

## 'Vitamins'

*Raymond Carver*

I had a job and Patti didn't. I worked a few hours a night for the hospital. It was a nothing job. I did some work, signed the card for eight hours, went drinking with the nurses. After a while Patti wanted a job. She said she needed a job for her self-respect. So she started selling multiple vitamins and minerals door-to-door.

For a while she was just another girl who went up and down blocks in strange neighbourhoods knocking on doors. But she learned the ropes. She was quick and had excelled at things in school. She had personality. Pretty soon the company gave her a promotion. Some of the girls who weren't doing so hot were put to work under her. Before long she had herself a crew and a little office out in the mall. But the names and faces of the girls who worked for her were always changing. Some girls would quit after a few days, after a few hours sometimes. One or two of the girls were good at it. They could sell vitamins. These girls stuck with Patti. They formed the core of the crew. But there were girls who couldn't give away vitamins.

The girls who couldn't cut it would last a week or so and then quit. Just not show for work. If they had a phone they'd take it off the hook. They wouldn't answer their door. At first Patti took these losses to heart, like the girls were new converts who had lost their way. She blamed herself. But she got over that. Too many girls quit. Once in a while a girl would quit on her first day in the field. She'd freeze and not be able to push the doorbell. Or maybe she'd get to the door and something would happen to her voice. Or she'd get the opening remarks mixed up with something she shouldn't be saying until she got inside. Maybe it was then the girl would decide to bunch it, take the sample case, and head for the car where she hung around until Patti and the others had finished. There'd be a hasty one-on-one conference. Then they'd all ride back to the office. They'd say things to buck themselves up. 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going.' And, 'Do the right things and the right things will happen.' Stuff like that. Now and then a girl disappeared in the field, sample case and all. She'd hitch a ride into town, then beat it. Just disappear. But there were always girls to take their places. Girls were coming and going. Patti had a list. Every few weeks or so she ran a little ad in the Pennysaver and more girls showed up and another training session was in order. There was no end of girls.

The core group was made up of Patti, Donna, and Sheila. My Patti was a beauty. Donna and Sheila were medium-pretty. One night Sheila confessed to Patti that she loved her more than anything on earth. Patti told me she used those words. Patti had driven her home and they were sitting in front of Sheila's apartment. Patti said she loved her too. She loved all her friends. But not in the way Sheila had in mind. Then Sheila touched Patti's breast. She brushed the nipple through Patti's blouse. Patti took Sheila's hand and held it. She told her she didn't swing that way. Sheila didn't bat an eye. After a minute, she nodded. But she kept Patti's hand. She kissed it, then got out of the car.

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That was around Christmas. The vitamin business was off, and we thought we'd have a party to cheer everybody up. It seemed like a good idea at the time. But Sheila got drunk early and passed out. She passed out on her feet, fell over, and didn't wake up for hours. One minute she was standing in the middle of the living room, laughing. Then her eyes closed, the legs buckled, and she went down with a glass in her hand. The hand holding the drink smacked the coffee table as she fell. She didn't make a sound otherwise. The drink poured into the rug. Patti and I and somebody else lugged her out to the back porch and put her down on a cot and tended to forget about her.

Everybody got drunk and went home. Patti went to bed. I wanted to keep on, so I sat at the table with a drink until it started to get light out. Then Sheila came in from the porch and began complaining. She said she had this headache that was so bad it was like somebody was sticking hot wires into her temples. It was such a headache, she said, she was afraid it might leave her with a permanent squint. And she was sure her little finger was broken. She showed it to me. It looked purple. She bitched that we'd let her sleep all night with her contacts in. She wanted to know didn't anybody give a shit. She brought the finger up close and looked at it. She shook her head. She held the finger as far away as she could and looked some more. It was as if she couldn't believe the things that must have happened to her that night. Her face was puffy, and her hair was all over. She looked hateful and half-crazy. She ran cold water over her finger. 'God, oh God,' she said and cried some over the sink.

But she'd made a serious pass at Patti, a declaration of love, and I didn't have any sympathy.

I was drinking scotch and milk with a sliver of ice. Sheila leaned against the drainboard. She watched me from little slits of eyes. I took some of my drink. I didn't say anything. She went back to telling me how bad she felt. She said she needed to see a doctor. She said she was going to wake Patti. She said she was quitting, leaving the state, going to Portland, and she had to say goodbye to Patti. She kept on. She wanted Patti to drive her to the emergency room.

'I'll drive you,' I said. I didn't want to do it, but I would.

'I want Patti to drive me,' she said. She was holding the wrist of her bad hand with her good hand, the little finger as big as a pocket flashlight. 'Besides, we need to talk. I want to tell her I'm leaving. I need to tell her I'm going to Portland. I need to say goodbye.'

I said, 'I guess I'll have to tell her for you. She's asleep.'

She turned mean. 'We're *friends*,' she said. 'I have to talk to her. I have to tell her myself.'

I shook my head. 'She's asleep. I just said so.'

'We're friends and we love each other,' she said. 'I have to say goodbye to her.' She made to leave the kitchen.

I started to get up. I said, 'I told you I'll drive you.'

'You're drunk! You haven't even been to bed yet.' She looked at her finger again and said, 'Goddamn, why'd this have to happen?'

'Not too drunk to drive you to the hospital,' I said.

'I won't ride with you, you bastard!' Sheila yelled.

'Suit yourself. But you're not going to wake Patti. Lesbo bitch,' I said.

'Fucker bastard,' she said. She said that and then she went out of the kitchen and out the front door without using the bathroom or even washing her face. I got up and looked out the window. She was walking down the road toward Fulton Avenue. Nobody else was up. It was too early.

I finished my drink and thought about fixing another one. I fixed one.

Nobody saw any more of Sheila. None of us vitamin-related people anyway. She walked to Fulton Avenue and out of our lives. Later on that day Patti said, 'What happened to Sheila?' and I said, 'She went to Portland.' That was that. Patti didn't ask the details.

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I had the hots for Donna, the other member of the core group. We'd danced to some Duke Ellington records that night. I'd held her pretty tight, smelled her hair, and kept a hand at the small of her back as I guided her over the rug. I got turned on dancing with her. I was the only guy at the party and there were six or seven girls dancing with each other. It was a turn-on to look around the living room. I was in the kitchen when Donna came in with her empty glass. We were alone for a minute. I got her into a little embrace. She hugged me back. We stood there and hugged.

Then she said, 'Don't. Not now.' When I heard that 'not now' I let go and figured it was money in the bank.

So I'd been at the table reconstructing that hug, Donna on my mind, when Sheila came in with her bum finger.

I thought some more on Donna. I finished the drink. I took the phone off the hook and headed for the bedroom. I took off my clothes and got in beside Patti. I lay for a minute, winding down. Then I started in. But she didn't wake up. Afterwards, I closed my eyes.

It was afternoon when I opened them again, and I was in bed alone. Rain was blowing against the window. A sugar doughnut lay on Patti's pillow, and a glass of old water sat on the nightstand. I was still drunk and couldn't figure anything out. I knew it was

Sunday and close to Christmas. I ate the doughnut and drank the water. I went back to sleep until I heard Patti running the vacuum. She came into the bedroom and asked about Sheila. That's when I told her, said she'd gone to Portland.

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A week or so into the New Year Patti and I were having a drink. She'd just come home from work. It wasn't so late, but it was dark and rainy. I was going to work in a couple of hours. But first we were having us some scotch and talking. Patti was tired. She was down in the dumps and on to her third drink. Nobody was buying vitamins. She was reduced to Donna, core, and Sandy, a semi-new girl and a kleptomaniac. We were talking about things like negative weather and the number of parking tickets Patti had accumulated and let go. Finally, how maybe we'd be better off if we moved to Arizona, some place like that.

I fixed us another one. I looked out the window. Arizona wasn't a bad idea.

Patti said, 'Vitamins.' She picked up her glass and swirled the ice. 'For shit sake! I mean, when I was a girl this is the last thing I ever saw myself doing. Jesus, I never thought I'd grow up to sell vitamins. Door-to-door vitamins. This beats everything. This blows my mind.'

'I never thought so either, honey,' I said.

'That's right,' she said. 'You said it in a nutshell.'

'Honey.'

'Don't honey me,' she said. 'This is hard, brother. This life is not easy, any way you cut it.'

She seemed to think things over for a minute. She shook her head. Then she finished her drink. She said, 'I even dream of vitamins when I'm asleep. I don't have any relief. There's no relief! At least you can walk away from your job after work and leave it behind. Forget about it. I'll bet you haven't had one dream about your job. You don't come home dead tired and fall asleep and dream you're waxing floors or whatever you do down there. Do you? After you've left the fucking place, you don't come home and dream about the fucking job!' she screamed.

I said, 'I can't remember what I dream. Maybe I don't dream. I don't remember anything when I wake up.' I shrugged. I didn't keep track of what went on in my head when I was asleep. I didn't care.

'You dream!' Patti said. 'Even if you don't remember. Everybody dreams. If you didn't dream, you'd go crazy. I read about it. It's an outlet. People dream when they're asleep. Or else they'd go nuts. But when I dream I dream of vitamins. Do you see what I'm saying?' She had her eyes fixed on me.

'Yes and no,' I said. It wasn't a simple question.

'I dream I'm pitching vitamins,' she went on. 'I dream I've run out of vitamins and I have a dozen orders waiting to be written if I can just show them the fucking *product*. Understand? I'm selling vitamins day and night. Jesus, what a life,' she said. She finished her drink.

'How's Sandy doing? She still have sticky fingers?' I wanted to get us off this subject. But there wasn't anything else.

Patti said, 'Shit,' and shook her head as if I didn't know anything.

We listened to it rain.

'Nobody is selling vitamins,' Patti said. She picked up her glass. But it was empty. 'Nobody is buying vitamins. That's what I'm telling you. I just told you that. Didn't you hear me?'

I got up to fix us another one. 'Donna doing anything?' I read the label on the bottle and waited.

Patti said, 'She made a little sale a few days ago. That's all. That's all that's happened this week. It wouldn't surprise me if she quit. I wouldn't blame her,' Patti said. 'If I was in her place, I'd think of quitting. But if she quits, then what? Then I'm back at the start, that's what. Ground zero. The middle of winter, people sick all over the state, people dying, and nobody thinks they need vitamins. I'm sick as hell myself.'

'What's wrong, honey?' I put the drinks on the table and sat down. She went on as if I hadn't said anything. Maybe I hadn't.

'I'm my own best customer,' she said. 'I've taken so many vitamins I think they may be doing something to my skin. Does my skin look OK to you? Can a person OD on vitamins? I'm getting to where I can't even go to the bathroom like a normal person.'

'Honey,' I said.

Patti said, 'You don't care if I take vitamins or don't take vitamins. That's the point. You don't care. You don't care about anything. The windshield wiper quit this afternoon in the rain. I almost had a wreck. I came this close.'

We went on drinking and talking until it was time for me to go to work. Patti said she was going to soak in a hot tub, if she didn't fall asleep first. 'I'm asleep on my feet,' she said. She said, 'Vitamins, for shit's sake. That's all there is any more.' She looked around the kitchen. She looked at her empty glass. 'Why in hell aren't you rich?' She laughed. She was drunk. But she let me kiss her. Then I left for work.

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There was a place I went to after work. I'd started going for the music and because I could get a drink there after closing hours. It was a place called the Off-Broadway. It was

a spade place in a spade neighbourhood. It was run by a spade named Khaki and was patronized by spades, along with a few whites. People would show up after the other places in town had stopped serving. They'd ask for house specials—RC Colas with a belt of whisky—or else they'd bring their own stuff in under their coats or in the women's ditty bags, order RC and build their own. Musicians showed up to jam, and the drinkers who wanted to keep drinking came to drink and listen to the music. Sometimes people danced on the little dance floor. But usually they sat in the booths and drank and listened to the music.

Now and then a spade hit another spade in the head with a bottle. Once a story went around that somebody had followed another somebody into the Gents and cut the man's throat while he stood in front of the urinal. But I never saw any trouble. Nothing that Khaki couldn't handle. Khaki was a big spade with a bald head that gleamed under the fluorescents. He wore Hawaiian print shirts that hung over his pants. I think he carried a pistol inside his waistband. At least a sap. If somebody started to get out of line, Khaki would walk over to where it was beginning, some voice rising over the other voices and the music. He'd rest his big hand on the party's shoulder and say a few words and that was that. I'd been going there off and on for months. I was pleased that he'd say things to me like, 'How're you doing tonight, friend? 'Or, 'Friend, I haven't seen you for a spell. Glad to see you. We're here to have fun.'

The Off-Broadway is where I took Donna on our first and last date.

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I walked out of the hospital just after midnight. It'd cleared up and stars were out. I still had this buzz from the scotch I'd had with Patti. But I was thinking to hit New Jimmy's for a quick one on the way home. Donna's car was parked in the space beside my car. Donna was inside the car. I remembered that hug we'd had in the kitchen. Not now, she'd said.

I walked over to her door. She rolled the window down and knocked ashes from her cigarette.

'I couldn't sleep,' she said. 'I have things on my mind, and I couldn't sleep.'

I said, 'Donna. Hey, I'm glad to see you.'

'I don't know what's wrong with me,' she said.

'You want to go some place for a drink? I could have been out of this place an hour ago,' I said.

'I haven't been here long. Anyway, I needed time to think. I guess one drink can't hurt. Patti's my friend,' she said. 'You know that.'

'She's my friend too,' I said. Then I said, 'Let's go.'

'Just so you know,' she said.

'There's this place. It's a spade place,' I said. 'They have music. We can get a drink, listen to some music.' 'You want to drive me?' Donna said.

'Scoot over.'

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She started in about vitamins. Vitamins were in a skid, vitamins had taken a nosedive. The bottom had fallen out of the vitamin market.

Donna said, 'I hate to do this to Patti. She's my best friend, and she's trying to build things up for us. But I may have to quit. This is between us. Swear it! But I have to eat. I have to pay rent. I need new shoes and a new coat. Vitamins can't cut it,' she said. 'I don't think vitamins is where it's at any more. I haven't said anything to Patti. Like I said, I'm still just thinking about it.'

Donna's hand lay next to my leg. I reached down and squeezed her fingers. She squeezed back. Then she took her hand away and pushed in the lighter. After she had her cigarette going, she put the hand back on the seat next to my leg. 'Worse than anything, I hate to let Patti down. You know what I'm saying? We were a team.' She handed me her cigarette. 'I know it's a different brand,' she said, 'but try it, you might like it.'

I pulled into the lot for the Off-Broadway. Three spades leaned against an old Chrysler that had a cracked front windshield. They were just lounging, passing a bottle in a paper sack. They looked us over. I got out and went around to open the door for Donna. I checked the doors, took her arm, and we headed for the street. The spades watched but didn't say anything.

'You're not thinking about moving to Portland?' I said. We were on the sidewalk. I put my arm around her waist.

'I don't know anything about Portland. Portland hasn't once crossed my mind.'

The front half of the Off-Broadway was like a regular spade cafe and bar. A few spades sat at the counter and a few more worked over plates of food at tables covered with red oilcloth. We passed through the cafe and into a big room in back. There was a long counter with booths against the wall. But at the back of the room was a platform where musicians could set up. In front of the platform was something that could pass for a dance floor. Bars and nightclubs were still serving, so people hadn't turned up at the Off-Broadway in any large numbers yet. I helped Donna take off her coat. We settled ourselves in a booth and put our cigarettes on the table. The spade waitress named Hannah came over. Hannah and me nodded. She looked at Donna. I ordered us two RC Cola specials and decided to feel good about things.

After the drinks came and I'd paid and we'd each had a sip, we started hugging. We carried on lightly for a while, squeezing and patting, kissing each other's face. Every so often Donna would stop and draw back, push me away a little, then hold me by the wrists. She'd gaze into my eyes. Then her lids would close slowly and we'd fall to kissing again. Pretty soon the place began to fill. We stopped kissing. But I kept my arm around her. She ran her fingers up and down my thigh. A couple of spade horn players and a white drummer began fooling around with a piece. I figured Donna and me would have another drink and listen to the set. Then we'd leave and go to her place to finish what we'd started.

I'd just ordered two more from Hannah when this spade named Benny came over with this other spade, a big dressed-up spade. The big spade had little red eyes and was wearing a three-piece grey pinstripe that looked new but was tight in the shoulders, a rose-coloured shirt, a tie, topcoat, a fedora. All of it.

'How's my man?' said Benny. Benny stuck out his hand for a brother handshake. Benny and I had talked. He knew I liked jazz and he used to come over to the booth and talk whenever he and I were in the place at the same time. He liked to talk about Johnny Hodges, how he had played sax accompaniment for Johnny. He'd say things like, 'When Johnny and me had this gig in Mason City.'

'Hi, Benny,' I said.

'I want you to meet Nelson,' Benny said. 'He just back from Vietnam today. This morning. He here to listen to some of these good sounds. He got his dancing shoes on in case.' He looked at Nelson and nodded. 'This here is Nelson.'

I was looking at Nelson's shiny black shoes, and then I looked at Nelson. He seemed to want to place me from somewhere. He studied me. Then he let loose a rolling grin that showed his teeth. He looked down the booth.

'This is Donna,' I said. 'Donna, this is Benny, and this is Nelson. Nelson, this is Donna.'

'Hello, girl,' Nelson said and Donna said right back, 'Hello there, Nelson. Hello, Benny.'

'Maybe we'll just slide in and join you folks?' Benny said. 'OK?' I said, 'Sure.' But I was sorry they hadn't found some place else. 'We're not going to be here long,' I said. 'Long enough to finish this drink is all.'

'I know man, I know,' Benny said. He sat across from me after Nelson had let himself down into the booth. 'Things to do, places to go. Yes, sir, Benny knows,' he said and winked.

Nelson looked across the booth to Donna. He stared at her. Then he took off the hat. He seemed to be examining the brim as he turned the hat around in his big hands. He made room for the hat on the table. He looked up at Donna. He grinned and squared his shoulders. He had to square his shoulders every few minutes. It was like he was very



tired. I wished they'd have landed some place else.

'You real good friends with him, I bet,' Nelson said to Donna, not wasting a minute.

'We're good friends,' Donna said.

Hannah came over. Benny asked for RC's. Hannah went away and Nelson worked a pint of whisky from his topcoat pocket.

'Good friends,' Nelson said. 'Real good friends.' He unscrewed the lid.

'Watch out, Nelson,' Benny said. 'Keep that bottle out of sight. Nelson just got off the plane from Vietnam,' Benny said.

Nelson raised the bottle and drank some of his whisky. He screwed the lid back, laid the bottle on the table, and tried to cover it with his hat. 'Real good friends,' he said.

Benny looked at me and rolled his eyes. But he was drunk too. 'I got to get into shape,' he said to me. He drank RC from both of their glasses and then held the glasses under the table and poured whisky. He put the bottle in his coat pocket. 'Man, I ain't put my lips to a reed for a month now. I got to get with it.'

We were bunched in the booth, glasses in front of us, Nelson's hat on the table. 'You,' Nelson said to me. 'You with somebody else, ain't you? This beautiful woman, she ain't your wife. I know that. But you real good friends with this woman. Ain't I right?'

I had some of my drink. I couldn't taste the whisky. I couldn't taste anything. I said, 'Is all that shit about Vietnam true we see on the TV?'

Nelson had his red eyes fixed on me. After a time he said, 'What I want to say is, Do you know where your wife is? Hah? I bet she's out with some dude and she be laying in his arms this minute. She be touching his nipples, pulling his pud for him while you sitting here big as life with your good friend. I bet she have herself a good friend too.'

'Nelson,' Benny said.

'Nelson nothing,' Nelson said.

Benny said, 'Nelson, let's leave these people be. There's somebody in that other booth. Somebody I told you about. Nelson just this morning got off a plane,' Benny said.

'Nelson—'

'I bet I know what you thinking,' Nelson said. He kept on with it. 'I bet you thinking, Now here's a big drunk nigger and what am I going to do with him? Maybe I have to whip his ass. Hah? That what you thinking?'

I looked around the room. I saw Khaki standing near the platform, the musicians working away behind him. Some couples were on the floor. People had piled into the

booths and were listening to the music. I thought Khaki looked right at me, but if he did he looked away again.

'Ain't it your turn to talk now?' Nelson said. 'I just teasing you. I ain't done any teasing since I left Nam. I teased the gooks some.' He grinned again, his big lips rolling back. Then he stopped grinning and just stared.

'Show them that ear,' Benny said quickly. He put his empty glass on the table. 'Nelson got himself an ear off one of them little dudes,' Benny said. 'He carry it with him. Show them, Nelson.'

Nelson sat there. Then he started feeling the pockets of his topcoat. He took things out of the pockets. He took out a handkerchief, some keys, a box of cough drops.

Donna said, 'I don't want to see an old ear. Ugh. Double ugh. Jesus.' She looked at me.

'We have to go,' I said.

Nelson was still feeling in his pockets. He took a wallet from a pocket inside the suit coat and put it on the table. He patted the wallet. 'Five thousand dollars there. Listen here,' he said to Donna. 'I going to give you two bills. OK? Two one hundred dollar bills. I got fifty them. You with me? I give you two of them. Then I want you to French me. Just like his wife doing some other big fellow. You listening? You know goddamn well she got her lips around somebody's hammer this minute while he here with his hand up your skirt. Fair's fair. Two one hundreds. Here.' He pulled the corners of the bills from his wallet. 'Hell, here another hundred for your friend. So he won't feel left out. He don't have to do nothing. You don't have to do nothing,' Nelson said to me. 'You just sit here and drink your drink. Sit here and listen to the music. Good music. Me and this woman walk out together like good friends. And she walk back in by herself. Won't be long, she be back.'

'Nelson,' Benny said, 'this is no way to talk. Nelson, Nelson.'

Nelson grinned. 'I finished what I have to say.' Then he said, 'But I ain't joking.' He took the handkerchief and wiped his face. He turned to Benny.

'I always say my mind. Benny, you know me. You still my friend, Benny? Hell, we all good friends. But I want what I want,' Nelson said. 'And I willing to pay for it. Don't want something for nothing. I pay for it, or I take it. That simple.'

He found what he'd been feeling for. It was a silver cigarette case which he worked open. I looked at the ear inside. It lay on a piece of cotton. The ear was brown, like a dried mushroom. It was beginning to curl. But it was a real ear and it was attached to a key chain.

'God,' said Donna. 'Yuck.'

Benny and I looked at the ear.

'Something, hah?' Nelson said. He was watching Donna.

'I'm not going outside with you and that's that,' Donna said. 'No way. I'm not going and that's all there is to it.'

'Girl,' Nelson said.

'Nelson,' I said. And then Nelson fixed his red eyes on me. He pushed the hat and wallet and cigarette case out of his way.

'What you want?' Nelson said. 'I give you what you want.'

Benny closed his eyes and then he opened them and said, 'Thank heaven, here come Khaki. Nelson, Benny going to make a prediction. Benny predict that in thirty seconds Khaki going to be standing here asking if everything be all right, if everybody happy.'

Donna said, 'I'm not happy. I'm not one bit happy,' Donna said.

Khaki came over to the booth and put a hand on my shoulder and the other hand on Benny's shoulder. He leaned over the table, his head shining under the lights. 'How you folks? You all having fun?'

'Everything all right, Khaki,' Benny said. 'Everything A-OK. These people was just fixing to leave. Me and Nelson going to sit here and listen to the music makers.'

'That's good,' Khaki said. 'Folks be happy is my motto.' He looked around the booth. He looked at Nelson's wallet on the table and at the open cigarette case next to the wallet. He saw the ear.

'That a real ear?' he said.

Benny said, 'It is. Show him that ear, Nelson. Nelson just stepped off the plane from Vietnam with this ear. This ear has travelled halfway around the world to be on this table tonight. Nelson, show him,' Benny said.

Nelson handed the case over to Khaki.

Khaki examined the ear. He took up the chain and dangled the ear in front of his face. He looked at it. He let it swing back and forth on the chain. 'I heard about these dried-up ears and cocks and such things, but I ain't really believed it. Or I believed it, but I never really believed it till this minute.'

'I took it off one of them little gooks,' Nelson said. 'He couldn't hear nothing with it no more. I wanted me a keepsake.'

'My God,' said Khaki. He turned the ear on its chain. 'I guess I seen everything.'

Donna and I began getting out of the booth.

'Girl, don't go,' Nelson said.

'Nelson,' Benny said.

Khaki was watching Nelson now. I stood beside the booth with Donna's coat. My legs were crazy.

Nelson raised his voice. He said, 'If you go with this fucker, let him put his face in your sweets, you going to fry in hell with him!'

We started to move away from the booth. People were looking.

'Nelson just got off the plane from Vietnam this morning,' I heard Benny say. 'We been drinking all day. This been the longest day on record. But me and him we going to be fine, Khaki.'

Nelson yelled something over the music. He yelled, 'You fixing to plow that, son of a bitch, but it ain't going to do no good! It ain't going to help none!' I heard him say that, and then I couldn't hear any more. The music stopped, and then it started again. We didn't look back. We kept going. We got out to the sidewalk.

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I opened the door for her and went around to my side. I drove us back to the hospital. Donna stayed over on her side of the car. From time to time she'd use the lighter on a cigarette, but she wouldn't talk.

I tried to say something. I said, 'Maybe I should have taken *his* ear for a souvenir. Look, Donna, don't get on a downer because of this. I'm sorry it happened,' I said.

'Maybe I should have taken his money,' Donna said. 'That's what I was thinking.'

I kept driving and didn't look at her. I couldn't say anything that would help.

'It's true,' she said. 'Maybe I should've taken the money.' She shook her head. 'I don't know. I don't know what I'm saying. I just shouldn't have been there.' Donna began to cry. She put her chin down and cried.

'Don't cry,' I said. There was nothing else to say.

'I'm not going in to work tomorrow, today, whenever it is the alarm goes off,' she said. 'I'm not going in. I'm going to quit. I'm leaving town. I take what happened back there as a sign.' She pushed in the lighter and waited for it to pop out.

I pulled in beside my car and killed the engine. I scanned the rear-view, half expecting to see that old Chrysler drive into the lot with Nelson in the front seat. I kept my hands on the wheel for a minute, and then dropped them to my lap. I didn't want to touch Donna. She knew it. She didn't want to be touched either. The hug we'd given each other in my

kitchen that night, the kissing we'd done at the Off-Broadway, it seemed to belong in somebody else's life now, not my life.

I said, 'What are you going to do?' But right then I didn't care. Right then she could have died of a heart attack and it wouldn't have meant anything.

'Maybe I could go up to Portland,' she said. 'There must be something in Portland. Portland is on everybody's mind these days. Portland's a drawing card. Portland this, Portland that. Portland's as good a place as any. It's all the same.'

'Donna,' I said. 'I'd better go.' I started to let myself out. I cracked the door and the overhead came on.

'For Christ's sake turn off that light!'

I got out in a hurry. 'Night, Donna,' I said.

She nodded.

I left her staring at the dash and went to my car. I saw her move over behind the wheel. Then she just sat there without doing anything. She looked at me. I waved. She didn't wave back. So I started the car and turned on the headlights. I slipped it in gear and fed it the gas. Donna would get herself home OK.

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In the kitchen I poured scotch, drank some of it, and took the glass into the bathroom. I brushed my teeth. Then I pulled open a drawer. Patti yelled something from the bedroom that I couldn't understand. She opened the bathroom door. She was still dressed. She'd fallen asleep with her clothes on.

'What time is it?' she screamed. 'I've overslept! Jesus, oh my God! You've let me oversleep, goddamn you!'

She was wild. She stood in the doorway with her clothes on. She could have been fixing to go to work. But there was no sample case, no vitamins. She was having a bad dream, that's all. She began shaking her head back and forth.

I couldn't take any more tonight. 'Go back to sleep, honey. I'm looking for something,' I said. I knocked stuff out of the medicine cabinet. Things rolled into the sink. 'Where's the aspirin?' I said. I knocked down more things. I didn't care. 'Goddamn it,' I said. Things kept falling.