

The hotel room brightened with the sunrise as Dr. Patrick Rivera prepared for a day of golf, unaware that it would be the last day of his life. He had scheduled an eight-thirty tee time with an old classmate who had promised to invite a couple of others, making it a foursome. Patrick was eager to unwind after the highly unusual day he had experienced at the Global Achievements offices, where he had felt completely out of his element and thoroughly confused.

The previous evening, he had called his father to inform him of his plans to relax and reconnect with friends over the remaining four days of his stay, assuring him that he wouldn't extend his visit beyond the original plan. Patrick had also reached out to his cousin, who was more like a younger brother due to their close upbringing and overlapping schooling in Virginia.

Dr. Pat Rivera, a medical researcher, worked at Warner Pharmaceuticals in Richardson, Texas. His days were spent developing new therapeutics for Type Two diabetes, funded by a substantial annual government grant exceeding ten million dollars. The younger Dr. Rivera had gained recognition in critical research circles for creating an effective Type Two Diabetes treatment that eliminated the need for daily injections and had no adverse effects on pancreatic function. His approach modulated the effects of naturally produced insulin in the body. He was regarded as one of the leading research scientists in his field and currently led a team focused on developing a safe and effective weight loss medication.

Patrick showered, shaved, dressed, and retrieved his golf bag from the closet. Using a washcloth from the Marriott, he cleaned the grooves of his pitching wedge and nine iron, then examined his driver and three wood after removing the head covers.

He removed his new Calloway putter from the bag, lined up an imaginary shot, and smoothly stroked it across the thick carpet. In his mind's eye, he watched the putter sink the shot.

"And the gallery goes nuts!" he exclaimed before placing the putter in the bag with the club head down.

He hoisted the bag onto his shoulder, headed to the elevator, descended to the lobby, briefly stopped by the breakfast room, and then took a cab to the Centennial Golf Club in Herndon. Patrick set his clubs next to a small table near the entrance and headed to the food Bar for a glass of juice and a bagel. To his surprise, he encountered a familiar face.

"Dr. Taū! What a small world! I didn't know you were staying here."

Dr. Lǐ Xǐng Taū began to leave but stopped and greeted Patrick with a nod. "It appears you're attending another meeting today, Dr. Rivera," he remarked, glancing at the golf bag.

Feeling embarrassed at being discovered and questioned, Patrick replied, "Well, you know, the whole Gap thing doesn't interest me. I'm a doctor and not too concerned about the economy if you catch my drift."

Taū nodded and curtly responded, "Clearly. Enjoy your game." He then turned and left the hotel, getting into an awaiting SUV under the hotel's portico.

Patrick noticed a cab pulling up, grabbed his golf bag, discarded his uneaten bagel, and exited the hotel. A brief ten-minute drive took him to the clubhouse of the Centennial Golf Course, where he checked in and waited for the rest of his foursome to arrive.

Beside the clubhouse, there was a practice putting green. Since it had been six weeks since he had last played, Patrick decided to get some practice to avoid embarrassing himself with his old friend due to a rusty short game.

He took four golf balls from his pocket and placed them about twenty feet from the hole. Strangely, his hand felt damp after touching the golf balls, but he wiped his hands on a towel

clipped to the bag, brushed the hair from his forehead, and scratched an unexpectedly itchy chin.

He retrieved his putter, walked to the first ball, and, with a firm, short stroke, sent the ball to within eighteen inches of the hole. Stepping over to the next ball, he took a deep breath. Despite feeling tight in his chest, he put the ball just six inches from the hole. He smiled and stepped to the third golf ball but suddenly couldn't breathe. Looking down, he realized he couldn't see the ball or the clubhouse. His world turned black, and he collapsed face-first onto the turf, dead before he hit the ground.

A silver SUV parked at the back of the parking lot inched forward slowly. As Dr. Rivera's lifeless body fell to the ground, an Asian man stepped out and casually made his way to the practice green. He picked up the putter and the four golf balls with a gloved hand and returned them to the vehicle. The SUV then departed the lot, merging into the traffic heading back to Reston.

News reports and the Virginia Northern District Coroner would later attribute the thirty-two-year-old physician's tragic death to a heart attack during a game of golf. This information would be harrowing for a renowned twenty-seven-year-old biochemist in Dallas, who had spent an hour talking to his cousin the night before when he called from the hotel to describe the strange meeting he had attended.

Two Dr. Patrick Riveras discussed all the details that the physician could recall, and the biochemist found some of the foundational points raised by the committee chairman intriguing. Firstly, the charter was rooted in the belief that America's economy would inevitably collapse due to the burden of an aging, overweight, smoking, diabetic, and generally unhealthy population. Furthermore, if the US economy were to collapse into a depression similar to that of the 1930s, it would have a cascading effect on the global economy.

Another speaker lamented the impact minority communities were having on the economy, as many of them relied on welfare and overutilized Medicaid, which was state-funded but backed up by federal grants to the states. Neither the physician nor the biochemist were well-versed in economics, but the premise seemed logical to them.

What concerned them was that this GAP Committee was determined to find a solution to the problem. Patrick was skeptical, stating, "Nobody will make significant lifestyle changes just because a DC Think tank says they should." He had laughed at the idea and told his younger cousin that he would skip the remaining sessions to play golf instead of extending his visit.

The elder, Dr. Rivera, was seeing patients when two Dallas Police officers requested a private conversation. Notifying next of kin was a duty all policemen dreaded. This notification was particularly hard for Sergeant Jorge Palermo, a ten-year veteran of the force and a high school friend of the deceased Dr. Rivera. The officers followed Dr. Rivera to his private office at the back of the space and respectfully declined the chair offered. The old man stood facing them with a knot forming in his stomach.

Sergeant Palermo had never met Patrick's father when they played sports together in high school, but as the senior officer, he delivered the sad news himself. "Dr. Rivera, I'm very sorry to have to tell you that your son Patrick has passed away," Palermo calmly said. The old man's eyes widened, and he had to steady himself with the edge of his cluttered desk. "That's impossible, officer. My son is out of town on business," he protested. "You must be mistaken," he added as he slowly sat on the edge of the desk.

"We were asked by the Herndon, Virginia PD to make the notification," said Palermo. With this added news, the old man realized his doubts and hopes were erased. Tears filled his eyes, and he felt he might lose consciousness as his lungs lost all ability to inhale.

"I...I don't understand. What happened? How can he be gone?" the old man pitifully asked.

"We don't have any details, but the preliminary report says he may have suffered a heart attack while playing golf. I'm sorry we can't be more specific. I knew Patrick personally, and I can only imagine how hard this must be. Someone will have to identify the body, and this report will provide the information you'll need," Palermo said, handing the elder Rivera a folded report that had been faxed over from Herndon PD.

The notification of Patrick's untimely death hit his father very hard. He had lost his wife to cancer three years earlier and never imagined he would have to bury another loved one. At sixty-eight years of age, he had looked forward to retiring and spending time being a grandpa to his five grandchildren. He hoped Patrick would marry his current girlfriend and produce more grandchildren. Instead, he faced the unbearable task of planning a funeral for his baby boy. He called his office manager to his office, informed her, and hugged her as she nearly collapsed. She had been with the practice for twenty-two years, had watched young Patrick grow up, and was delighted when he joined the practice. Everyone loved him; his loss would be tough for the entire office and many patients. The staff began canceling appointments.

His nephew, Pat, volunteered to fly to Virginia to accompany his son's body back to Texas for burial. He had flown out in the late afternoon on Wednesday, the day following Patrick's death, to make the identification and arrangements for flying back with his cousin's remains as soon as possible.

Landing at Dulles International Airport, Pat Rivera took his carry-on bag and a rolling suitcase and walked straight to ground transportation, where he located the Alamo Car Rental counter. It was crowded at every position, but he patiently waited in line.

His mind kept replaying his last conversation with his cousin. He wished the conference had been more interesting to

him, so he would have been sitting in a room full of physicians when he had a heart attack. However, walking eighteen holes of golf on a hot day in May, carrying forty pounds of clubs and a hundred pounds of extra weight, must have been too much for his overweight cousin.

Both cousins had joked over the years that the elder cousin needed to shed some weight, and the younger one had teased that he was working on diabetes and weight loss therapies just for his cousin's inevitable needs. He had even mentioned naming a drug after him, calling it "Chubby Riveracure," and they both had a good laugh about it.

That was six weeks earlier, at the end of March when they had played golf together. Patrick wanted to show off his new set of Callaway clubs, convinced they would shave ten strokes off his game. That day, the new clubs might have improved his game by a few strokes, but what mattered most was spending time with his favorite cousin, regardless of their performance on the course.

After arriving, Pat was called forward and rented a Toyota Camry, then drove to the Hilton Hotel in Reston, Virginia, where he had made a reservation. It was only about a mile from the Marriott where his cousin had stayed.

As he approached the hotel, a valet wearing a red vest suddenly appeared at his window. Pat handed him the key fob, and the valet efficiently took his luggage from the trunk before Pat proceeded inside. After checking in, Pat found the room and the bed to be very comfortable. However, he had difficulty falling asleep as his mind repeatedly replayed his last conversation with his cousin. He shed a few tears and agonized for a long time until finally, sleep came in the early morning hours.

Pat awoke just before eight on Thursday morning and quickly got dressed. The rental car came equipped with a Garmin GPS device, which he used to program the address for

the Northern District Coroner's office in Manassas. He had made arrangements for the identification the previous day before leaving for the airport. Rush hour traffic had diminished, but it still took him forty minutes to reach the Northern District Coroner's Office in Herndon.

The building was a relic from the 1960s, with fading tan bricks on the exterior and minimal landscaping around the spacious parking lot. Pat parked his rental car on the back row, near a delivery bay with a large garage door securely closed. He walked to the front door and was buzzed in after providing his name and the purpose of his visit.

Pat was escorted to a small conference room just off the lobby. The room was furnished with old but comfortable chairs covered in gray and black checkered material.

After a ten-minute wait, a woman knocked lightly twice and entered the room. She appeared to be in her forties, thin, and stood very upright in the doorway. She extended her hand for a firm handshake as she introduced herself as Dr. Ramona Coggins, Deputy Coroner. Pat stood up from the small table and shook her offered hand.

He introduced himself as Dr. Patrick Rivera, which led to a momentary look of confusion on Dr. Coggins' face. She glanced down at a file she held at her side before asking, "Excuse me? Your name is...?"

Pat explained, "Oh, sorry. Yes, my name is the same as my cousin's. It's a family thing. I'm here to identify the body and take him home with me to Dallas."

Ramona relaxed, her expression softening as she held Pat's gaze. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Dr. Rivera," she said. "He was awfully young," she added.

Pat replied, "Yes, he is or was. Not yet thirty-three. Ironically, he recently started exercising to get in shape too. That's why his death is so upsetting and very strange," he said

with an inquisitive tone. "It just doesn't seem possible this could happen."

Dr. Coggins offered consoling words, saying, "We are never really prepared to lose someone, even if they are older and have been sick for years; death is painful for the living."

Pat agreed, saying, "It is, for sure. But I mean 'strange' in that his death really makes no sense at all."

Having spoken with hundreds of family members over the last ten years, Ramona had dealt with many doubts and questions about the death of a loved one, particularly in suicide cases. Still, in her experience, death's finality was universally hard to accept. "I understand, Dr. Rivera. But, please, come with me."

They walked slowly down a corridor with dark green speckled tile and light green walls that reminded Pat of the old elementary school he had attended in South Dallas. The air smelled of antiseptic and iodine, and ceiling-mounted air cleaners hummed loudly as he followed a step behind his escort. They made a right turn, and Dr. Coggins used a scan card to open a locked door that revealed another long corridor with doors on the left and huge plexiglass-windowed rooms between them. Next to each window was a button with instructions printed on a white label to *Press Just Once Please*. Dr. Coggins pressed the button when they stopped at the fourth window in the hallway.

A young man pulled back the curtain covering the window inside the room, and a light blue sheet-covered figure lay on a gurney before him. The gurney was turned sideways, so the entire figure filled the large window. The young man walked to the head of the bed and then looked at Dr. Coggins.

"Are you okay?" she asked soothingly. Pat responded that he was and braced himself to do what he had come to do without letting emotion get the better of him. The coroner



turned to the young man waiting by the bed and nodded, and the sheet was pulled down, revealing the face of Pat's favorite cousin. A sob escaped him, catching him by surprise.

"Oh, dear God," he said, reaching for the windowsill to steady himself.

"It's okay, Dr. Take your time. I know how difficult this is for you." Dr. Coggins placed a reassuring hand on Pat's shoulder as he removed his glasses and used a sleeve to dry the tears that flowed despite his best efforts to control them. She retrieved a small travel pack of tissues from her pocket, handed two to Pat, and he thanked her before passing the package back to her.

"It's him. That's Patrick. It's my cousin," he spoke in clipped sentences through tears and choked breaths. "I can't believe this is happening, but it's him, undoubtedly."

"Would you like a moment alone, Dr. Rivera?" asked Ramona.

"No, thank you. I'm good. It's just harder than I thought it would be. I can't believe he's dead," he said, looking her in the eyes and then asking, "Do you have time to answer some questions?" Pat inquired as he dabbed a tissue to his eye and put his glasses back on.

"Absolutely. Let's return to the conference room, and I'll explain the process of releasing your loved one. I can also help with clearance for the airline if you need it."

With that, she turned and nodded, and the young attendant beyond the plexiglass raised the sheet over the body before walking over to pull the curtain across the window, marking another act of finality.

Pat talked with the coroner for the next ten minutes, receiving a cursory briefing on his cousin's cause of death. He had already been informed that it was a fatal cardiac event,

likely brought on by the extra weight he carried and the strain of walking a golf course in the heat of the day.

More profound questions remained unanswered and were not openly shared outside official channels. However, Pat did learn the name of the golf course where his cousin had played his final round of golf: Centennial Golf Course, located fifteen minutes away from the Virginia Northern District Coroner's Office and the next stop for Pat before returning to his hotel.