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**MANIFESTO**

*A NOVEL*

COLSON  
WHITEHEAD



DOUBLEDAY  
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*To Clarke*

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# *RINGOLEVIO*

1971

“Crooked stays crooked and bent hates  
straight.”

## ONE

From then on whenever he heard the song he thought of the death of Munson. It was the Jackson 5 after all who put Ray Carney back in the game following four years on the straight and narrow. *The straight and narrow*—it described a philosophy and a territory, a neighborhood with borders and local customs. Sometimes when he crossed Seventh Avenue on the way to work he mumbled the words to himself like a rummy trying not to weave across the sidewalk on the way home from the bars.

Four years of honest and rewarding work in home furnishings. Carney outfitted newlyweds for their expedition and upgraded living rooms to suit improved circumstances, coached retirees through the array of modern recliner options. It was a grave responsibility. Just last week one of his customers told him that her father had passed away in his sleep “with a smile on his face” while cradled in a Sterling Dreamer purchased at Carney’s Furniture. The man had been a plumber with the city for thirty-five years, she said. His final earthly feeling had been the luxurious caress of that polyurethane core. Carney was glad the man went out satisfied—how tragic for your last thought to be “I should have gone with the Naugahyde.” He dealt in accessories. Accent pieces for lifeless spaces. It sounded boring. It was. It was also fortifying, the way that under-seasoned food and watered-down drinks still provide nourishment, if not pleasure.

There was no retirement party when he stepped down. No one gave him a gold watch for his years of service, but he’d never lacked for gold watches since becoming a fence. The day Carney retired he had a box of them in his office safe, engraved with the names of strangers, as it had been a while since he made the trip to his watch guy out in Mott Haven. His farewell to the stolen-goods biz mostly consisted of rebuffing former clients and telling them to spread the word in their criminal circle: Carney is out.

“What do you mean, out?”

“I quit. Done.”



The door onto Morningside, carved out of the building to facilitate the night trade, became the innocent route for afternoon deliveries. Two weeks after the Fortuna robbery, Tommy Shush knocked on the Morningside door with a black leather briefcase tucked under his arm. Carney took a look at the diamonds to test his resolve—and bid the thief good luck. The next day Cubby the Worm, one of his white regulars, showed up after hours with “some real hot stuff.” Cubby specialized in unlikely hijackings that took years to off-load—the man was up to his eyeballs in Chinese pogo sticks and pantyhose encased in plastic eggs. Carney turned him away before he could describe this week’s misbegotten haul, nothing personal.

They stopped coming by, the thieves, bit by bit, only momentarily glum, for there was always another hand, another conduit, another deal to be made in an enterprise as vast, complicated, and crooked as New York City.

\* \* \*

“Touch it—it won’t bite. It’s like grabbing a cloud of heaven.”

Across the showroom Larry reeled in a customer, a wizened specimen who flipped a red beret around and around in his hands. Stoop-shouldered and wilting. Carney leaned against his office doorway and crossed his arms. A reliable subset of his clientele consisted of old men splurging on simple things they had long denied themselves. Then the creaky chair’s springs poked through too many trouser seats, or the doctor offered remedies for poor circulation and obscure pains, and they came here. Carney pictured them, counting his blessings, the old men who lived alone in slant-floor railroad apartments or dim-lit efficiencies: bus drivers looking for new armchairs to eat soup on while they pored over racing forms, cashiers at one-hour dry-cleaning joints who hankered for something to prop their tired feet on. The abandoned. They never haggled about prices, ticked off to break into the savings but proud to have the money on tap.

The article in question was a 1971 Egon club chair in tweed Scotchgard upholstery. A tank of comfort, aprowl on Pro-Slide brass casters. “Heaven,” Larry repeated.

When the customer entered the store he'd shaken Larry's hand and introduced himself as Charlie Foster. Now he danced his fingertips across the green-brown fabric and chuckled in delight like a toddler.

Larry winked at Carney. When Rusty, Carney's longtime floor man, threw out his back and was laid up for three and a half months, Carney needed a fill-in. Larry showed up on the second day of interviews and stayed.

Larry was a study in controlled ease, a slow unfurling of pure style. Greet him when he punched in and he'd raise two fingers in a hold-on gesture as if in the middle of a transatlantic call with foreign powers, then respond after he changed out of his striped vest, flare trousers, and suede bucket hat or whatever groovy plumage he'd chosen that day. Once in his salesman costume, he'd finally offer a velvety "What's up, baby?"

He belonged to that tribe of black player so nimble in his skin that all others were *baby*—old man, young mother, red-faced beat cop. Your average square would use the word *slick* to describe him, on account of that jaunty smile and stream of hectic patter, which Larry would take as a compliment. Slick was an asset in the sales game. He was only twenty-one but had lived many lives, even if Carney suspected he had emerged full grown from a vat of Harlem Cool five minutes before he first laid eyes on him. Line cook at a Madison Avenue hotel; topiary wrangler at two cemeteries; chauffeur for the wife of a Connecticut marble magnate; "gassing doggies at Gotham Veterinarian," which Carney assumed required some sort of specialized training or licensing, but no matter. And now Deputy Sales Associate at Carney's Furniture on 125th Street, "Fine Furniture for the Community for Over 15 Years."

"Never stays late, always has a date," Carney's secretary Marie liked to sing, stealing the tune from *The Patty Duke Show*. Like Carney's late cousin Freddie, Larry claimed as his hunting grounds uptown, downtown, and every meridian of pleasure in between. Hearing Larry's chronicles of New York at night, and its multifarious cast, was like getting a morning-after report from Freddie in the good old days. It lifted Carney's spirits.

Carney kept Larry on after Rusty got back on his feet. There was more than enough work and it allowed Carney more time off from the floor. It was as if the store had always been the four of them. Even when withered

and hungover, Larry never let a customer see the misery. *Keep your secrets in your pocket*—an unspoken job requirement at Carney’s Furniture. Marie sometimes wore sunglasses to cover a black eye but never ratted out her husband Rodney. Carney of course was well practiced in hiding his crooked aspects. Only Rusty was what he appeared to be, a genial Georgia transplant still befuddled by the city after all these years. As far as Carney knew. Perhaps Rusty was the most accomplished performer of them all, and come quitting time ran around performing brain surgery or routing SPECTRE.

Another siren passed up Morningside Ave.

“Is it sturdy?” Charlie Foster asked. “I like a sturdy chair.” He poked the left armrest as if nudging a water bug with his shoe to make sure it was dead.

“Like the USS *Missouri*, baby,” Larry said. “You buy cheap, you get cheap, right? Egon prices these babies nice because if they do that, they make it up in loyalty. That’s how we do business, too. Sit, my brother, sit.”

Charlie Foster sat. He appeared to merge with the club chair. Shedding years of worry, from his expression.

*That’s a sale.* Carney returned to his office. He’d bought the new executive chair in April and repainted last Christmas but his office had changed little over the years. His business-school diploma dangled from the same nail, his signed picture of Lena Horne remained in its holy perch. Business was good. The fencing sideline had allowed him and Elizabeth to buy the place on Strivers’ Row and sprung them from their cramped first apartment before that. Made possible the expansion of the store into the bakery next door and helped them to ride out numerous rough patches. But buying 381 and 383 West 125th Street? That was all Carney’s Furniture. He bought the two buildings from Giulio Bongiovanni the first week of January 1970. A new decade, full of promise.

If you’d said when he signed the lease that one day he’d own the joint, he would’ve told you to get lost. *Carmen Jones* was holding its movie premiere down the street at the Hotel Theresa and as he held the keys in his hand for the first time it was like all that light and noise were for him. The property wasn’t much to look at, but it might make a man his fortune. For the first two years he dropped off the rent by hand at the Fifth Avenue

offices of Salerno Properties, Inc., not trusting the U.S. Postal Service, as if at 12:01 A.M. on the second of the month the marshals were going to bust down the door and throw his shit out in the street. He felt the 12:01 A.M. thing had happened to someone he knew, or his father had known, but now that he was settled and middle-aged recognized it as a tall tale. Most likely.

Carney met the landlord for the first time when he called Salerno about expanding into the bakery. One of the baker's regulars had been alarmed to find the store still closed at five past seven, then noticed the legs sticking out from behind the counter. Out of respect for the dead, Carney waited forty-five minutes before inquiring about the lease.

Giulio Bongiovanni let his staff handle the tenants, but he'd been curious about Carney for a long time. 383 West 125th had been a cursed retail spot since before Bongiovanni took over the real estate side from his father. Two furniture stores, a men's haberdashery, two shoe stores, and more had come to swift ruin after signing the lease, and the bad luck had followed the owners even after vacating the space. Cancers you'd never heard of that afflicted body parts you'd never heard of, divorces to be studied in family law courses for generations, a variety of prison time. Crushed by a large object in front of a nunnery. "It got so I was afraid to rent it," Bongiovanni told Carney.

"I'm doing okay," Carney said. The man subjected him to a never-seen-a-Negro-like-you-before look, not a novel experience for Carney. He reckoned it occurred more frequently these days, all over. Lunch counters, the voting booth, next thing you know they're running successful furniture businesses in Harlem.

"More than okay," Bongiovanni said, and he gave Carney permission to break through the wall into the bakery.

Giulio Bongiovanni's roots on 110th Street went way back, to when East Harlem was the biggest Little Italy this side of the Atlantic. He talked like a guy from around, but distinguished himself with his tight polyester polos and Muscle Beach physique. When asked about his regimen he attributed it to positive thinking and Jack LaLanne, whose show he watched daily and vitamin shipments he awaited monthly. "Don't knock

the Glamour Stretcher,” he said, posing in a forty-five-degree twist. “It’s not just for the ladies, as you can see for yourself.”

His grandfather had operated two grocery stores on Madison, and his father had bought 381 and 383 West 125th Street as investments when the Jews split the changing neighborhood. The family groceries still thrived, although the Bongiovannis no longer lived upstairs. They had decamped themselves for Astoria after World War II and now Bongiovanni was leaving the area for good. “The city is going to hell,” he told Carney when he proposed the business deal. “The drugs, the filth. I’ll take Florida.”

Carney was flattered that the Italian thought he had the scratch to buy the two buildings, that the white side of town recognized his successes, then quickly assumed something was wrong and Bongiovanni was dumping bum properties on him. The city itching to condemn, some expensive disaster in the sewer below, or the final version of the Curse of 125th and Morningside finally come due. None of that turned out to be true, although Mrs. Hernandez in apartment 3R of 381 had a mysterious stain in her bathroom wall that returned each time it was patched and repainted and which bore an eerie resemblance to Dwight Eisenhower, a curse if ever he heard one. “He stares at me,” she said.

Bongiovanni asked Carney if he was ready to be a landlord. “People calling you all hours, the water’s too cold, the heat’s too cold, my wife hates me?”

Carney meant to feast upon their complaints and grievances like they were a big bloody steak and potatoes. “Yes.”

“Good man.” They did a deal for the two buildings and three months later in Miami Bongiovanni keeled over while doing his sunrise calisthenics—aneurysm. The family brought him home and buried him with his ancestors in Calvary Cemetery in Woodside, plum view of the expressway.

*Churn.* Carney’s word for the circulation of goods in his illicit sphere, the dance of TVs and diadems and toasters from one owner to the next, floating in and out of people’s lives on breezes and gusts of cash and criminal industry. But of course churn determined the straight world too, memorialized the lives of neighborhoods, businesses. The movement of shop owners in and out of 383 West 125th Street, the changing entities on

the deeds downtown in the hall of records, the minuet of brands on the showroom floor.

Carney's legit trade had transformed during the four years of his criminal retirement. Argent, his biggest client, the name he built the store on, was bought by Sterling in '68, who phased out their lines two years later. Sears swallowed up Bella Fontaine and assumed exclusive dealership. Collins-Hathaway overextended themselves in their Canadian expansion and got wiped out in last year's recession. Carney kept their Authorized Dealer plaque up above his desk as a souvenir.

To replace the hole in his inventory, Carney signed up with DeMarco, the American arm of the big Norwegian concern Knut-Bjellen, currently specializing in low-slung, boxy "lifestyle components." Palette: earth tones. Market research warned that the U.S. consumer was suspicious of "foreign"-sounding household products, so DeMarco renamed their lines for the American market, rechristening their modular couch system the Homesteader, their recliner the Mitt. The product moved so Carney didn't care what they called it.

His only complaint concerned the photo shoots in the DeMarco brochures and literature, which unfolded in far-off ski lodges and mountaintop aeries. Prodigious fire in the hearth, rust- and mustard-colored lifestyle components arranged around it, and white ladies with furry hand muffs and white guys in wool turtleneck sweaters adrift in dopey bliss on the shag. Carney didn't want to put people in a box, but he wondered how many of his customers saw themselves reflected there. The shag.

"Welcome to my chalet," Carney said whenever their latest catalog arrived.

*Hope y'all niggers like fondue,* Freddie chimed in from beyond.

Another siren. Business, orderly business, unfolded inside the walls of Carney's Furniture, but out on the street it was Harlem rules: rowdy, unpredictable, more trifling than a loser uncle. The sirens zipped up and down the aves as regularly as subway trains, all hours, per calamity's timetable. If not the cops on a mayhem mission, then an ambulance racing to unwind fate. A fire engine speeding to a vacant tenement before the

blaze ate the whole block, or en route to a six-story building kerosened for the insurance, a dozen families inside.

Carney's father had torched a building or two in his day. It paid the rent.

This was a radio car's siren. Carney joined Larry and Charlie Foster at the window. On the other side of 125th, two white officers hassled a young man in a dark denim jacket and red flare trousers, their vehicle beached on the sidewalk. The cops pushed him up against the window of Hutchins Tobacco, known for cigarettes without tax stamps and for its vermin problem. The flypaper was booked all year round, no vacancies, the chocolate bars in the candy counter thoroughly weeviled. Hutchins locked his front door and glared from behind the glass with his hands on his hips.

The 125th Street foot traffic bent around this obstruction in the stream. Most did not stop; nothing special about a roust. If not here, somewhere else. But the manhunt had people edgy and off their routines. They lingered and muttered to one another, sassing and heckling the policemen even as they remained at a distance that testified to their fear.

The taller cop swept the man's feet apart and patted the inside of his legs. An onlooker howled, "Touching his junk?"

"What'd he do?" Carney said.

"They pulled up, tackled him like he robbed a bank," Larry said.

"Acting crazy," Charlie Foster said. "Looking for those Black Panthers."

"Black Liberation Army," Larry said.

"Same thing."

Carney didn't want to interrupt when there was a fish on the line, but the disagreement between the Panthers and the offshoot Black Liberation Army was about more than names. The philosophical dispute encompassed the temperament of the street, law enforcement's current posture vis-à-vis Harlem, and all the sirens. Step back and maybe it contained everything.

\* \* \*

"Reform versus revolution," Carney explained to John. Two and a half weeks earlier, May 12th. The verdict in the Panther 21 trial had come down and his son had questions.

“It’s like in my store,” Carney said. “Reform is changing what’s already there to make it better, like stain-proof upholstery, or wheeled feet, and then wheeled feet with brakes. Revolution is when you throw out everything and start new. You know the Castro Convertible?”

John nodded. The TV commercials were inescapable.

“The convertible sofa is revolution,” Carney said. “Takes every idea we have about sleeping, about space, and flips them upside down. Living room? Boom—it’s another bedroom.” He paused. “Bet you didn’t know the inventor of the convertible bed was a black man.”

John shook his head.

“Leonard C. Bailey, businessman and tinkerer. Filed a patent in 1899 that the U.S. military put into mass production. You can look it up. Revolution.”

He had entered that stage of a black man’s life when some days the only thing that got him out of bed was the prospect of sharing stories of Black Firsts and neglected visionaries of their race.

John nodded vaguely. Carney picked up the pace. “The Panthers are opening food pantries, they have that free-breakfast program, legal aid—reform. The BLA wants to overthrow the whole system.”

“If they’re for reform, then why did those Panthers try to blow up the subway?”

“Just because the cops said it, doesn’t make it so.”

That afternoon the longest and most expensive trial in New York City history had wrapped up in a surprising acquittal. The Panther 21 had been arrested two years ago, fingered by undercover cops who’d infiltrated the organization. They faced one hundred and fifty-six counts of attempted murder and arson and etc. in a conspiracy to blow up the Bronx Botanical Garden, various police precincts, a few subway lines, as well as Alexander’s, Korvettes, Macy’s, and other department stores for good measure. The retail targets were an anti-capitalism thing, presumably, but it was unclear what they had against flowers.

John asked if they wanted to blow up Carney’s store, too. Carney told him there were probably a lot of white stores to blow up before they got to his.



It took the jury ninety minutes to deliberate and twenty minutes to read out the one hundred and fifty-six Not Guiltys. “The undercover agents made up their stories out of whole cloth.” A humiliating turn for Frank Hogan, the Manhattan DA. What’s the world coming to when you can’t railroad a bunch of Negroes?

“Why would the cops lie?” John said.

“Why does anyone lie?” Some things a boy has to figure out for himself.

Carney tried to picture himself as a kid, asking his father about political action. Inconceivable. Big Mike Carney pegged the civil rights movement —“these so-called righteous brothers”—as fellow hustlers. How much were they skimming when they put their hand out for soup kitchen donations, pocketing from the overhead when they cut the ribbon for a new rec center? Work rackets for a living and you see them everywhere, the possibilities, the little crack where an enterprising soul might sneak in a crowbar.

For a black boy growing up in Manhattan, John had an inspiringly naïve outlook. Fighting for survival made you think quick; John took the time to consider the world from every angle, claiming as his right the luxury of thoughtfulness. Sometimes Carney saw him as a version of the boy he might have been if he’d grown up in a different apartment, where there was food in the cupboard when he got home from school, with a mother to greet him, one who had not died young. A father who was not crooked. Carney liked that there was a version of that boy somewhere, even if it couldn’t be him.

May took after her mother. Strident and assured, a flinty fifteen years old. A week after the Panther 21 trial, Carney and the kids were eating breakfast in the dining room. To exercise a paternal muscle Carney skipped his Chock Full o’Nuts ritual to spend time with John and May before school.

May tapped the newspaper. “These are some heavy dudes,” she said.

Carney took the *Times*. Someone had claimed responsibility for the police shooting Wednesday night. Two cops guarding DA Frank Hogan’s apartment were in critical condition, machine-gunned by “two young black males” in a car. Hogan had been under guard since last summer, when the

house of John Murtagh was firebombed. Who was John Murtagh? The judge in the Panther 21 case.

Last night, the shooters had dropped off packages at the New York Times Building and at the offices of WLIB in the Theresa, down the street from his store. The packages contained a .45-caliber bullet, license plates from the car identified in the attack, and a note:

May 19, 1971

*All Power to the People,*

*Here are the license plates sought after by the fascist state pig police. We send them in order to exhibit the potential power of oppressed peoples to acquire revolutionary justice.*

*The armed goons of this racist government will again meet the guns of oppressed third world peoples as long as they occupy our community and murder our brothers and sisters in the name of American law and order. Just as the fascist marines and army occupy Vietnam in the name of democracy and murder Vietnamese people in the name of American imperialism, and are confronted with the guns of the Vietnamese liberation army, the domestic armed forces of racism and oppression will be confronted with the guns of the black liberation army, who will mete out in the tradition of Malcolm and all true revolutionaries real justice. We are revolutionary justice.*

*All Power to the People  
Justice*

The syntax dizzied but he got the gist. "Militant," Carney said.

"Somebody has to say it," May said. "Vietnam. The ghetto. It's the same."

"The Man sure keeps busy."

"It's not funny." She snatched the paper back.

"I'm not laughing."

"Did you get the tickets?"

Carney winced. "I told you they're sold out, honey."

“You said you’d get them.”

John dragged a pencil through a maze on the back of the box of Honeycomb cereal.

The next night there was another attack, successful this time. Saturday morning Carney was going over the accounts with 1010 WINS on for company. *All News. All the Time.* The newscaster mentioned the Colonial Park Houses on 159th. Carney had customers who lived there, he had arranged deliveries. A little after ten on Friday night, Officers Waverly Jones and Joseph Piagentini had been returning to their patrol car when they were ambushed from behind. Jones was black; he was shot twice. Piagentini, the white cop, was shot eight times. Aunt Millie was on duty at Harlem Hospital when they wheeled them in. “It was a damned mess.” Mayor Lindsay attended their funerals, all choked up on the telecasts.

The NYPD described their response as a *show of force*. “A motherfucking siege” is how a man in line at Chock Full o’Nuts described it, paying for his bag of doughnuts ahead of Carney. “I was in the war.” Patrolmen staked out corners, a new magnitude of prowler cars hit the streets, with unmarked units shadowing them for extra protection. Midnight raids on suspects. Activists and movement figures on downtown lists were rounded up. It reminded Carney of the ’64 riots, or ’68 after they shot King. There was a special hotline to call if you knew anything.

At 240 Centre Street they downplayed the BLA link at first. Now they embraced it, Carney noticed. Three more attacks on policemen followed in the coming days, nonlethal—the same party, or copycats? Edward Kiernan, the head of the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association, held up Piagentini’s bullet-perforated shirt on TV and implored every cop on duty to carry a shotgun. “With a pistol, the odds are one in five that you will miss,” he said, “but with a shotgun the odds are ninety-nine to one of a hit.”

That was lynching talk. Percy Sutton told him to quit it. Sutton—Tuskegee Airman, lawyer to Malcolm X, and currently Manhattan borough president—would have set Big Mike’s eyes rolling. “This is New York City, not Alabama,” he said. “We don’t do ‘shotgun justice.’ ”

The days passed. The manhunt continued. The sirens continued.

\* \* \*

First week of June. Start of another wilting New York summer. The air-conditioning unit over the front door wheezed and coughed like a crosstown bus, but it got the job done.

It was cool beneath the machine. Carney, Larry, and Mr. Foster huddled there. Carney supposed the crowd across the street contained various uptown factions: movement sympathizers, young people drunk on the counterculture, revolution-minded folks who frowned on shooting cops in the back, and those who just wanted to go about their business without getting fucking involved. Like Mr. Charlie Foster, whose expression soured at the display.

A dark brown Plymouth rounded Morningside and honked, sending bystanders scrambling. It pulled up on the curb and disgorged two white plainclothes. The detained man shook his head as they hollered at him.

“Pigs,” Larry said.

“When I was coming up, they hear you say that, make you a cripple,” Foster said.

“*Constables*,” Larry amended.

The patrolmen handcuffed the man. One of the plainclothes gripped his neck with one hand and steered him forward with the other. When Carney was little, his father worked at Miracle Garage in between jobs. The owner, Pat Dodds, had this gray mutt out back and when the dog made a mess somewhere, he grabbed the dog’s neck and rammed its face into it. That’s how the cop grabbed this young brother’s neck.

For a moment it appeared that the young man stared into Carney’s eyes, but with the sun where it was the man would only see his own face reflected in the store window. Such was the character of light on 125th Street at that time of day, making everything into a mirror. The plainclothes shoved him into the backseat. The sedan lurched and retreated from the sidewalk. The radio car followed suit.

This tall brother in a floppy suede hat started a “Power to the People” chant, but it didn’t catch. With the cops’ departure, there was nothing to bind them. They moved their feet, as if the WALK/DONT WALK sign had switched. Carney thought: GAWK/DONT GAWK.