

“Death!”

P.E. Rowe

A few years back, I'm in the executive club on the way back to Seattle and I bump into this guy from Bellevue. He's maybe fifteen years older than me, and he seems like a real decent guy. So we start talking a little. You know, small talk. How're the Mariners gonna do this year and so forth. But I could tell by the way he carried himself that he was somebody. Well-dressed, strong demeanor, you know, comported himself like a pretty high-class individual, but down-to-earth. We ended up on the same plane, and by the time we got off the plane, he'd asked for my card and said we should have drinks together sometime. I didn't think too much of it until he called me about a week or so later.

Come to find out, the guy was pretty high up at Microsoft. I'll say that. Don't want to say too much more. I mean, he wasn't Paul Allen or anything like that, but from a financial standpoint, he could've retired ten times over if he'd wanted to. He was just the type of guy that really liked to work, though—to be in things, running the show. And his wife was a pretty successful lawyer and a philanthropist who loved to put together charity events for all kinds of different foundations around Seattle. She was into everything. We'll call them Stephen and Ashley for the sake of anonymity. Really, it doesn't matter what their names are.

Anyway, Stephen and I hit it off, started playing golf together. He used to invite me out on his boat. Before I

knew it, Ashley and my wife Emma were going out together and we were getting invited to all of Ashley's events, and she'd A-list us. Stephen and Ashley knew we weren't exactly in their tax bracket. Hell, I didn't even own a tuxedo till that first year I met Stephen. For a while there, the tux was getting about as much use as my golf clubs after Emma and Ashley started hanging around together. And we really liked Ashley's parties. She was a great event planner. She'd always put together a really interesting crowd, you know. It wasn't all money people or Microsoft people. There were doctors, entrepreneurs, artists, all kinds of different people from all over Seattle, and it always made for a fun evening. We ended up with what amounted to a network of friends in about all the places you'd ever want to go in town, and all of it stemmed from that one meeting with Stephen in the airport lounge all those years back. Turns out it's a very useful skill to talk to people and be friendly. Imagine that in America.

I think what Stephen and Ashley liked about us was that we never really took anything too seriously. We didn't really care about how much money any of these people made or what they did for a living. We were just out for a good time, you know. Put people at ease and have a real conversation or two. Drink a few martinis and tell a few jokes. Whatever. No one's keeping score, after all. So that's how we acted.

Now, Stephen and I don't golf together quite as much these days, but we still meet for lunch. Ever since Emma had the baby last fall, though, she and I haven't really been out to too many of their parties. But Ash put us both on the

list for the Hospice benefit at Stephen's country club in early September, probably because Stephen always wants to beat the Amazon guys in the best-ball tournament, and even when I don't play more than twenty times a year, I'm still a damn-near scratch golfer, same as Stephen.

That's how I came to be at the Balmoral Bar at the country club—stag, unfortunately, because Emma came down with the same chest cold little Heather was battling—so there I was, back to the good old days, clowning around with a bunch of rich folks in tuxedos and evening gowns, throwing back martinis and helping everyone struggle to walk that fine line between trying not to seem boring while not embarrassing themselves. A rare skill in this day and age, I'll tell you.

It was only an hour or so into the evening, so people were still doing the old "who are you, and how do you know so-and-so" nonsense. That part's usually a bit of a chore, but you have to work through those things—buy a few martinis for people so they let their guard down. I like to circulate, talk to a bunch of people, get a little feedback on the energy in the room, give things a push in the right direction, you know?

I see this guy by himself down the end of the Balmoral Bar staring down into his scotch, looking pretty discouraged, and I figured I'd toss the guy a lifeline or something. I think he was even sweating, and it wasn't nearly that hot. So I ask him what he's drinking, and he tells me it's a Macallan, and I start talking to him about scotch, saying something like, "Oh, you like that Macallan, have you tried the Oban?" And of course he hadn't. So I had the bartender

pour him some Oban and the guy started to open up a bit. Turned out he was an orthodontist up in Edmonds with a nice little practice, and he was recently divorced, so he didn't really know how to handle himself all alone in a room like this, and it showed.

I tried to introduce—well, let's call him Dr. Vechio, the orthodontist—so I introduce Vechio to a few people around the bar, and I circled back around a few times trying to make sure he didn't linger around the same people for too long. This is something few people seem to have figured out. They want to settle into a place where they feel somewhat comfortable, but it's like a social self-destruct button at a thing like this. You have to move, and one of the easiest ways to do it is to act like you recognize someone—you know, "Didn't I meet you at the Arts Foundation benefit?" Or something like that, or a silly joke, and off you go. Easy. The other good move when you have a friend is the old introduction gambit, and that's what I was trying to work for Vechio the Orthodontist. And you have to linger until you learn something about the guy, like he works in Edmonds and he likes to ski. Then you can circle around to other groups of people, find someone from Edmonds or a skier, cycle back around to Vechio, and get him out of the other place before he self-immolates.

This kind of crowd management is something Ash and Stephen do at every function. It takes work to get everyone engaged at an event, and Ash had deputized me and Emma in that capacity so often that now it feels like the natural thing for me to do when I'm at a party like this. I'd usually pick up a Vechio or two a night, and after I moved whoever

it was a couple times, they'd figure out the rhythm without having to be told anything. People learn when they have a chance to get the hang of things. I guess I'd been to so many of these parties that I'd probably come to experience them as much through the success or failure of my own little pet projects as to whether I had a good time myself. There really wasn't anything I found more enjoyable than watching a person open up and start interacting with their fellow party-goers—you know, enjoy themselves. Have a good time with new people.

With Vechio, though, I was a little concerned. I probably introduced him to four or five groups of people and he'd just stand there like dead weight, clutching his drink and taking the introduction about two sentences deep, and then he'd stand around for five minutes while everyone else started feeling about as awkward as he did. Finally, on the last move it seemed like he was catching on. I set him up with these two Amazon couples and a single girl in her thirties who worked for some high-end graphic design firm or something. That group was pretty much floundering on their own already anyway. So I walk up and introduce Vechio to the designer, who'd mentioned something about camping earlier in the night. They start talking about Montana with the two couples and finally Vechio's drunk enough or engaged enough to start talking about all the places he liked to go camping and hiking back in college. There it is, I think. Settled. And I start to circle around again, casting an eye over that way every so often, and for about ten minutes or so that whole crew seemed to be laughing and having a grand old time. Vechio's even had

them laughing a few times, which isn't that much of a surprise to me, because I sensed that about the guy—that he had a sense of humor buried beneath that thick shell of nervous energy.

I lost track of Vechio for a few minutes while I was at the bar chatting up a few of the Microsoft guys I knew through Stephen and Ashley. By the time I got back that way again, Vechio was practically holding court. It even looked like the graphic designer was considering him—by which I mean she was well aware he was there, and she didn't seem that unhappy about it, despite the fact he was quite a bit older with a little gray in the moustache. I went over and gave him a pat on the back. When he saw me again he lit up and grabbed me by the shoulder and said, "Hey, Kapp, get in here. We were just talking about the joys of parenthood. Robert and Jodha here just had their first last fall."

"He's with the sitter," said the young Middle-Eastern-looking woman standing across from Vechio. "I almost feel kinda guilty being out tonight."

"Blasphemy!" I said. "No beautiful woman should ever feel guilty with a martini in her hand, young lady."

"I know, right!" she laughed.

"I'm Kapp," I said, shaking hands with Robert, then Jodha, then introducing myself to the other Amazon couple. I'd already met the graphic designer so I clinked glasses with her and said, "Hello again."

The graphic designer started talking about the joys of being childless, which, mind you, can spiral into a pretty

bad place in such a setting real fast. I was just about to defuse that bomb and Vechio pipes up.

“You know, I hear you, Amy. I really do. There’s nothing quite like sleeping late on a Saturday or having that second or third beer whenever the heck you feel like it. But, boy I’ll tell you, kids are a lot of fun sometimes. You guys will find out,” he said, gesturing over toward Robert and Jodha. “The fun really starts when they start talking and figuring things out, start making mistakes. You just never know what they’re going to do.”

My jaw almost dropped. I swear, I couldn’t believe this Vechio was the same guy I’d met at the Balmoral Bar a couple hours earlier staring into his scotch. He was doing great. And these are the moments I enjoy most – watching somebody so socially-constricted put themselves out there like that. I love to sit back and be a fly on the wall when it happens.

“Like what?” Jodha asked Vechio. “What’s the funniest thing one of your kids has done recently?”

“Like how recent?”

“Like the last year or so,” she said. “Just something you can remember.”

“Boy, I don’t know,” Vechio said. “Sometimes it’s not always funny. Sometimes it’s just like, you never really know what the heck they’re going to do, or they say something that comes out of nowhere? You guys understand, right?”

“Not just yet,” Robert said, smiling at Jodha. “Gabby’s just starting to string her words together these past few weeks.”

“Okay, well, I’ll give you an example, right,” Vechio said. “Last summer, my wife and kids and I, we took a trip up to Glacier, up in Montana, right? And I can’t even imagine, nowadays, you get in the car for twelve hours with a couple kids, and you can give them an iPad or something and they’re as quiet as anything. I can’t imagine what the heck we’d do without it. Back in the day, my parents had four kids fighting and screaming at each other the whole way. But with the technology, the thing is, it’s hard to get them to take their eyes off the screens now. You’re like, ‘Mountains, kids; beautiful mountains.’ Nothing. ‘Grizzly bear; look at the grizzly bear.’ They yawn at you, right?”

“My niece is so like that,” Amy says. “Did you guys see that massive rainbow about a week ago over the lake?”

“Which lake?” Vechio asks.

“I’m *sorry*?” Amy says.

“Which lake were you talking about, with the rainbow?”

“God, I just spaced out for a second,” she said. “God—um—”

“Lake Washington?” Robert said.

“Union, sorry,” Amy continued. “Anyway, I’m at my sister’s in Eastlake and there’s this huge, I mean massive, bright rainbow out over Lake Union, and I say to my niece, ‘Arianna come look at the thing,’ you know. I told her the whole thing, and she was just flicking around on her phone, like, ‘That’s nice, Aunt Amy, I’m sure it’s really exciting.’”

“She didn’t get up?” Jodha asked.

"Didn't even flinch," Amy said. "Sorry. Anyway, Dr. Vechio, I interrupted. What were you saying?"

"No need to apologize, it's nothing. You made my point far better than I could. You can't get their eyes off that stuff," Dr. Vechio continued. "And, that's how it was in the car, all the way across Washington through Idaho and into Montana. And the thing that was surprising that I never would have guessed in a million years would catch their attention, right? Any guesses?"

"No idea," Amy said. "When I was a kid it used to be we'd look for punchbuggies, but you don't see many of them anymore."

"What's a punchbuggy?" Jodha said.

"It's like a car," Robert answered. "You know the old VW Beetles, the old one."

"Yeah," Amy said. "You used to see one and then you'd shout, 'punchbuggy!' and whoever said it first got to punch somebody in the arm. My brother and I used to kill each other."

"How is that a thing?" Jodha said. "That's so strange."

"Were they punching each other, Dr. Vechio?" Amy asked, trying to steer the conversation back to his story.

"No, but it was a bit like that," Vechio said. "So my son, Julian, about a half hour or so into Montana he asks my wife about the little white crosses by the side of the road, right? You guys have seen those?"

"I don't think so," Jodha said. "I've never been to Montana."

"They put up crosses," Amy says. "Whenever somebody dies on the highway, they put this little metal

cross on the edge of the road where the people die, I guess to warn people to drive carefully.”

“Exactly,” Vechio says. “And my wife, she went through the whole thing with Julian, and he was fascinated by it, and because—well he’s four years older than Madison, so whenever he gets interested in something, she starts listening too.”

“How old is Julian?” Amy asks.

“Sorry,” Vechio says. “They’re twelve and eight, right. So anyway, Julian asks my wife, like, ‘For real, mom, somebody died there?’ And she says, ‘Yeah, Julian, that’s what they’re there for, to remind people to slow down and be careful.’ And I continue driving, thinking nothing of it. Well, the next time we pass one of those little white crosses, Julian pokes Madison in the arm and sort of whispers in this ominous voice to her, ‘Madison, death.’ And he says to her, ‘Let’s see who can spot the next cross first.’ A lot like the punchbuggy thing.”

“Oh my God,” Amy says. “Like the most morbid version of the alphabet game ever, right?”

“Yeah,” Vechio says, “And before my wife or I know it, they’re keeping score and they’ve got their eyes glued to the side of the road like their own lives depended on it.”

“That is so strange,” Jodha says.

“Exactly,” Vechio says. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. You never know when or where something’s going to catch their interest and they’re going to do something so totally unpredictable like that. And with that thing, it just kept going on. We both told them, ‘Guys, you need to show a little respect because that’s real, like, that actually marks

the place of a person's death.' But they were already into the game, and you try to put a stop to it, but then one of them gets one point ahead of the other, and it just becomes about that sibling rivalry and staying ahead. There wasn't anything we could really do, it's just like, we were driving down the road and every five minutes one of the kids would shout, 'Death!'"

"And you couldn't get them to stop?" Robert said.

"Well they don't really put that situation in the parenting books, Robert. That's another thing you'll learn is that ninety-five percent of being a parent is just winging it and hoping you make it through the day, right? So I looked over at the wife, and she looks at me, and we sort of collectively decide that the best course of action is to downplay the situation, let them grow tired of the game, and eventually they'll go back to playing Angry Birds or whatever little thing they do. But they kept going. Every five minutes, 'Death! Death!'"

Right at that moment, Stephen and Ashley walked onto the patio, and as they came into my field of view, I could tell they were looking for me. Ashley caught my eye first and she did one of those little wave/come-here, Kapp, gestures with her hand. And when Stephen and Ashley wave me over, it's usually to introduce me to someone important, so I look back over at Vechio, I figure he's doing all right, and I excuse myself.

"How long did the kids keep going on like that?" Jodha asked Vechio right as I was walking away.

"That's not even the best part. You won't believe—" I hear Vechio's voice trailing off as I step out of earshot.

I was thinking about the situation as Stephen patted me on the back and introduced me to the CEO of some biotech firm that had recently relocated to Seattle from Chicago. We started talking about how the two cities compare, and I mentioned how I wasn't aware there was much biotech in Chicago. "A little less now," Stephen says, and of course the young CEO laughs. I did my best to stay engaged, but the truth was that I was distracted. I was still thinking about Vechio and his story. I was curious—about a lot of things, really. First, I mean, the story itself—it was just such an odd thing. And the guy, I really wouldn't have predicted he'd come to life like that, pulling something so strange and interesting out of nowhere in front of a group of socialites. Every minute or so, I'd look over, and the whole group would be laughing and smiling. Then, again, Vechio would say, "Death!" And everyone would erupt in laughter. The people around them even began to notice, and from where I was, it looked like he was killing it over there. I had to do my best to hide my distraction from Stephen and Ashley and the young CEO. I'd guess it was about four or five minutes before I excused myself under the pretext of grabbing a drink for myself and Stephen. I walked back toward Vechio and figured I'd stop on the way to the bar to see how the situation had panned out, because they all seemed to have stopped laughing.

When I get there, Vechio says, "Oh, hey, Kapp, you made it back in time for the good part," and I was a little surprised he was still telling the same story, but he just kept talking.

“So we’re still stuck behind this semi-truck for like a half hour, right?” Vechio says. “And boy, I just cannot get a break in the traffic to pass the guy. It’s like every time I try to pull around him there’s a car coming the other way. And then out of nowhere, the traffic comes to a dead stop, and I’m thinking, must be construction or something. But the darn truck’s so big, I can’t see around to the road in front. And of course finally, after about three hours of trying to get the kids to settle down and forget the darn road crosses, the game’s finally tied, so me and the wife think the thing’s finished, because they haven’t shouted ‘Death!’ in at least a half hour.”

The two Amazon couples and Amy were staring at Vechio, I mean, they were really into it. There were even a few people adjacent to their little circle listening in. I couldn’t help but think how much momentum the guy’d been able to build into this little story.

“So we sat there crawling along,” Vechio continues. “And, boy, I mean crawling. We probably only made it a few hundred yards in about ten minutes, so the kids are starting to get restless, and I’m getting frustrated. Then the truck pulls forward and I can finally see these emergency lights by the side of the road up there.”

“Oh, God,” Amy gasped as she began to realize where Vechio’s story was going. But of course it was a bit like the wreck itself: she’d waited in traffic and couldn’t back out now. I’m not sure I was quite anticipating what she was, because she was almost cringing, and I really didn’t guess where the story was going yet. I was curious just like the rest of them.

Vechio continued: "So after another two or three minutes, we pull even with the lights, and of course the ambulance and the fire trucks had gotten the kids' attention. The semi-truck was still blocking the way, though, so we couldn't see until the last minute that there was an SUV rolled over by the side of the road—all banged up—roof dented in, front end all crunched up—I mean, boy, this was one serious crash, we could tell. But we figured the fire department had gotten everyone out by ambulance until we heard the sound of the helicopter. Then, when we pulled even with the crash, there was a trooper, right? He was waving cars through one by one. When he waves the truck past we could finally see. And there, lying on the shoulder was a person, right? We couldn't see how old, but it was a man—you could tell by the shoes. But he's lying there with a sheet over his face, and my wife shouts to the kids, 'Don't look, don't look!' But of course they couldn't look away once they got their eyes on it."

I started to really worry about where Vechio's story had gone, but everyone was so engrossed there was no way to change the topic. I thought of every funny way I could pull him out of there, you know, but about the only thing that held any hope was if he could turn the corner himself.

Vechio keeps talking, shaking his head and smiling. "So there's this guy, he's lying under this white sheet, and there's blood all over the road. And my wife was like frantic, trying to reach into the back seat and cover up Madison's eyes. Meanwhile, she's hollering at Julian to look away. So finally, the trooper waves me through and I

floor it past the body and Julian's leaning over his sister, staring out the window, and my wife's got my daughter's head in her hands. Suddenly Julian starts laughing, pokes his sister in the arm, and goes, 'Death! Madison, death! Look, look, look,' and he starts laughing and poking her, and he's like, 'I win, I win.' Just laughing like no tomorrow."

Vechio looked up and, suddenly he realized he was the only one smiling. Robert and Jodha were standing there with their mouths hanging open. Amy was looking down at the patio shaking her head. Everyone else listening was aghast. I was probably the only one who didn't really react. I guess I was just sorta cringing internally.

It was silent for a few seconds before Robert finally spoke up, "You know, Dr. Vechio," he said. "That woman down there in the purple dress, she's married to a friend of mine at Microsoft, that's how I know. She's a pediatric psychiatrist. You might want to get her card before you go."

"Hey, come on," I said, doing my best to keep the situation from growing any worse for the poor guy. "I'm going to go grab another martini, anybody else want a drink?"

Of course, nobody said yes. I just took the opportunity to invite Vechio back to the bar with me and make the most graceful exit he could at that point. I think that was when it began to hit him. Nobody looked at him as we stepped away, and he looked over his shoulder a couple times as we crossed the patio back into the Balmoral.

“Boy, Kapp, most people like that story,” Vechio said. “Nobody’s ever—” then he paused, looking back at the group out on the patio as they closed around each other and began to whisper. He sat down at the bar again and I ordered a couple martinis. I could see everything about his body language reverting back to that earlier place and worse. Poor Vechio was shaking his head before the bartender had even poured the first martini.

“Boy, Kapp, I really blew it, didn’t I?”

“Come on, now, Dr. Vechio. It’s not that big a deal. Take a drink and relax. Don’t sweat it,” I said.

But he was sweating it. You could see. There wasn’t enough alcohol or prodding in the world that could’ve made Vechio go back onto that patio.

“I guess I’m just not cut out for these things,” he said. “Fancy parties. Fancy people.”

“They’re just regular people in tuxedos and evening gowns,” I said, and I pushed the first martini his way. “Every last one of them is pretending to fit in, same as you and me. That’s all.”

“Well, I guess some people are better at it than others, Kapp. Who am I kidding with all these young, successful people? I’m just an aging orthodontist. I don’t even know what I’m—”

I couldn’t remember seeing anyone so dispirited at a party in a long time. I felt awful. He sat there holding that martini in his hand with this hangdog look on his face. He never even lifted the glass off the bar.

“Did you know you can’t even see the Earth from Jupiter with the naked eye, Dr. V?” I told him. “Can’t see it. But

the world keeps turning just the same, my friend. It's no big thing."

He took his hand off the martini and turned toward me. He shook my hand and told me, "You're a good man, Kapp. One of the few."

"One of the many, Dr. V," I answered. "You are too. Hang in there."

I left him sitting there and went back to the patio to see how Stephen and Ashley were doing with the CEO. The next time I went back to the bar, Vechio's martini was still sitting there untouched and he was nowhere to be seen. Might as well have been a little white cross propped up on that barstool.

You know, I've never understood what it's like to be all bound up like that—like the Vechios of the world. It must be an awful thing. And the poor guy. He wasn't even that far off. Another crowd? A couple drinks deeper, maybe? I don't know. I could see where he was coming from. If you've got a dark sense of humor, it was kind of a funny story, I guess. I wonder about people sometimes, though, why it has to be so damn hard all the time. Why everyone can't just be natural around each other. And Dr. Vechio? Never saw the guy again. I hope he's doing well, though. I really do.

I probably shouldn't dwell on it, though. I mean, who's got time to worry about one sad orthodontist's botched story? There's a million other things to do—a million other people to meet, and they've all got more stories than a person can ever hope to remember. And isn't that the beauty of this whole crazy thing? I sure hope so.