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A Novel

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COOL MACHINE

A NOVEL

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for New York Fuckin' City

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1981

“It’s harder to find a good coffee table than it
is to fall in love.”

ONE

In all of Ray Carney's years as a fence—he had been a reluctant fence and a ruthless fence, at times imperiled by his choices and at others the embodiment of crooked intelligence—there was only one occasion when he participated in the theft itself, and that was in the summer of 1981 when Uncle Rich came back to town. That bad-news time.

The city that year was true to its personality, as malformed across the centuries—a monstrous entity powered by innate miseries, operated by brute will, and held together by pluck, fury, and rebar. It had been flat broke, and now clambered from the crater of debt one mucky handhold at a time. Crime in its ingenuity devised new permutations daily, making every citizen a victim or a witness. New arrivals poured in hourly, as if there were room, multiplying the local varieties of sadness and perseverance, and outnumbering those who had scurried to the suburbs or fled their last humiliation. It was dirty, and sick, and plainspoken in its threats. “How am I doin’?” the mayor asked on his rounds, barking like one of the mangy seals installed at the decrepit and neglected Central Park Zoo (a real dump). It was his trademark. Everybody needs a gimmick: “*How am I doin’?*” The same as everyone else: tired, banged-up, but staggering forth somehow.

As for Ray Carney, he was a son of his city, enduring his ration of misfortunes and managing to engineer a few reversals. The day the Uncle Rich mess came to a head, Tuesday the 16th of June, was already out of the ordinary in that Carney had a notable appointment—an interview with *Sterling Quality*, the monthly magazine of the Sterling Furniture Co. Carney had sold their products since he first opened his doors, to

budget-conscious Harlemites of contemporary sensibility and taste, to bright-eyed couples who strained cheerfully under the monthly payments, to geezers who set themselves adrift in living rooms on new recliners. Now the company had chosen him as Northeast Regional Dealer of the Month (August).

Carney jumped up and almost knocked over his coffee when he got the call. Across a lifetime, a man cultivates a number of secret wishes that he dare not share with the world, precious things too delicate to exist outside the safe pastures of his mind. To see his name flow and curl in the dignified typeface of the Sterling Furniture house magazine—it was a dream he'd kept close for decades. He and Elizabeth celebrated with a dinner at this French joint off Lex, where too-tiny portions coiled on the big plates in insolent triumph.

Sterling saluted five dealers a month, from the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Northwest, and Southwest, according to sales numbers, length of service as a Certified Dealer, and overall fidelity to the other, undisclosed attributes that gave the magazine its name. Each month *Sterling Quality* featured one of those five; Dealer of the Year, in turn, was drawn from that pool of twelve subjects. Carney didn't have any illusions about being DOY, but was pretty sure he was the first Afro American Dealer of the Month, except maybe for Lou Edminson (March 1973), who was most likely passing, what with that wavy hair of his, criminy. Carney knew something about maintaining a false front and appreciated the complexities.

Carney's introductory conversation with the writer of the piece confirmed his trailblazing status. "I don't think we've ever chosen someone from your background before," Andrew Fisher told him. "I thought it was important." He went on to relate a story from his childhood in Bloomington, Indiana, when a black family moved in down the street and he was the only kid who'd play with the son. "They only lasted a year, but it's a friendship I still cherish."

On the day of the interview, Carney wore a suit and tie to stay in character, even though it was over the phone. He wore the same one three weeks later when the magazine took his headshot. In the published photograph, the readers of *Sterling Quality* encountered a slim gentleman in his early fifties, with the calm, practical air one expected in a purveyor of home furnishings. His hair was graying, but his face retained a youthful openness that some mistook for naivete, and others for

benevolence. Both assessments were incorrect. Comfortable in his achievements, he had grazed upon the feast of middle-class comforts and had lately acquired a paunch, which was just out of frame.

The rejected headshots captured a recent addition to his repertoire of expressions—a distinctive squint, as might belong to a bookkeeper skeptical of his sums or someone lost in a maze wondering which wrong turn to undo. An indicator of unease, trouble below. The photographer found the squint vaguely degenerate, counter to the “even keel” that was a Regional Dealer’s stock in trade. He burned the negatives one drunken night in a renouncing mood.

Andrew Fisher called Carney’s Furniture from the company HQ in Waltham, Massachusetts, where Sterling’s founder, Atherton James, had opened his factory more than a hundred years ago. (“Furniture for Life.”) Carney locked the door of his office for privacy, like it was the old days and he was meeting some shady mope with a satchel full of hot watches. Since reopening, Carney rarely met crooks in the store. Sure, he sat down with lawyers, insurance agents, and other straight-world deputies of varying degrees of corruption, but not crook crooks. Carney preferred not to insult his new office with their presence. *New office*, even though it had been five years since the fire.

The blaze had destroyed his two-decade archive of *Quality*s, but he’d started a new collection—and was relieved that Fisher drew his questions from a master template. Carney had studied up. They settled into a genial collaboration. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his ankles on his desk.

“As a small-business owner,” Fisher said, “you’ve been through some rough patches. Had to make some tough decisions. Can you share with our readers a moment when you were tested?”

The responses that popped into Carney’s head all referred to his other business, not the furniture trade, forcing him to grope for a *Quality*-worthy answer. He ignored the images that emerged—a ruined face framed by a shattered car window, the exuberant jet of blood when the straight razor bit into the thug’s windpipe, that final expression of bewilderment when the bullet penetrated Alexander Oakes’s eye socket.

Carney cleared his throat. “Opening up the shop all those years ago—for sure, that was a test—but then reopening after the fire. *Can I pull it off?* It’s audacious. It’s too

big an idea. But you go ahead because you have no choice. Might as well be dead if you don't try."

"Right, right."

Like this white guy knew what he was talking about. Fisher had let it drop that this was a little intern stint on his summer break from Harvard; an uncle was a VP of marketing. "I'm learning so much. About business, and also life."

A moment when you were tested. He was a black man in America. When was he not being tested? For Chrissakes. He thought of Elizabeth's latest loan rejection, from some bumpkin bank in Virginia. The system didn't know how to accommodate Carney, and it certainly didn't know how to handle his wife. He pictured the bank officers who had torpedoed her business loans these last eighteen months: an identical succession of white-haired mummies in tweed. Scratching codes in the margins of her applications, banker graffiti, to alert the manager that the business was black-owned—nix.

"One second," Fisher said. He riffled through his notes.

Mike appeared through the window, herding a middle-aged Spanish lady toward the new Egons. Post-renovation, Carney's office looked out on the second-floor showroom, directly above where his old office had been. His new office furniture recreated the original scheme as much as possible. He hadn't been able to replace the autographed picture of Lena Horne from her *Cabin in the Sky* days, but the new one, a flamboyant color photo from an early '70s Vegas stint, picked up his spirits on low days. The earlier photo introduced an eager, hungry talent; the latter confirmed an indomitable personality. She had survived.

The Spanish lady galumphed between the ottomans. Harried-housewife sag, glassy-eyed. Mike gestured and she set her A&P shopping bags on the Lucite side table next to her. Out for groceries and popped in on a whim. Suddenly remembering the threadbare arms of her couch and the ten-year-old Kool-Aid stain, or walking by and drawn in by the new DeMarco sleeper in the window display? It had been Rusty's idea to feature DeMarco's Slumber King out front; Carney made a note to thank him. Might cheer the guy up, what with his divorce and all.

Mike squeezed his hands together in the air, miming the pliable comforts of a polyurethane core. He worked 'em good. The kid was a natural, explaining microfibers

and payment-plan scenarios like a Casanova enumerating impending delights. The customer nodded. How long would Mike hang around? This new breed bored easily. Used to be a gig at an uptown store like Carney's was a career. Stable, nice salary for the neighborhood. "Positive working environment," occasional acts of arson aside.

The *Quality* writer reeled Carney back in. "What would you say is the best thing about your job?"

Carney whistled. "So many."

Like opening his 1977 model Hermann Bros. safe and depositing a brick of cash atop last week's brick, one neatly fastened by the bank's paper belt, the others grubby bills cinched by a rubber band. Or the day after a complication, replaying how it went down and realizing he could have died—but didn't. Seeing Elizabeth's eyes when she unwraps a gift and he's not bothering about whether the money that bought it was clean or dirty, just that she loves it and what did it matter, really?

Carney said, "That little smile on a customer's face when they sit on a fine new sofa for the first time, and they're not thinking about how much it costs, or the landlord, or how the kid needs her teeth fixed, they're thinking about how good it feels. That, and nothing else."

The interview was almost over. They had covered his business degree from Queens College ("It really opened my eyes to the underlying principles"), his twenty-seven years in the furniture trade, the Sterling versus Collins-Hathaway cold war of the 1950s and the consolidations and shrinking consumer options that followed. The fire and the reopening.

"They never found who did it?" Fisher asked.

"New York City," Carney responded. The city was question and answer in one. Cause and effect and everything else, too.

Unknowable patterns and designs of Great Destiny aside, Carney hadn't lost his love for the home-goods trade. "If they keep making them," Carney said, "I'll keep selling them. There's always another family looking to lay down for that starter dinette, and I'll be here."

"Any advice to a young business owner just starting out?"

Never knock over a bank on a Tuesday. A passing remark of Pepper's that Carney carried over the years like shrapnel. He had never investigated the reasoning, not being

in the knocking-over business, but he accepted its truth. It did not, however, suit the present circumstances.

Nor did the second thing that occurred to him, an idle observation that over time had blossomed into a grim assessment of existence: *It's harder to find a good coffee table than it is to fall in love*. An odd notion, if one dealt in tables, accent or coffee or otherwise, and was also acquainted with the transformative properties of love. Yet, over time he had become more and more certain of it: *It's harder to find a good coffee table than it is to fall in love*. He shrank from the idea. What to do with such knowledge? If one truly believed that, why sell furniture at all? It was a confidence that betrayed his profession and counterfeited his days. He shared it with Elizabeth once in the summer of '78—from her look, he knew never to utter it again.

Carney changed tack. So far in the interview he had sold *Quality* a version of himself—upstanding business owner Ray Carney, bootstrapping entrepreneur with his own corner of 125th Street to prove it. Now it was time to sell Sterling a version of itself, deliver the customer affirmation that was the cap to any successful sales deal. *How did Sterling see Sterling?*

Argent.

Argent, and its legendary jet-age Metropolitan line—the dynamic wingbacks, curvilinear sofas and love seats, their creamy champagne finishes warmly glinting in the light. Argent had carried him through his early struggle years and paid the rent on their miniscule apartment across from the subway tracks, kept the lights on, food on the table. Had cast its spell on families all across the U.S. of A. Sterling bought out Argent in '68, shut it down—then came last year's spectacular revival. The customers demanded it, an entire generation who had bounced, dozed, fucked, and watched black-and-white television on its cushions.

Carney said, "Keep rising. Keep fighting. Look at Sterling. Some people coast on reputation, but Sterling brought back Argent because you have to adapt, keep pushing." People needed Argent again, for proof that there had been good times before the bad times, before the downturn. Open up a newspaper and take your pick. The energy crisis, the hostages—it was a marathon of disaster. Families had once felt safe in their living rooms, and they might return to that place.

“Argent is a gift you must share in turn,” Carney said, “or else it loses its meaning. And now it’s how much of the Sterling bottom line? To be able to give that to somebody—it’s a rare and beautiful thing. But you have to be in the fight.” Carney stood and got dizzy; this heady furniture talk made his blood rush.

Andrew Fisher considered Carney’s answer. “I like that,” he said.

So did Carney. He’d never make Dealer of the Year, but he had done his best, even if he didn’t admit he was auditioning.

Carney made quick work of a white couple who were mid-dither over by the sectional. He didn’t hit the floor like he used to, but the interview had revved him up. Old phrases on tap, the fake smiles in stock. He got them on the hook for a three-piece Argent sectional with custom Summer Oasis floral print upholstery and the optional locking casters. Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Michaels, recently of Sugar Hill—enjoy your new indoor-living solution.

Back in his office, Rusty had left a note on his desk from Martin Green: “The new samples arrived.” Code for, come down to my office. Carney called him back—busy signal.

Downtown, see what Green had on his plate, make it back home in time for the next episode of that Walter Cronkite CBS News thing on the nuclear menace—he could swing it. Out of habit, Carney braced himself when he closed his office door, expecting it to scrape an arc into the floor, like the old one. It did not. The rebuild was top-notch. Everything around him, holding him up, was now sturdy as hell.

He missed the 4 train. It slipped into the tunnel when he reached the platform, like a pickpocket’s hand into a purse. Graffiti enveloped its exterior in a spiteful jumble of letters and numbers, as if all the antipathies and mean ideas of those inside the cars had been transcribed into a primitive language on the outside. Spray paint and indelible markers had rendered the whole city a canvas, but the artists weren’t very talented, in Carney’s foggy assessment, nor did they stretch themselves. Solid work

ethic, though. To describe a wall as “covered in graffiti” missed the mark; more accurately, the graffiti had some wall in it.

Carney slid around two men in Zenith repairman uniforms and stopped outside the splash range of the MTA maintenance crew. The workers scoured the platform wall with a high-pressure hose, blasting away last night’s installment of graffiti. He supposed the platform walls had some kind of protective coating, like Egon’s StainAway but for tile. Koch was on the attack. Just the other day the papers announced his latest offensive in the war against graffiti—teams of German shepherds to patrol the train yards and tunnels at night. The mayor said, “If I had my way, I’d put in wolves instead of dogs.” He wasn’t joking, either—you know that old ghoul would love to sic a goddamn wolf on some kids. Then laugh his ass off when they try to get patched up, only to find out he closed down Sydenham Hospital.

Carney gave it two weeks—tops—before those canines were on street corners drinking fortified wine out of paper bags and playing craps. The city worked on you quick.

He was headed to Forty-Second so he moseyed to the spot on the platform that’d drop him off at his desired exit when he got off downtown. There was a poster on the wall behind him for that movie he wanted to see, *Escape from New York*, next to a big Fresca ad. “1997. New York City is a walled maximum security prison. Breaking out is impossible. Breaking in is insane.” In the old days, John would be begging Carney to take him to see it on opening day. He didn’t know if his son liked trashy movies like that anymore. It was moot; John was staying in Amherst for the summer.

In the poster, three people ran down a skyscraper canyon, chased by a mob wielding sticks and bats. A woman in a red dress fired at her pursuers while a dude with an eyepatch helped another man up the street. Carney dug the premise. New York City *was* a prison sometimes, locking you up with a million stone-cold psychos, and breaking in—moving here to make a go of it—was several aspects of nuts. But he didn’t understand the “breaking out” part. Where would you go, really? In a practical sense. And why were they being chased? Were they tourists? Everybody hates tourists.

Behind the three figures, the giant shiv of the Empire State Building stabbed the night sky, and the Statue of Liberty’s head sat in the middle of the ave, copper eyes staring at nothing. She ended up in the strangest places, Lady Liberty. Jutting out of

the beach in *Planet of the Apes*, decapitated in Midtown. She wasn't going anywhere. A prisoner like everyone else.

The new samples arrived. Something Green couldn't discuss on the phone. He and Carney had a bunch of codes. If the heat was coming down there was, *Want to run some numbers by you.* Green called about "samples" when he had an operation or opportunity that might be up Carney's alley. Carney usually passed—"Not my bag"—but he gathered that sometimes Green wanted an excuse to hang out. He hadn't seen Green since he got the call from Sterling. Perhaps they'd grab a meal afterward, mark the occasion, though the gem broker didn't get out much since Seth was born.

Fatherhood. Green had come a long way since the days of dressing like Jimi Hendrix's drummer's hipper brother, dolloping references to the Man and the military-industrial complex into his broker patter. Carney had a bunch of white, ex-hippie customers, and had noticed that cohort's slow slide into conventionality, one home mortgage and self-actualization motto at a time. 1979 was particularly rough. Green went through a phase of blue blazers over cabled white turtlenecks, as if about to officiate a yacht race and not hit up the corner fern bar. Then he disappeared one day when Carney needed to off a haul of Louis Long necklaces, nice stuff from a Philly rip-off that was looking for its next home. Green's service said he was unavailable—turned out the dude was in California, enduring a sixty-hour "transformation seminar" in Mendocino. Madness. Barry Cruz got Carney's business that day.

When Green returned, he was so full of esoteric slang and animated by a new, hard-to-communicate philosophy that he reminded Carney of an ex-con. "Personal contentment might be the biggest heist of all." *Okay, Jim.* Time in the joint, the various joints of this world, changed a man. So much so that Green had even admitted one night that he had voted for Ronald Reagan, a core betrayal of flower-power principles and confirmation of generational hypocrisy. One day you're tuning in, turning on, and dropping out, and the next you're salivating over your tax cut. Green was not alone. Carney had dealt with all types in his line of work and was accustomed to the way individual corruption reflected the larger culture. The herd tended toward the horrible. Carney tried not to hold it against his friend. Tried mightily.

A rat skittered from behind an overflowing trash can and flung itself onto the tracks.

The platform filled up for the next train.

When Carney hit the street he realized he hadn't been on Forty-Second in a while—east and west, up and down Lex, an anxious rush of construction was underway. This part of town was jumping, spectacularly alive, in the frenzied honking and jackhammering and rasp of steel beams across concrete. The big construction players hustled to outrace expiring zoning regulations and tax abatements. Gaps of open air signaled where runty storefronts had been razed to make room for their betters. Teamsters unloaded ducts and glass, steering them behind blue plywood fences that hid the mammoth excavations and half-poured foundations. Trailers, chugging generators, and wavering cranes nuzzled the curbs, parked, double-parked, triple-parked. Down Lex, two new office towers topped out, spidery derricks delivering beams and insulation—

“Step aside!”

A scrawny old white man pushing a shopping cart full of *Reader's Digests* clipped him. Yeah, yeah. Carney's fault for stopping to gawk. Rush hour. The crotchety millions gushing in and out and between buildings. It was a wonder. When was the last time there was so much construction going on? When it felt like a high-rise might erupt from the sidewalk under your feet and send you flying? He had to go back to the '60s, before the city-wide paralysis, the rising tide of filth. Mayor Lindsay in his first term, before things ran aground.

Development. City hall's cure for the fiscal crisis and the name it gave the future. The greatest city in the world ran out of money and Uncle Sam stepped in. Carney had no choice but to follow the work of the Emergency Financial Control Board in the papers—their fiddling and wrangling eventually manifested in his store as foot traffic and sales volume. The Control Board cut hundreds of millions from the budget, laid off municipal workers, gutted social services, forked over some operating cash. Like a pimp putting a Port Authority runaway on a short leash.

It worked. *Development* brought in fresh players and motivated the old parasites, the new ventures attracted workers and generated tax revenue to pay for yet more development. Churn, baby, churn. Forty-Second Street, a subway platform on 125th

Street, a midnight train yard—attack on multiple fronts to fight off the decay and take the city back one block at a time. Fix it here and there, and it radiates throughout the island, Brooklyn, the Bronx. (Well, maybe not the Bronx.) If you look over here, the city was a gigantic mess, but look thataway and there's its new face, emerging from the grime. Both things at once, in the same space.

Martin Green operated out of the Chanin Building, across from Grand Central. For a good stretch of his life, Carney thought art deco meant “a building below Ninety-Sixth Street.” When he learned that it was an architectural style, and saw examples, he didn't expand his definition. Art deco didn't exist in his neck of the woods. The building was quite lovely from the outside, if a bit stuck up with all that cool black marble and bronze. The fabulousness continued in the lobby's terrazzo floors, and the polished metalwork in the elevators made for a classy ride.

Then you stepped onto the thirty-fourth floor, and anyone hip to crooked frequencies knew they'd entered a corridor of criminal enterprise.

Green Imports, Inc. sat between a CPA outfit and an immigration lawyer. The accountant cooked the books for one of the more plodding but financially circumspect crime families, working hard to convince the Feds that the most profitable driving school in North America just happened to be located in Piscataway, New Jersey (it wasn't). The lawyer specialized in green cards and other official documentation for Albanian hit men, a surprisingly steady clientele, who knew? Last Christmas the three of them had a little holiday party in the lawyer's, Ritz crackers and gin.

Green buzzed in Carney. He'd rented a two-room suite, with a dummy reception area outside his office. He bought a bunch of ladies' hats and jackets and for a while kept up the prank of a phantom receptionist, rotating articles on the coatrack every day, even swapping out the nameplate on her desk when she got hitched. Eventually he got bored. The *New York Post*, arranged just-so next to the telephone, mourned a Yankees–Royals heartbreaker from last fall, and the houndstooth peacoat had hung for a year. They were such a familiar sight, dangling there, that Carney was quite surprised to discover the tableau in Green's office—his friend handcuffed to the club chair, gagged and bloody, and two white men pointing guns.

The older man prodded Green with his pistol. “This the fence?”

Green shook his head to blink blood out of his eyes. He nodded.

“Don’t want to beat up the janitor,” the older man said. “We’re looking for Uncle Rich.”

“I don’t know who that is,” Carney said.

The white man reached into his coat and held up the sapphire Dwayne had given Carney.

“Oh,” Carney said. “He said he was someone else.”

“Aren’t we all?” the man said, and his partner slugged Green in the face.