how it was working our I told him, slightly abashed, that I had sold it. "How much did you get?" he wanted to know.

"Seven hundred," I said.

"That's twice what you could get in Ohio," he said to me. "You did good, Michael. Real good."

I love my real dad, who has also been generous to me. But if I'd sold a gift my real dad gave me, the act would inevitably have been about him. I'm the same way, measuring every act against my dignity and expectations. Dick was better than that.

He was only a modestly successful businessman, running a motel and restaurant way out on the west side of the Cleveland area that his father Frank Konieczkowski, a Polish immigrant and, I'm told, bootlegger, set up for him, on the intuition that the west side was due to grow. It never did. Dick's big windfall came in the 60s, when Holiday Inns of America bought his name to secure their trademark.

Within a few months of my sister's funeral, heartbroken and confused, my dad took off to try his luck in California. Shortly thereafter, Dick began showing up at our door. I think he saw my mom as an impossibly elegant lady who could not only be great for business, but would be a kind of trophy for him, a benchmark of achievement. He would drive us to Cleveland, 30 miles away,

for grandiose six -course Cantonese dinners. He can't have known how low everyone in the house was feeling, or how these trips to the exotic east lifted us up. I knew, and I was grateful. I ingested every grain of fried rice as if it were manna.

He had a grand manner about him. When Dick Konik entered a room, all eyes turned to him. He loved to flash his bankroll around, loved to leave big tips, loved to flirt with waitresses, calling them "honey" and "sweetheart," and making them blush and giggle, right in front of my mom." He was a small-scale Diamond Jim, but it was all a joke, a joke he loved more than anybody.

Dick hired me, at 11, to wash dishes and swab floors at the restaurant. I worked for him, weekends and summers, for six years. It was a mixed opportunity. I remember scrubbing grease-clogged garbage cans under a hot sun, every square centimeter of me and my apron and clothes saturated with animal fat. But I also remember delighting in fraternizing with the young waitresses who worked alongside me, which worked better if I hadn't just been scrubbing garbage cans in the sun.

Dick was something that wasn't understood in those days, dyslexic, and accordingly suspicious of education and the educated elites. And he had a temper. He could be incredibly obnoxious at the restaurant when things failed to meet his standards. When he was in a tantrum he tended to shout in a loud whiny voice absurd rhetorical observations like "What are we running here, a Marshall's Drug Store?" and "If I want a job done half-assed, I have to do it myself."

And he would storm about the back area, doing things the right way, throwing heads of lettuce behind him into a tub, scooping enough ice from the machine to pack a horse in. Five minutes later, the storm would have passed and he would be completely tranquil, as if the shouting madman were another person. His character was such that people simply tuned him out when he was on the warpath, because experience taught us that the mood would pass quickly, and he would be a friend to man again in no time.

After a suitable period of courtship, Dick and Mary got married, and my family moved from Amherst to the new house he'd built next to the restaurant, in Vermilion, on Lake Erie. Overnight, we were rich, compared to the days when my mom worked three jobs. Dick remained very generous. I was astounded when he gave me his car to drive to my new school in, a powerful 1958 V-8 Buick Century sedan. I arrived for my first day with automatic highest status, at the wheel of a monster car. In my whole life, no other gift came close to pleasing me as much.

For two summers, he set me up in a business for my brother Pat and me to run, selling fruits and vegetables from a shack by the highway, which he put up just for us. Sweet corn, potatoes, and six-packs of Pepsi paid our college tuition.

He was a little scary, and he was no intellectual, but people adored him, because he went out of his way for them. When he sold the restaurant and started a trucking and excavating business, he became truly happy. Like a little boy, he loved the trucks and bulldozers and dirt, and he loved working with rough, inarticulate, grown men like himself instead of chatty teenaged waitresses.

That was when Dick blossomed and became a local godfather. Polish immigrants clustered about his feet as he dispensed jobs and other favors. His men were phenomenally loyal to him. If you ever got into trouble -- an arrest, a divorce, a death in the family -- Dick was there for you, with cash in hand. The things he was unable to put into words burned in his commitment to other people's happiness and fulfillment. He was like a godfather to over a hundred families, the beneficent lord, and he would do anything for them, and the feeling was mutual.

By 1989, at 60, Dick was one of the best-known and best-liked men in the county. People who understood his popularity but didn't know the man talked about him running for Congress. He was youthful, vigorous, and powerful. But he didn't feel right, and began talking in a way uncharacteristic of him, self-concerned and fretful.

When my mom would tell us on the phone that something was

wrong, we did the usual thing, reassured her that Dick was strong as a horse, and nothing could bring him down. But when we visited that summer, he seemed changed -- inward, and angry. One day we arranged to drive 80 miles in two cars to see Shamu the killer whale at Sea World. But something went wrong and we were unable to meet up again at Sea World. Rachel and I and our two kids wandered through the area looking for them for a couple of hours, without success. Bewildered, we drove home again. Late that night, Dick and my mom returned, and Dick was in a hideous mood, seething with rage. As he passed me in the kitchen he gave me a look that would kill small animals. He was a different person.

Several months later Dick and Mary called a family meeting, at a Holiday Inn in Beloit, Wisconsin. Every faction of the extended family showed up, for a discussion of the division of family wealth. Dick had it in his mind that he was going to die, and wanted everyone to be clear on the flow of goods. Again, we tended to pooh-pooh his concerns. But he looked tired, and resigned. It was a time for the next generation to show leadership, but none of us felt worthy.

These were the things I thought of when Dick was finally diagnosed as having a brain tumor. His doctor -- he preferred going to his local doctor because he *knew* him, and he didn't *know* the specialists in Cleveland, so how good could they be? -- assured us that it was, in all likelihood, non-cancerous. For that reason, he dithered for almost a year, relying on CT scans rather than the more sensitive MRI. Of course, by the time we got the MRI scan, the tumor was obviously cancerous as hell, an astrocytoma of feral malignity that invaded his cranium like a homicidal starfish.

The starfish dragged Dick down through a miserable last couple of years, and finally to an awful death, crying out in bed, pounding with his fists, as the last great stroke swept him away.

But I will say this, that once he understood his diagnosis, his personality sweetened again. The reason it sweetened was the same reason it deteriorated in the first place -- because the tumor

was pressing against his prefrontal lobe, where the emotions are housed. Because of the pressure, he lost his customary control of his emotions. That was why, despite a lifetime of temper squalls that quickly passed, he bore a grudge over the Shamu affair. And it was why, as the tumor tightened its grip around his life, his unwillingness to confront people directly and tell them how he felt -- and to slide them twenty dollar bills instead -- melted away, revealing a man in love with almost everyone he knew.

I visited him four times in the last year. His health and appearance deteriorated steadily. Chemotherapy took his hair. Radiation took much more. To shrink the tumor, they overheated his head, and destroyed some of his salivary glands and tear ducts, and converted his raspy voice, and laugh you could hear halfway across the county, to a whisper. The tumor did a number on his coordination -- his long stride was replaced shuffling baby steps. It seemed he was forever sipping water, to irrigate the dry passages.

One day I witnessed something remarkable -- a barber giving a hairless man a haircut -- and wrote this poem:

Dick didn't have a hair on his head after chemo, not one.

But he liked talking to Dave, who also sold insurance
and awnings.

Dave would pretend to cut hair for half an hour or more,
chatting about the kids today, or an open lot

on the outskirts of town where a supermarket might go.

And Dick would nod, or grunt with half open eyes.

He had no words left in him, but he was pleased to be
served,

to be the man again, it made him feel that ghost hair
was still coming out of him, unstoppable, wild.

When Dave was done he carefully brushed the excess

off,

shook the cloth off on the porch, let nothing ride away
on air.

It struck me that he and my mother, who had an on-again, off-again love in their marriage, became very close in their last year together. She, the self-educated sophisticated lady, and he, the rough-and-tumble man's man, became best friends at the end. My mom was always very prudish about matters sexual or even physical. Yet at the end, she set aside all her airs, and when he was unable to get to the bathroom by himself, she took his penis and placed it in the urinal jar herself, while he let go. It was the last thing I expected her to be comfortable doing, and she did it humbly, and with conviction.

I had some extraordinary talks with Dick in the last months of his life. He spent much of his days sitting in the quiet wearing dark glasses. The dimmest light seemed glaringly bright to him, and high-pitched noises, like my one-year old son Jon's voice, could set off rapid, upsetting aural seizures. He liked to sit by the picture window, watching the finches and warblers flit by the bird feeder.

And he liked to discuss his dreams. A recurring one began with him waiting outside the house at dusk on a summer evening. He was healthy in the dream, and whole. Soon a long black car would pull up by the Lake Road, and inside were George Raft, the actor who played gangsters, and Al Capone. They would gesture for him to climb in, and they would speed off down the two-lane backroads through the farmsteads of Brownhelm Junction, Henrietta, and the Firelands. Along the way Capone would do the talking.

"And you know," Dick said, "people don't understand Al Capone. Everyone makes out like he's this bad guy. But they're wrong. He's OK. He might of done some bad things a long time ago, but I know him. I talked to him. In his heart, he's OK."

It didn't take a Jungian to see that Dick was coming to terms with his own failures in life, through Capone, and finding it in his heart

to forgive himself.

We talked about death. It disturbed him that no one in the family was comfortable discussing it with him. But he knew he was dying, and he felt he was the only one of us working through the implications.

"What do you think happens when you die?" I asked him.

He looked at me levelly. "I'm going to be with Jesus, and my mother," he said, with a gulp.

I blurted out that I have always believed that something carries us on after we die -- heaven, or nirvana, or something. I couldn't believe that all this consciousness, all this meaning and memory, simply vanish like a computer shut down.

"I want to die," Dick said. "This is no damn good."

"I hate it that you have to go through all this, Dick," I said. "If you decide you can't go on any longer, and you need help, I'll do anything you want."

Dick smiled. "No, I'll -- I'll get through this. Don't worry about me." He began to sob. "I never knew it could be like this between people. It's so beautiful."

My last visit to Ohio was for a huge farewell picnic in the 20 acre backyard. It was just like the picnics of old, when Dick would smoke a hundred pounds of kielbasa on green applewood, and enough Coho salmon to fill a tent. The day before the picnic Dick was still getting about the house in his small two-inch steps. But when the people began to arrive, he felt his strength return, his voice deepen, and late in the afternoon, as the accordionist played, he stood with my mother among the scrub pines and danced a stately, balanced waltz.

That weekend he counseled me. "You know, Michael, in this life you need to think with this head," he said, tapping his left temple, "not this one," he said, pointing below his waist.

"I think some of my problems are because I think too much with

this head," I said, indicating the upper one.

"Yeah, well," Dick said, and smiled. "That would be you, wouldn't it."

I nodded.

"You know, Michael, I always loved you," he said, his voice catching, and his eyes weeping tearlessly. "I loved you as much as if you were my own son. And I've never been anything but proud of you."

When I said the car was the nicest gift I ever got, that wasn't quite true. What he told me that day on his bed in Ohio, that was the best.