Did I Just Throw Up at the Country Club?
My First Encounter with the Silver Blabbermouth

The first time I had a martini, I had five.

It was also my first night out with my new boss, and customers. Big customers, with titles like Chairman, President, and Vice President. My first time to dine at the Country Club in the small city that was home base for the Fortune 500 Company that had hired me right out of school about six months earlier. My first night to drive the Company Car. And, the only time I ever threw up in public.

Life was full of promise in that small Indiana town in the mid ‘60’s. My wife and small daughter and I had recently moved, at my new employer’s expense (!) from a small un air-conditioned apartment near the Ohio State campus to a small, un air-conditioned apartment near my new job as Sales Engineer. I was so proud of that title, I couldn’t see straight. We lived in the only apartment complex in that humid and sticky mid-western town. Our neighbors were other new or recent hires, with young families, living paycheck to paycheck. We all had student loans; loans on our new ‘pre-owned’ cars….and we were scrimping to save money to buy the proper rep ties and button down shirts preferred by the senior executives of the Company.

Talk about hot. Those apartments were thinly insulated. Built in the late ‘50’s on a lot near a foundry, where the sun beat down mercilessly through the day, and the foundry hum combined at night with the hum of mosquitoes and tree frogs. We kept the windows open hoping for the slightest breeze. I still remember the beads of sweat on our two year old daughter as we would get her ready for bed.

Joe lived a few apartments down with his wife. No kids. Joe had an MBA, while most of us just had our BS in Business, or engineering. Word soon got out that Joe, with his MBA, was making more money than the rest of us; a whopping $50 a month more! (the ‘60’s….remember) Where is the justice, I thought, I work every bit as hard as he does.

One Saturday, Joe came home with a window air conditioner. The news quickly swept through the complex; Joe is gonna have air conditioning. Several of us came out to help him get the window unit unloaded. Just think; within an hour, Joe will be relaxing in his bedroom in cool, dry, Air Conditioned comfort. The only way I could deliver Air Conditioning to my family was to take them to Kresge’s or the movies. I’ll admit to feeling sorry for myself as Joe and a friend wrestled the window unit upstairs to the bedroom in their apartment. I stayed outside to watch them install the unit in the upstairs window, fantasizing that it was our bedroom the unit was being installed in. And, at that point they dropped the air conditioner. As they positioned the window unit on the ledge, something happened, because it simply tilted, slipped from their grip, and crashed to the sidewalk twelve feet below. Pieces flew everywhere.
Joe leaned out the window, incredulous; his eyes wide; his body shaking. He looked at his friend in disgust and screamed “whoever wants that damned thing can have it!!!

Some things just seem to work themselves out.

But! Back to the Big Event. My Night Out With the Boss….

Fred was Vice President of Sales; a stern workaholic who seldom smiled; but a consummate marketing executive who had the respect of his customers and of those of us who worked under him. Fred was a clean desk man; never more than one thing on his desk. He explained it this way: “when the mail comes in” (the 60’s, remember…no email; mail the old way) “ I sort it for the two or three most important memo’s or letters; those I answer right away. The rest goes in a drawer. Every few week’s, I clean out the drawer. You’d be astounded at how much of that mail isn’t important. Nobody ever follows up on it”.

I didn’t report directly to Fred, so I was surprised one morning when his secretary called me at my steelcase desk in the sales bullpen and said “Mr. L. wants to see you in his office”. I hung up the phone and sat back in my Steelcase chair with a knot forming in my stomach. What had I done? Fred would never call for me unless I’d screwed something up. I thought back over the last few days trying to remember what I could have screwed up to the point it would get to Fred. Maybe I’d offended a customer. Maybe some report or forecast was overdue. I racked my brain, and finally decided I’d better not keep him waiting. I got up, walked down the aisle to his office, where Shirley motioned me in with a nod of her head.

As usual, Fred was at work on a single document on his desk. He looked up at me and said “John Keith and his staff are coming into town to meet me for dinner; they arrive around 5:00 tonight out at the Holiday Inn. I’m taking them to the Country Club. I want you to check out the Company Car, and meet me at the Holiday in the bar at 5:30. You’ll drive us to the Club, have dinner with us, and then drive us back to the hotel. In the morning, you’ll take them to the airport. And, by the way, wear a suit.”

I was nearly speechless. I uttered something about being honored, but Fred had already gone back to his work and waved me out. John Keith? His staff? This was one of the top names in trucking; the head man at the most prestigious truck maker in America, and one of our biggest customers. He was an Icon; if trucking had been rock ‘n roll, he would have been Elvis. And I was going to have dinner with him, his staff, a corporate Vice President, at the Country Club! I knew it! The ‘big guys’ had seen me in action, concluded I was Executive Material, and had selected me to be a key player in this Very Important Meeting. What next? I wondered who had been the youngest Vice President of this outfit, and if it was possible that honor might fall to me. I started to think about which upscale housing development Vice President Friel would be moving to, what with a well deserved raise accompanying my promotion, and how soon to have some of the senior Executives over for cocktails.
I checked with Shirley about where to pick up the Company Car, then went back to my little Steelcase desk, my head swimming with my incredible good fortune.

Around 4:00, I decided it was time to check out the Company Car, and go home to put on my suit. I owned one suit that I’d bought for $19.00 from an outlet near Ohio State for interviewing, and a green wool sport coat that I’d worn that day, in spite of the 90 degree weather. Dress code in those days was shirt and tie, with either a suit or sport coat. My sport coat was wool. I had a suit, the green wool sport coat, and several pairs of J.C Penney slacks. So dressing for work in the mornings didn’t take a lot of imagination.

The Company Car was a ’65 Mercury; black, with all the amenities, including Air Conditioning. Quite a step up from my ’59 Renault Dauphine that was on its third engine. I drove home slowly in the quiet and cool luxury of that splendid machine, hoping my friends would see me, quite obviously “on my way up.” As I changed into my suit back at the apartment, I told my wife about the important meeting I’d be attending that evening with my good friend’s Fred, John, and the other V.P.’s; but I didn’t want her to think I was too excited about it.

“It’s nothing, really; Fred just asked me to help him entertain the Chairman and President of our largest customer”, trying to make it sound as though it was just routine for a Young Man on the Way Up like me to rub shoulders with the great and near great.

It would only dawn on me much later that, in fact, my only role was to drive the car for the evening.

I arrived at the Holiday Inn just before 5:30 and found Fred seated at a table in the bar, a glass of clear liquid in front of him. Even in this setting he was every bit the Boss; expensive pin stripe suit, crisp white shirt offset by a striped maroon tie, closely cropped graying hair, and steel rimmed glasses. I was somewhat intimated and it must have showed. ”Relax Eddie; they’ll be down in a bit. We’ll have a drink here, then go out to the Club….the car clean?” I assured him it was and tried to relax as the waitress approached.

“What would you like”, she asked. I hesitated, my mind blank. My experience in bars so far had been limited to college hang-outs when I could even afford to buy a beer on my meager budget. Somehow, ordering a Pabst Blue Ribbon in this atmosphere seemed like a certain faux pas. So, I motioned to Fred’s glass, and said “I think I’ll have one of those”.

Fred’s eyebrows rose slightly as he said “so you’re a Martini drinker, eh?”

Martini….I had no idea what a martini was, but I said “I like a good martini.”

I prayed he wouldn’t ask me a question about my martini preferences. All I knew about Martini’s was what I’d seen in the movies. Cary Grant sipping what looked like water out of an elegantly stemmed glass; or a picture of a Martini in an ad in Playboy. I had no idea
what one was even made of. The only hard liquor I’d been around was the bottle of Early Times My Old Man kept under the kitchen sink. The Old Man wasn’t much of a drinker; he’d take a single pull straight from the bottle every weekday when he got home from work, then sit down to supper. That bottle would last for weeks.

My Martini arrived. It was just like the ones I’d seen in the movies. The stemmed glass; the cold, clear liquid, and a single olive on a little plastic spear.

If only the Old Man could see me now, I thought. Sitting in the cool air-conditioned comfort of a well appointed bar; semi new suit; with a genuine Corporate Vice President, about to clink glasses with my Boss, all the while awaiting the Chairman and staff of our biggest customer. I raised my glass and took my first ever sip of a martini.

The martini was icy cold, and silky smooth; with a taste that hinted somewhat of pine needles maybe, and lemon. To my surprise, it had a slightly anesthetizing and not unpleasant effect on my tongue and throat as it went down. So, this is a martini, I thought. Not bad; not bad at all. Life was definitely looking good.

Our guests arrived. The Chairman and President; John Keith himself, his Vice Presidents for Sales, Engineering, and other departments. Four of the top executives in our industry. The waitress reappeared as they settled around the table, and took their drink orders; and I ordered my second martini. Straight up; chilled, no ice. I drained the remains of the first martini as the second one arrived. Starting to feel more at ease in the company of these high powered executives, laughing at their jokes and nodding knowingly as they discussed business.

“Let’s have one more round of drinks here, then we’ll go to the Club for dinner”, Fred said, motioning to the waitress. I ordered my third martini.

The sun was just starting to set as we walked across the parking lot to the car. It was just a short trip, so Fred suggested we all go in one car. “Eddie will drive us, and you won’t have to worry about following us in your car”.

I drove the Company Car to the Country Club. The Club itself was on a lake, at the end of a winding and narrow two lane road. I couldn’t figure out why I was having trouble keeping the car on the roadway; several times the wheels dropped onto the shoulder, and I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that some of my passengers were bracing themselves.

But, we made it, and nothing was said about my driving. We walked into the Country Club, and Fred took us into the bar “to enjoy the view of the lake”. We sat at a table out on the long porch that ran the length of the clubhouse. The view was nice; a few sailboats on the lake, expensive homes in the distance, a cool breeze off the lake. First time I’d ever been in a Country Club. Boy, if the Old Man could see me now. I ordered my fourth martini.
Fred and the customers were talking now about their golf game and I noticed I was having a little trouble following some of the conversation. My mind wouldn’t seem to stay focused. At one point, one of the group asked me a question, and he had to repeat the question to get my attention. I don’t remember what he asked me, or how I answered.

“Well, let’s have one more and go in for dinner”, Fred said. I ordered my fifth martini.

When the drinks came, Fred said “let’s take ‘em into the dining room so we can order”. I picked up my drink and stood up….and the floor seemed to tilt in several directions at once. I shook my head and regained my balance, trying not to let the customers, or Fred notice that I was having a little trouble walking. What the dickens was happening? I let them go ahead and gingerly walked into the dining room, groping for chair backs for support. What in the world could possibly be wrong with me??

We sat at a table near the back of the crowded dining room, Fred and me at opposite ends of the table, with the customers on either side. We placed our orders; salad, steak, baked potato, and I tried to focus on the conversation. Why was I suddenly so sleepy? And why did it feel like the room was moving? Is it hot in here, or is it just me?

The salads came. When the waiter came back to remove the salad plates, he took my plate, held it to the edge of the table and scraped my salad back onto my plate. I hadn’t noticed that I had scattered half my salad onto the table and into my lap.

The steaks came, and I discovered I must have been given a rubber knife and fork. The damned things wouldn’t work. I couldn’t get that steak cut. And now the room had become oppressively hot. The table was starting to spin…but I had to eat; had to keep up with the rest of the group; couldn’t let them see that I was having some kind of problem. Oh no….the steak slipped off my plate. Did anyone notice? I didn’t look around to see. I picked it up between my fingers and tried to move my plate to cover the stain on the tablecloth.

I clenched my fork in my left hand and went to work on the steak once more, and this time finally managed to cut it approximately in half. I speared the smaller half and tried to fit it in my mouth, but it was too big, so I tried to at least chew off a bite. And that’s when I knew I was going to be sick.

I didn’t throw up right there at the table, but I knew I had to get away from there. I could feel my stomach begin to recoil as beads of sweat broke out. I stood up, and tried to orient myself toward the door…why did that door have to be so far away? And were all those people really looking at me? The hostess started to say something to me as I approached, but by now the urgency to get to the bathroom was real. I felt my throat begin to constrict as I entered the hallway….where is that bathroom?? And then it happened. I vomited; on the floor, on my shirt, my pants. I think another couple was in the hallway with me, but it didn’t matter; my life was over, and I was going to be sick again.
I made it to the bathroom. Had I just thrown up in the Country Club? With my boss and our top customers sitting in the dining room? Will someone have to mop up my vomit? Will they know it was me? What have I done??? Lord, let this be a nightmare….or strike me dead right here and now.

Fortunately, I was alone in the bathroom as I took stock of myself in the mirror. What a sight. Sweating, my face flushed, hair damp, and hanging over my forehead. Vomit on my shirt, tie and jacket. Why can’t I just die right here and now? What am I going to do?

I had to get back to the table. Had to make everyone think nothing had happened. I got several paper towels, wet them and began wiping the debris from the martinis, salad and steak from my outfit. Brushed my teeth and tongue with my finger, and straightened myself up as much as I could. I leaned against the sink, took a number of deep breaths, and took stock of myself. Aside from the bloodshot eyes, stains on my shirt, tie and suit jacket, and the sweat glistening on my forehead, I didn’t look too bad. I squinted into the mirror and wondered; Will anybody know that I’ve been sick? Maybe I can recover from this and pull myself out of this mess.

With trembling hands, I smoothed my hair back into place, and turned to walk back to the dining room. Opening the bathroom door, I hoped that somehow, throwing up had been in my imagination, and that I wouldn’t encounter a janitor mopping up my mess, or an angry dining room manager ready to toss me bodily out of the place. Looking back, I guess I was drunk enough to think I could just resume my place at the table as if nothing had happened. If I’d been a little more sober and able to think, I probably would have left by the back door and taken my chances after sleeping it off.

So, swaying from the effects of the gin, and in a drunken state of denial, I walked down the hallway and into the dining room. The hostess was nowhere in sight, so I carefully eased myself back to the table. The plates had all been cleared and Fred and the customers were talking and smoking. No one seemed to pay any attention to me as I carefully sat down, lest I miss the chair and land unceremoniously on the floor. Through glazed eyes, I looked around the table to see if anyone was aware of my condition. They didn’t seem to be, and they were in what appeared to be a serious discussion of issues in the trucking business. I tried to follow the conversation; tried to think of a way to appear coherent and involved. I had to establish the fact that I wasn’t affected by the drinks, and that my absence from the table had just been a routine trip to the bathroom. I focused as best I could on what John Keith was saying; something about interest rates. I listened as Fred responded.

Blearily, it came to me; I knew what I had to do. I had to get involved in this conversation! Show them I was alert, knowledgeable, and worthy of being in their company. That my place in this esteemed group was no fluke; that Fred’s faith in me as an up and coming executive was not misplaced. I knew I had to ask a question to get involved in this thoughtful discussion; a question that would startle the group with my grasp of our industry and business in general. Putting on what I assumed to be a thoughtful expression, I carefully formulated my question.
There! The pause in the conversation I had been waiting for. I put my arms on the table, looked at Fred and began to speak.

“Fled,…I mean Fled, what do you think of….I mean…I…you know…”

What in the world was wrong with my tongue? I couldn’t control it. It seemed to just flop around in my mouth. At the sound of my own garbled voice, I lost my train of thought, and stopped trying to talk; tried to pretend I was thinking.

“I know just what you were thinking, Eddie,” Fred said. Then he turned to John and began talking. The others looked at their watches or one another as I sat there, dejected, drunk, wondering what else could go wrong.

Finally, it was over. Fred and our guests stood up, and we started for the door. It had begun to rain. I purposely brought up the rear as they walked down the rain dampened walk to the car. Somehow, I had managed to stagger into the flowerbed beside the walk. I could feel the wetness on my ankles as I sank into the mud. When we got to the car, Fred said, “Better let me drive back to the hotel, Eddie.”

Miserably, I gave the keys to Fred and climbed into the back seat, certain I would be fired as soon as the guests were out of earshot. I noticed that everyone tried to squeeze into the front seat; no one seemed to want to share the back seat with me. Guess I must smell pretty bad.

I don’t remember what happened when we got back to the hotel. In fact, the next thing I remember is pulling up in front of our apartment in the Company Car, and of throwing up one more time in the grass as I staggered to the door of our apartment. The only good thing about my return home was that my wife was asleep, and unaware of my condition.

The next morning, I was supposed to meet Fred at the hotel, and then take the guests back to the airport where they would meet their private plane. I pulled into the parking lot of the hotel, and spotted Fred standing under the hotel awning. This was it. This is where and how my brief career would end; in the early morning dampness of a gray Indiana day, and I had brought it on myself. How could I face my wife? What would my Dad say? How would we pay our bills? What would I do?

I walked up to meet Fred. He looked at me and said “Morning. You know how to get to the airport? To the private hangar?” I nodded and mumbled that I did, waiting for what was certain to come. Maybe he wouldn’t fire me here; he’ll probably tell me to come back to his office, where he could fire me in his office, and where I’d have to clean out my desk with everyone looking on.

But he turned to look at the door where John and his staff were just emerging. Everyone shook hands all around, the guests thanking Fred (and me) for a fine evening. Fred was invited to come to their headquarters, and he assured them he’d be out soon. We loaded
luggage into the Company Car, and with a final round of handshakes, I drove them to the airport. On the way, I pointed out things of local interest, doing my best to make them forget last night, and trying my best to assume the poise of the Young Man On The Way Up…

At the airport, a final round of handshakes with John Keith and his men. I climbed back in the car, and watched their plane while it taxied out, and until it was airborne and out of sight. Now, there was nothing to do but go back to the office and meet my fate.

I arrived at the office after dropping off the Company Car, and walked to my desk. Everything looked normal; no note to See Fred Immediately. No furtive glances thrown my way by the other Sales Engineers. I glanced in the direction of Fred’s office. He was at his desk, head down, concentrating on the single document on his desk. Shirley was typing, glancing occasionally at notes on her desk. The rest of the activity in the bullpen was normal; guys on the phone, secretaries typing; just another day. My head ached and my eyes burned from the short restless night, but I sat down to work, hoping for the best.

The years passed. A few years after the Night of the Martini’s, the Company had a layoff, due to business conditions. Rumors were rampant that the number of Sales Engineers would be cut back. We were all nervous; on several occasion’s, one of the guys would be called into Fred’s office for a closed door meeting; shortly, he would come out, ashen faced; clean out his desk, and leave, generally with a few bitter words to the rest of us about “this chickens**t company.

One day, when I returned from lunch, there was a note on my desk to “See Fred”. My heart jumped; my stomach dropped, and I knew this was it. Crap! I was about to be out of a job. I started toward Fred’s office, thinking bitterly that this just wasn’t fair. I’d worked hard since my near disastrous night at the Country Club. I walked into Fred’s office, my face set grimly to hear the bad news. He looked up and said “looks like a new shirt” (I’d worn the new white button down my wife had bought me out of our meager clothing budget).

“Well”, I replied “I always heard the condemned man got a clean outfit before he was executed”, not caring how bitter I sounded, since I was about to be canned.

Fred laughed; ”what the hell are you talking about?” he asked, leaning back in his chair, a smile on his face.

“Well, I just assumed you called me in here to lay me off”….

Fred slapped the desk with his right hand and, with a grin, said “you’re not being laid off! I’m promoting you. You’re the new Account Manager for WesTrucks.”
WesTrucks? Me? Account Manager?? This was a prize promotion. A major account, and I’d be in charge, reporting directly to Fred. Later, I learned that the current Account Manager had just been laid off, and I was taking his place.

Several years later, another promotion, this one to the Atlanta Regional office. Traveling the southern states as a Regional Manager. Two years later a promotion to Division Manager, this time in Toronto, where I had responsibility for marketing activities throughout Canada.

By now, it had been over 10 years since the Night of the Martini’s. I was in my office one day when the phone rang. It was Fred, still in his position as Corporate V.P., and the Grand Old Man of Marketing for the company.

“Eddie, I’ve got to visit a few of the Canadian customers next week; can you meet my plane and go with me to those meetings?” I assured him it would be my pleasure, and told him I’d meet his plane; then we’d go to lunch, and continue on to the appointments. After hanging up, I wondered if it would be safe to ask Fred about that night so many years ago. In all the ensuing years, nothing about that night had ever been mentioned, but I had thought about it many times, and wondered why Fred never brought it up.

So the following week, I met Fred at the airport; he still was a commanding figure; trim, close cropped hair, steel rimmed glasses, and the same stern bearing. But he smiled when we shook hands, and we talked about business in Canada on the way to one of my favorite restaurants.

The waiter came, and Fred ordered a martini, straight up. This was probably 1977, and a drink at lunch was SOP in many businesses. Besides, we were in Toronto, a thousand miles from Company headquarters. I joined Fred in ordering a martini; but I was now older and wiser, and knew the wallop they packed. We settled into the business of ordering.

After we placed our order, I decided it was time to find out what Fred had thought about my stupidity that night. After all, it had been over ten years, and my track record with the company was reasonably good. I took a deep breath. “Fred, remember the night back in ’65 when you asked me to go to dinner with John Keith and his staff? Fred looked me straight in the eye and said “Yes, I remember. Why do you ask?”

What was that look in his eye? Had I made a mistake in bringing this up now?

But it was too late to turn back, so I continued. ”Well, Fred, I had never in my life had a martini before that night”

I laid out the whole story not leaving out a single detail. I could see the beginning of a smile as I described my pride in being asked to go to dinner that evening. When I got to the part about almost falling down when we stood up to go into the dining room, Fred grinned broadly, and laughed out loud when I got to the part about actually throwing up.
“You threw up in the Country Club? That’s a riot! Hell, Eddie, I must have been too smashed myself to have noticed; and the other guys must not have been any better off, because this is the first time I’ve ever heard the story!”

And with that, he called our waiter over, and said” a story like that calls for another drink! Waiter, two more martini’s….straight up!!”