

FICTION

CAMERON TULLY

Vitacare

I KNEW WHEN MY FATHER came home early in the middle of the afternoon from the cement plant that it was the start of a bad time in our lives. I don't know how I knew it then; I was only thirteen years old, and at thirteen you don't really have a yardstick for bad times, but something about the way his lunch pail sounded when he clinked it down on the kitchen table, or the cadence in my mother's voice when she said, "Harvey, what are you doing home at this hour?", or how our golden retriever, Maurice, barked at the garage door opening three hours ahead of schedule and circled his boots at the front door sniffing and licking them as if they were the shoes of an encyclopedia salesman or Jehovah's Witness—something about this strange sequence of events served as a harbinger of turbulent times.

I was sitting on the couch watching TV with my mother when he walked in. My mother watched a soap opera called *The Edge of Night* in those days, and because I was on summer vacation I had taken to watching it with her. My mother turned off the television and told me to go to my room so that she could have a talk with my father. But as I got halfway up the stairs my father said, "Come back down here, James—we're going to have a family meeting." Then he turned to my mother and said, "Glenda, there's no use having secrets in this family—there's no 'I' in team."

Neither of my parents had ever called a family meeting before—that was the type of thing I thought only occurred on television shows—but we took my father's cue and promptly sat around

the kitchen table. We watched him fold and wring his hands in front of him, waiting for him to speak.

"I quit my job today," he said, and leaned back on his chair against a damp pair of blue jeans that my mother had pulled out of the dryer early. She always did this because of her frugal unwillingness to purchase a clotheshorse. But she didn't say anything about the damp jeans my father was wrinkling the way she would if I had been leaning back on my chair. Instead, she said, "It's those tapes you've been listening to, isn't it Harvey?"

My father was given some audiotapes for his fortieth birthday from Frenchy Lapointe, a man who drove a cement truck at the plant where he worked. They were motivational tapes, and Frenchy told my father that he listened to the tapes while he drove from delivery to delivery. He told my father that anyone who really wanted to do something in life other than work at the plant ought to listen to them. My father listened to the tapes incessantly after that, and he made me listen to them as well. Every time he fired up the *El Camino* a tape would start and he would insist that there be no conversation in the car. He made sure that I listened to them on the way to my hockey games, and often if the tape wasn't finished by the time we pulled into the arena parking lot he made me sit in the car with him until the harangue was over. The tapes were called *Flying to Success with Steel McMaster*, and on the cover of the cassette case was a picture of a man with a very square jaw and big teeth.

"You're goddamn right it's the tapes," my father said. "I could die in that cement plant and nobody would give a good goddamn, but those tapes have given me a new outlook. Those tapes are full of winning ideas."

"And just what kind of winning ideas are going to pay the mortgage when you don't have a job?" my mother said.

My father slapped his palm down on the table and said, "It's all taken care of, Glenda." He went out to the garage and came back carrying white vinyl duffle bags with the word 'Vitacare' written across them in bold print.

"This stuff is our ticket to getting ahead," he said. He unzipped the duffle bags and began setting various products on the kitchen table: "See here, we've got soap on a rope, bath beads, nail brushes, foot cream, beard shampoo, pumice stone after-scrub moisturizer, fingertip scalp massagers—you name it."

My father talked about how he cashed out his vacation pay from the plant and how he figured that if my mother increased her hours at the Safeway to full-time that we could make ends meet.

During the week I went door-to-door with my father selling Vitacare. He told me Steel said that “team is faster” and that sales would be better if I went along with him. He used the same line with all his customers: “Good morning. My name is Harvey Richards and I’m the Vitacare representative in your area. Have you by any chance heard of our particular line of health-care products?”

I was accustomed to hearing my father talk about the plant: gravel trucks and bulldozers and the ingredients of various types of cements with their strengths and applications. But as we stood on countless doorsteps and talked to housewives in their bathrobes in the middle of their first morning cigarettes who simultaneously restrained overzealous, barking terriers or poodles that hadn’t yet been let out for their morning pee, or talked through aluminum screen doors to mothers with half-naked infants in their arms who had formula running down their cheeks, he talked about bath beads and glycerin soap or topographical cheekbone blusher. For the first few weeks, while we waited for people to answer their doors, he would fidget with the products in his bag or pick away at the calluses on his rough hands—hands that always seemed to be dirty no matter how much soap he used on them. But into the second month he had picked away most of the dead skin from the cement plant and his hands began to look smooth and tender while his sales pitch gained the cadence and intonation of a talk radio host.

On the weekends my father rented a space at the mall in front of the Sears where he set up a table to sell Vitacare. He told me that the space didn’t come cheap, but he said it would pay off in the long run. I kept an eye on the cash box while my father worked the table, handing out free samples to everyone within earshot. I was nervous about dealing with the public and making exact change, but few purchases were made, and usually I ended up just getting my father more samples from his duffle bags. Once in a while I would recognize someone walking through the mall who my father worked with at the plant, and whenever this happened my father would lower his eyes to the table and make it appear as though he were rearranging the display, tidying up bot-

gles of creams and brushes and soaps into straight lines on the table.

In the afternoons, during the week, my father and I sat at the kitchen table selling Vitacare over the phone. My job was to read out phone numbers to my father from the phonebook and check off each person he had called. As he talked on the phone my father paced back and forth as far as the phone cord would stretch, promoting Vitacare:

"I know exactly where you are coming from, sir," he would say. "Someone who works as hard as you do should never have to endure sleepless nights. Have you ever heard of Vitacare Sleep-Eeez?"

"Well, m'am, I can honestly say that you've never had a bath until you've had a Vitacare bath."

"Yes sir, explosive diarrhea can sneak up on you like a pack of dingo dogs. What you need is Vitacare diarrhea powder—works like you wouldn't believe. I wish somebody would have turned me on to this the last time I had the trots. Take it three times a day and you'll forget you even have an asshole."

When my father was still employed at the cement plant he used to come home at the end of the day and wait at the kitchen table for supper. My mother would ask him questions about work while she dished out casserole or filled up the gravy boat, and in return my father let out monotone grunts. After the dishes were cleaned he routinely went to a small room in the basement, which he referred to as his den, and smoked cigarettes and watched sports highlights. Often I stood just outside the doorframe, where my father couldn't see me, and I watched plumes of smoke mix with the blue glow of the television. Sometimes I stood there for close to an hour listening to matches being struck and recaps of the pennant race. Because he only smoked in the den I never actually saw him holding a cigarette, and it was very difficult for me to imagine what this might look like. Everything my father did involved such force: pulling the oil filter off the car, yanking the lawnmower rope, he even clutched his fork at the kitchen table with a closed, white-knuckled fist. I couldn't picture my father holding a cigarette in his hands without crushing it into tobacco crumbs.

But shortly after he started selling Vitacare he began inviting me into his den after supper. I sat on the beanbag chair while my father reclined with his feet up on the La-Z-Boy. He taught me how to calculate a pitcher's ERA and explained all the possible scenarios when a hit and run might be on. His favourite baseball player was Pete Rose, and after a while he began calling me Charlie Hustle, Rose's nickname. He told me that he thought one day I could be a great man like Pete Rose, and he said that Steel says a quitter never wins and a winner never quits—just like Pete. During that time we watched highlights of Terry Fox running through the Maritimes and Québec. Every time Terry Fox came on the TV I got out of my beanbag chair and limped around the den. My father let out a series of belly laughs and clapped his hands to cheer me on. We would sit in the den until my mother got home from her late shift, when she would call me to go upstairs to bed, and not once did my father light up a cigarette.

One Saturday morning, after my father drove my mother to work, he called me down to the basement where he had placed cardboard moving boxes throughout the rumpus room.

"We're having a garage sale today, Charlie," he said. "It takes money to make money, and most of this stuff we can convert into cash. Anything you don't want saved put in a box."

We worked for close to an hour filling the boxes. I decided that it was time to part with my Fisher Price toys and found a model of the Millennium Falcon that I never managed to put together. My father filled the boxes with everything he could get his hands on; sweat trickled down the sides of his face, and dark, wet rings formed under his arms and on his back. He unplugged the filter and pump from the fish tank, then took the net and scooped the fish into a plastic drywall mud pail that he had filled with water.

"Don't worry," he said. "Once I get Vitacare really going we can get a big hundred gallon and fill it up with tropical fish. These goldfish are just a nuisance—they're not even fancies."

I didn't want to sell the goldfish. Even though they were just plain feeder fish that we picked up five for a dollar, I had named all ten of them after my favourite Star Wars characters. And I didn't understand how my father could refer to them as a nuisance, con-

sidering that I had been the one feeding them every day for a year and a half.

But then I thought of the conversations that I heard through the bedroom walls late in the evening when my parents were in bed: my father talking about Vitacare taking off and my mother not having to work anymore and the big vacations we would take once the products really started to sell.

"Now Glenda," my father would say, "I'm not saying that we're going to be movie-star rich, but at least we'll be able to enjoy ourselves. At least we'll be able to take vacations and fly first class. Steel says on his tapes that there are those people who fly first class and everyone else behind the curtain who works to get them there. Steel says that there's nothing like finally being able to fly first class. He says that there's nothing like the first take-off when you reach that point of weightlessness and the plane tilts up toward the sky and you tell yourself, 'I'm flying first class. Everyone on this plane is working for me.' That's what Steel says."

Then he would say, "How can you not get excited about first class? They bring warm towels for your forehead, and they bring you bowls full of snacks and things, not like those crappy bags of peanuts they give the rest of the passengers. I guess that's why I'm really taking on this venture. Don't you think a guy who works hard his entire life should be able to take vacations and be served bowls of snacks and things?"

I thought of the excitement in my father's voice through the bedroom walls, and I looked at Lando Calrissian and R2-D2 and Han Solo and the rest of the fish, and I decided that selling them was something that had to be done.

We carried the boxes upstairs and put them in the garage. My father backed the El Camino onto the street and we scattered the items from the basement onto the garage floor. My father had a roll of masking tape and a jiffy marker and put prices on each of the items.

Once most of the pricing was done he said, "Now, let's bring up some of the big ticket merchandise."

We carried the couch up the stairs, the La-Z-Boy and TV from the den, an ottoman, some velvet paintings, the eight-track stereo with the old speakers and the aquarium. He told me to bring the bucket of fish up to the garage. He had filled the bucket nearly to the rim and it was very difficult to carry. When I got to the

second-last step the bucket hit the stair nosing. The pail tipped and before I could respond the fish and most of the water spilled down the basement stairs. I tried to grab one of the fish as it slid downstream, but as I bent over I slipped on the water-covered stairs and rolled my ankle. I screamed in pain and my father came running from the garage. When he arrived I was sitting on one of the stairs holding my ankle; it felt like I might have broken a bone. After assessing the situation he picked the fish up and put them back in the drywall mud pail. I was beginning to feel light-headed as I watched him soak up the water on the carpet with rags and paper towel. I must have passed out because the next thing I knew my father was rubbing a cold, wet rag on my face and saying, "Chuck, Chuck. You okay?"

He came back with a Vitacare first-aid kit. He touched my ankle in various spots, each time asking, "Does it hurt when I touch it here?" and each time I let out an affirming squeal. He rummaged through his bag and pulled out an anti-inflammatory cream and applied it to my ankle despite my pleas for him to stop.

"It's for the best," he said. "It will take down the swelling."

He then wrapped a tensor bandage around my foot and ankle and said, "When your mother gets home try not to limp."

My father helped me up the basement stairs and to the garage. He told me to have a seat on the ottoman while he finished setting up the sale. By this time the overhead garage door was open, and several of the items had been arranged on the driveway. On one side of the driveway, close to the sidewalk, my father had set up a Vitacare table where he taped red, white and blue streamers and poster board to the table which read "Vitacare Health Centre." There were several Vitacare helium-filled balloons tied to the table legs.

A wooden stake had been pounded into the front lawn with a sign attached that read "GARAGE SALE TODAY ONLY."

My father put a Petula Clarke eight-track in the stereo by the mailbox and turned on the old television that was beside the couch in the middle of the driveway. Then he ran the garden hose into the garage and filled the aquarium with water.

"Unadvertised garage sales always start out slow," he said as he dumped the pail of goldfish into the tank. "But don't worry, in half an hour or so this place will be hopping."

In the following hour we saw fewer than ten customers. A woman in her mid sixties walked up the driveway with two grandchildren, a boy and a girl, who were about five years old. My father smiled and talked to the woman while the boy ran around on the driveway and bounced on the couch. The girl walked into the garage and looked at the aquarium. She began tapping on the glass with a pebble she had in her hand.

"Don't tap on the glass," I said. "It'll scare the fish."

A few of the fish were in death throes from their trip down the stairs, and some were already floating belly up at the surface. The tapping on the glass didn't have any effect on the fish at this stage.

She ran out of the garage and stood beside her grandmother, who had decided to purchase a set of my mother's hot rollers. The boy was holding a stack of my old hockey cards, and the woman had picked out a Paddington Bear, that I used to sleep with, for her granddaughter. She gave my father a five-dollar bill and walked on down the street with her grandchildren.

Soon after they left, a red convertible Corvette drove up to the house. By this time I had limped out to the driveway so that I could sit on the couch in the sun. I watched my father's eyes follow the Corvette as it pulled up to the curb. A middle-aged man and a young blonde woman, who looked like a stripper, got out of the car and my father forced a smile.

"How's everyone doing this morning?" my father said.

"Dandy," the man said as he walked up the driveway. He was wearing red leather driving gloves that matched his car and had on mirrored aviator sunglasses. The woman walked up the driveway beside him and didn't say anything.

The man circled the items on the driveway, then walked into the garage to look around. He picked up a pair of roller skates I had outgrown and then rummaged through a box of winter clothing. He took off his driving gloves and tried on a pair of my father's deerskin gloves. Then he dug deeper into the box and pulled out a toque with "Montreal '67" written on it and put it on.

"Anything you want in that box goes for a buck," my father said. "Or else you can have the whole thing for ten." Then my father put a Crystal Gayle eight-track into the stereo which was halfway through "River Road."

He turned his attention to the woman who looked like a stripper, who had taken a seat in the La-Z-Boy, and said, "Have you ever heard of Vitacare, ma'am?"

The woman exhaled some smoke through her nose and said, "No, I'm not into that Avon shit." Then she pulled the lever on the side of the La-Z-Boy and reclined. She continued to smoke and then turned her attention toward the television. A mid-morning news program was playing some footage of Terry Fox, who at that time was just entering Ontario.

"He's never going to make it," the stripper said. "The country's too goddamn big to get across on one leg. He won't make it to the Prairies."

My ankle was really starting to throb now, and watching Terry Fox on the TV only seemed to make it worse.

The man walked out of the garage and said to my father, "Looks like you've got some floaters in that aquarium of yours. Might want to scoop them out. A fish tank is a hard sell with floaters in it." Then the man pointed out to the curb and said, "How much you want for the El Camino?"

"Car's not for sale."

"I'll give you fifteen hundred."

My father paused for a long time. His lips were pressed together so tightly that they seemed to disappear from his face completely. My ankle was really burning.

My father walked into the garage and picked up his Buck knife that was sitting between the food processor and the spoon plaque. He peeled the price sticker off it and walked back to the driveway. For a minute I thought he might do something crazy with the knife, but then he walked to the Vitacare table and cut the strings that attached the balloons to the table legs.

He held the strings in his smooth hands and said to me, "Why don't you take these to the backyard and pop them."

The tone had changed in my father's voice. I had never heard him speak so apathetically about Vitacare. I took the balloons and limped to the backyard. I stood on the lawn for a long time holding those balloons, deciding what I would do with them. I looked around in one of the flower gardens and found a stone with a sharp edge. I popped a couple of the balloons, and then I thought of the man with the red gloves out front and the stripper watching the Marathon of Hope in the La-Z-Boy. I wondered if the

El Camino would still be there when I got back and if my father would begin smoking again. Then I thought about taking a felt marker and writing something vulgar about Steel McMaster on the Vitacare balloons. I imagined letting them go, watching them transform from multi-coloured spheres to tiny specks until they disappeared in the sky. I remember wondering if the balloons would make it high enough into the atmosphere to meet a passing plane and if Steel himself might be sitting in front of the curtain looking out the window on that particular flight.

I held the balloons for a long time, waiting.