COLSON

author of
THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD &
THE NICKEL BOYS

Winner of the PULITZER PRIZE
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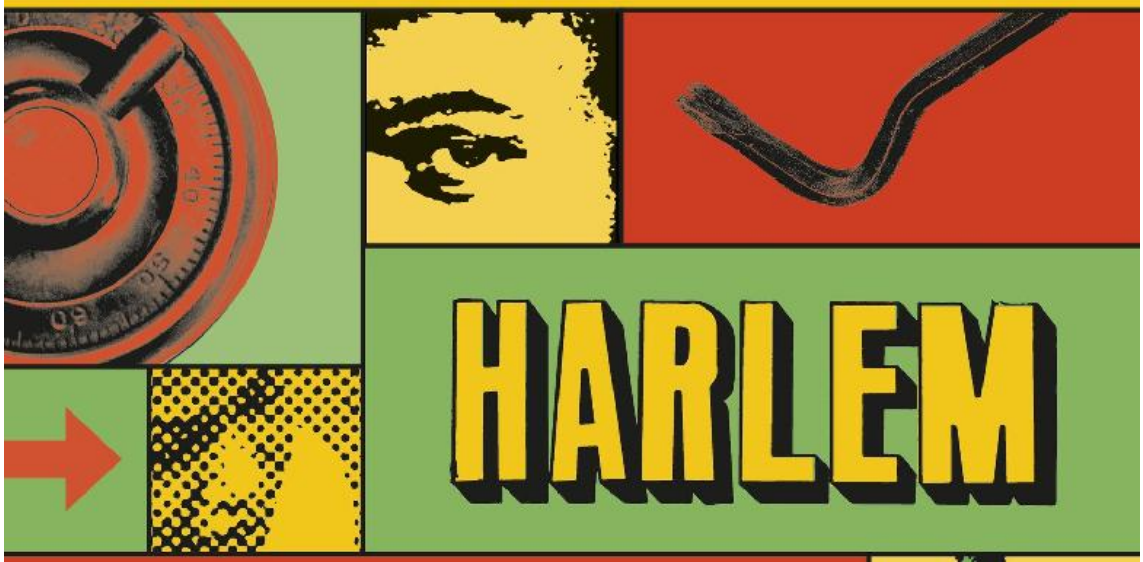
WHITEHEAD



HARLEM

Shuffle

A NOVEL

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The Intuitionist

John Henry Days

The Colossus of New York

Apex Hides the Hurt

Sag Harbor

Zone One

The Noble Hustle

The Underground Railroad

The Nickel Boys

HARLEM SHUFFLE

COLSON WHITEHEAD

DOUBLEDAY
NEW YORK

www.doubleday.com

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Whitehead, Colson, [date] author.

Title: Harlem shuffle / Colson Whitehead.

Description: First Edition. | New York : Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random

House LLC, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020044656 (print) | LCCN 2020044657 (ebook) | ISBN

9780385545136 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780385545143 (ebk) | ISBN 9780385547758

(open market)

Classification: LCC PS3573.H4768 H37 2020 (print) | LCC PS3573.H4768 (ebook) | DDC

813/.54—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/ 2020044656

LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/ 2020044657

Ebook ISBN 9780385545143

ep_prh_5.7.1_c0_r0

for Beckett

C O N T E N T S

THE TRUCK

1959

“Carney was only slightly bent

when it came to being

crooked…”

ONE

His cousin Freddie brought him on the heist one hot night in early June. Ray Carney was having one of his run-around days—uptown, downtown, zipping across the city. Keeping the machine humming. First up was Radio

Row, to unload the final three consoles, two RCAs and a Magnavox, and pick up the TV he left. He'd given up on the radios, hadn't sold one in a year and a half no matter how much he marked them down and begged. Now they took up space in the basement that he needed for the new recliners coming in from Argent next week and whatever he picked up from the dead lady's apartment that afternoon. The radios were top-of-the-line three years ago; now padded blankets hid their slick mahogany cabinets, fastened by leather straps to the truck bed. The pickup bounced in the unholy rut of the West Side Highway.

Just that morning there was another article in the *Tribune* about the city tearing down the elevated highway. Narrow and indifferently cobblestoned, the road was a botch from the start. On the best days it was bumper-to-bumper, a bitter argument of honks and curses, and on rainy days the potholes were treacherous lagoons, one grim slosh. Last week a customer wandered into the store with his head wrapped like a mummy—beaned by a chunk of falling balustrade while walking under the damn thing. Said he was going to sue. Carney said, "You're in your rights." Around Twenty-Third Street the pickup's wheels bit into a crater and he thought one of the RCAs was going to launch from the bed into the Hudson River. He was relieved when he was able to sneak off at Duane Street without incident.

Carney's man on Radio Row was halfway down Cortlandt, off Greenwich, right in the thick. He got a space outside Samuel's Amazing Radio—REPAIR ALL MAKES—and went to check that Aronowitz was in. Twice in the last year he'd come all the way down to find the shop shut in the middle of the day.

A few years ago, walking past the crammed storefronts was like twirling a radio dial—this store blared jazz into the street out of horn loudspeakers, the next store German symphonies, then ragtime, and so on. S & S Electronics, Landy's Top Notch, Steinway the Radio King. Now he was more likely to hear rock and roll, in a desperate lure of the teenage scene, and to find the windows crammed with television sets, the latest wonders from DuMont and Motorola and the rest. Consoles in blond hardwood, the sleek new portable lines, and three-in-one hi-fi combos with picture tube, tuner, and turntable in the same cabinet, smart. What hadn't changed was Carney's meandering sidewalk route around the massive bins and buckets of vacuum tubes, audio transformers, and condensers that drew in tinkerers from all over the tri-state. Any part you need, all makes, all models, reasonable prices.

There was a hole in the air where the Ninth Avenue el used to run. That disappeared thing. His father had taken him here once or twice on one of his

mysterious errands, when he was little. Carney still thought he heard the train sometimes, rumbling behind the music and haggling of the street. Aronowitz hunched over the glass counter, with a loupe screwed into his eye socket, poking one of his gizmos. “Mr. Carney.” He coughed.

There weren’t many white men who called him mister. Downtown, anyway. The first time Carney came to the Row on business, the white clerks pretended not to see him, attending to hobbyists who came in after him. He cleared his throat, he gestured, and remained a black ghost, store after store, accumulating the standard humiliations, until he climbed the black iron steps to Aronowitz & Sons and the proprietor asked, “Can I help you, sir?” Can I help you as in *Can I help you?* As opposed to *What are you doing here?* Ray Carney, in his years, had a handle on the variations.

That first day, Carney told him he had a radio in need of repair; he had just picked up his sideline in gently used appliances. Aronowitz cut him off when he tried to explain the problem and got to work unscrewing the case. Carney didn’t waste his breath on subsequent visits, merely set the radios before the maestro and let him have his way with it. The routine went: weary sighs and grunts as he surveyed the problem, with a jab and flash of silver implements. His Diagnometer tested fuses, resistors; he calibrated voltage, rummaged through unlabeled trays in the steel filing cabinets along

the walls of the gloomy shop. If something big was afoot, Aronowitz twirled in his chair and scurried into the workshop in the back, to more grunts. He reminded Carney of a squirrel in the park, darting helter-skelter after lost nuts. Maybe the other squirrels of Radio Row understood this behavior, but it was animal madness to this civilian.

Often Carney went down the street for a ham and cheese to let the man work in peace.

Aronowitz never failed to make the fix, find the part. The new technology vexed the old man, however, and he usually had Carney return the next day for TV sets, or the next week once the new picture tube or valve arrived. Refusing to shame himself by walking down the block to hit up a competitor. That's how Carney ended up there that morning. He'd dropped off the twenty-one-inch Philco last week. If he was lucky, the old man would take the radios off his hands.

Carney carried one of the big RCAs into the shop and went back for the next. "I'd have the boy help you," Aronowitz said, "but I had to cut back on his hours."

The boy Jacob, a surly, pockmarked teenager from a Ludlow Street rookery, hadn't worked there for more than a year as far as Carney could tell. The "& Sons" on the sign had ever been aspirational—Aronowitz's

wife had moved back to Jersey to live with her sister long ago—but bluster and bravado were a motif for Radio Row establishments. Top of the City, House of Values, Cannot Be Beaten. Decades before, the electronics boom made the neighborhood into a theater for immigrant ambition. Hang a shingle, deliver your pitch, and climb out of the tenement stew. If things go well, you open a second location, expand into the failed shop next door. Pass the business on to your sons and retire to one of the new Long Island suburbs. If things go well.

Carney thought Aronowitz should drop the Sons thing and go for something more hip: Atomic TV & Radio, Jet Age Electronics. But that'd be a reversal of their relationship, as it was Aronowitz who delivered the advice at this address, one entrepreneur to another, generally of the "physician, heal thyself" variety. Carney didn't need the old man's tips on accounting practices and merchandise placement. His business degree from Queens College hung in his office next to a signed photograph of Lena Horne.

Carney got the three radios inside. Sidewalk traffic on the Row wasn't what it used to be.

"No, they're not broken," Carney said as Aronowitz unfurled his roll of instruments. The roll was green felt, with slots. "I thought you'd want them,

maybe."

"Nothing wrong with them?" Like something that worked okay was an alien proposition.

"I figured I was coming down to pick up the TV, I'd see if you were interested." On the one hand, why would a radio man need a radio, but on the other, every businessman had a sideline. He knew this to be true of Aronowitz. "Strip them for parts or something?"

Aronowitz's shoulders dropped. "Parts. I sure don't have customers, Mr. Carney, but I have parts."

"You have me, Aronowitz."

"I have you, Mr. Carney. And you are very reliable." He asked after Carney's wife and daughter. A baby on the way? Mazel tov. He ran a thumb down his black suspenders and considered. Dust squirmed in the light. "I know a guy in Camden," Aronowitz said, "he specializes. Likes RCAs. Maybe he's interested. Or he isn't. You leave them, next time you come in, I'll tell you how it went." There was the matter of the Magnavox. Walnut cabinet, eighteen-inch woofer, Collaro changer. And top-of-the-line three years ago. "Leave that, too, we'll see."

The old man had always been droopy in the face, a jowl overall with saggy lobes and eyelids, and droopy in his wretched posture. As if when he

bent over the machines all those hours they were sucking him into themselves. The downward pull had accelerated recently, his submission to the facts of his life. The merchandise had changed, the clientele transformed into new beings, and aspiration wasn't all it was cracked up to be. But he had a few diversions to keep him busy, these twilight days.

"I have your TV," he said. He coughed into a faded yellow handkerchief.

Carney followed him into the back.

The name of the store—stark letters in gold paint on the shop window—promised one thing, the shabby front office another, and this room delivered a third thing that was entirely spiritual. The atmosphere was different, murky yet reverential, the Radio Row hubbub hushed. Disassembled receivers, picture tubes in various sizes, guts of machines lay on cluttered metal shelves. In the center of the room, the worktable was spotlit where a blank space in the scarred wood waited for the next patient, tools and boxy measuring instruments arranged neatly around it. Fifty years ago, most of the stuff in the room hadn't existed, was half a notion scurrying at the edge of an inventor's imagination—and suddenly there were rooms like this, where men maintained its secrets.

Until the next thing came along.

There was a collapsible army cot where the boy's desk used to be, a plaid

wool blanket curled in an *S* on top. Had he been sleeping there? As the radio man led him, Carney saw that he'd lost still more weight. He thought about asking after his health, but didn't.

Aronowitz kept a dusty display of transistor radios by the front door, but in the back items moved in more constant exchange. Carney's Philco 4242 sat on the floor. Freddie had steered it into Carney's store on a creaky dolly, swore it was in "A-1 condition." Some days Carney felt the need to press his cousin on a lie until it broke and some days his love was such that the slightest quiver of mistrust made him ashamed. When he'd plugged in the TV and turned it on, his reward was a white dot in the middle of the tube and a petulant hum. He didn't ask where Freddie got it. He never asked.

The TVs moved quickly out of the gently used section when Carney priced them right.

"Still in the box," Carney said.

"What? Oh, those."

There was a stack of four Silvertone TVs by the bathroom door, blond-wood Lowboy Consoles, all-channel. Sears manufactured them, and Carney's customers revered Sears from childhood, when their parents ordered from catalogs because the white men in their Southern towns wouldn't sell to them, or jacked up the prices.

“A man brought those by yesterday,” Aronowitz said. “I was told they fell off a truck.”

“Boxes look fine.”

“A very short fall, then.”

A hundred and eighty-nine retail, let’s say another twenty with the Harlem tax from a white store; overcharging was not limited to south of the Mason-Dixon. Carney said, “I could probably sell one to a customer in the market.” A hundred fifty on installments, they’d sprout feet and march out the door singing “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

“I can part with two. I’ll throw in the work on the Philco. It was just a loose lead.”

They did a deal for the TVs. On his way out the door, Aronowitz asked, “Can you help me bring your radios into the back? I like to keep the front presentable.”

Uptown Carney took Ninth Avenue, not trusting the highway with his new TVs. Down three radios, up three sets—not a bad start to the day. He had Rusty unload the TVs into the store and drove up to the dead lady’s house, 141st Street. Lunch was two hot dogs and a coffee at Chock Full o’Nuts.

* * *

3461 Broadway had a busted elevator. The sign had been up for a while. Carney counted the steps to the fourth floor. If he bought something and lugged it out to the truck, he liked to know how many steps to curse on the way down. On the second floor, someone was boiling pigs' feet and on the third, old socks from the smell of it. This had the feel of a wasted trip.

The daughter, Ruby Brown, let him in. The tenement had settled, and as she opened the door to 4G, it scraped the floor.

"Raymond," she said.

He couldn't place her.

"We were at Carver together, I was a few years behind you."

He nodded as if he remembered. "I'm sorry about your loss."

She thanked him and glanced down for a moment. "I came up to take care of things and Timmy James told me to call you."

Didn't know who he was, either. When he first got the pickup and started lending it out, and then buying furniture, he knew everyone. Now he'd been in business long enough that word had spread outside his old circle.

Ruby flicked on the hall light. They passed the galley kitchen and the two bedrooms off the hall. The walls were scuffed, gouged to plaster in spots—the Browns had lived there a long time. A wasted trip. In general when he got a furniture call, people had strange ideas about what he was looking for.

Like he'd take any old thing, the saggy couch with springs poking out nappily, the recliner with sweated-into arms. He wasn't the junkman. The good finds were worth it, but he wasted too much time on false leads. If Rusty'd had any sense or taste, Carney could send his assistant on these missions, but he didn't have sense or taste. Come back with something that looked like raccoons nested in the horsehair stuffing.

Carney was wrong this time. The bright front room overlooked Broadway and the sound of an ambulance snuck in through the window. The dinette set in the corner was from the '30s, chipped and discolored, and the faded oval rug revealed traffic patterns, but the sofa and armchair were in factory condition. Heywood-Wakefield with that champagne finish everybody liked now. And sheathed in transparent vinyl slipcovers.

"I live in D.C. now," Ruby said. "I work in a hospital. But I'd been telling my mother to get rid of the couch for years, it was so old. Two months ago I bought these for her."

"D.C.?" he said. He unzipped the plastic.

"I like it there. There's less of that, you know?" She gestured toward the Broadway chaos below.

"Sure." He ran his hand over the green velvet upholstery: pristine. "It's from Mr. Harold's?" She hadn't bought the sofa from him, and Blumstein's

didn’t carry the line, so it had to be Mr. Harold’s.

“Yes.”

“Took good care of them,” Carney said.

Work finished, Raymond took another look at Ruby. Dressed in a gray dress, round and plump. Tired in the eyes. She wore her hair in a curly Italian cut now, and then it flickered—Ruby Brown as a stick-limbed teenager, with two long Indian ponytails, a light blue blouse with a white Peter Pan collar. She hung out with a clique of studious girls back then. Strict parents, that type.

“Right, Carver High School,” he said. He wondered if they’d laid Hazel Brown to rest already, what it was like to attend the funeral of your mother or father, what expression you screwed into your face at such times. The memories that popped up, this small thing or that big thing, what you did with your hands. Both of his parents were gone and he hadn’t had that experience, so he wondered. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he said again.

“She had a problem with her heart, the doctor told her last year.”

He was a senior when she was a sophomore. Eleven years ago, 1948, when he was busy trying to get a handle on things. Spackling himself into something presentable. No one else was moved to help, so he had to do it himself. Learn to cook a meal, pay the bills when late notices arrived, have

a spiel when the landlord came around.

There was a gang of younger kids on his case all the time, Ruby's classmates. The rough boys his age left him alone, they knew him from before and let him be because they had played together, but Oliver Handy and his group, they were of that feral breed, street. Oliver Handy, two front teeth knocked out since whenever, never let him pass without starting something.

Oliver and his group made fun of the spots on his clothes, which didn't fit properly and so they made fun of that in addition, they said he smelled like a garbage truck. Who had he been back then? Scrawny and shy, everything out of his mouth half a stammer. He shot up six inches junior year, as if his body knew it better catch up to handle his adult responsibilities. Carney in the old apartment on 127th, no mother, father aprowl or sleeping it off. He left for school in the morning, closed the door on those empty rooms and steeled himself for whatever lay beyond. But the thing was, when Oliver made fun of him—outside the candy store, in the back stairwell at school—he'd already taught himself how to properly wash out a stain, hem his pants, take a good long shower before school. He made fun of him for who he'd been before he got his shit together.

What put a stop to it was smacking Oliver's face with an iron pipe.

Curved in a *U* like it came from under a sink. The pipe had appeared in Carney's hands it seemed, cast out of the empty lot at the corner of Amsterdam and 135th where they surrounded him. His father's voice: That's how you handle a nigger who fucks with you. He felt bad seeing Oliver at school, swole up and slinking. Later he learned that his daddy had ripped off Oliver's daddy on some scam, stolen tires, and maybe that explained the whole thing.

It was the last time he raised his hand. The way he saw it, living taught you that you didn't have to live the way you'd been taught to live. You came from one place but more important was where you decided to go. Ruby had decided on a new city and Carney chose life in the furniture business. A family. If it looked opposite of what he knew when he was little, it appealed.

He and Ruby talked crap about the old school, the teachers they hated. There was overlap. She had a nice, round face, and when she laughed he got the sense D.C. had been a good choice. No shortage of reasons to get out of Harlem if you could swing it.

"Your father used to work at the garage around the corner," she said.

Miracle Garage was the place his father worked at sometimes, when his main business ran dry. Hourly work, steady. The owner, Pat Baker, had been

a running buddy of his father's before he went straight. Straight as in less bent; it cannot be said that every vehicle on the premises had its papers right. The garage had churn, as Carney called it, like Aronowitz's. Like his place. Stuff comes in, it goes out, like the tides.

Pat owed his daddy from back when and gave him work when he needed it. "Sure," Carney said, waiting for the kicker. Usually when someone mentioned his father it was a prelude to a disreputable story. *I saw two policemen haul him away outside Finian's* or *He was beating this sucker with the lid of a garbage can.* Then he had to figure what to make his face look like.

But she didn't share any shabby anecdote. "It closed down a few years ago," Ruby said.

They did a deal for the couch and the matching armchair.

"How about that radio?" she asked. It was next to a small bookcase. Hazel Brown had kept a bunch of artificial flowers in a red vase on top of it.

"I'll have to pass on the radio," he said. He paid the super some bucks to help him carry the sofa down to the truck, he'd send Rusty tomorrow for the armchair. Sixty-four steps.

* * *

Carney's Furniture had been a furniture store before he took over the lease,

and a furniture store before that. In sticking around for five years, Carney had outlasted Larry Early, a repellent personality ill-suited for retail, and Gabe Newman, who lit out in the dead of the night, leaving behind a clutch of fuming creditors, his family, two girlfriends, and a basset hound. A superstitious sort might have deemed the location cursed in regards to home goods. The property wasn't much to look at, but it might make a man his fortune. Carney took the previous tenants' busted schemes and failed dreams as a kind of fertilizer that helped his own ambitions prosper, the same way a fallen oak in its decomposition nourishes the acorn.

The rent was reasonable for 125th Street, the store well-situated.

Rusty had the two big fans going on account of the June heat. He had a tiresome habit of comparing the weather in New York City to that of his native Georgia, in his stories a land of monstrous rainfall and punishing heat. "This is nothing." Rusty maintained a small-town sense of time in all things, devoid of urgency. Although not a natural salesman, during his two years in the store he had cultivated a brand of bumpkin charisma that appealed to a subset of Carney's customers. Rusty's newly conked hair, red and lush—courtesy of Charlie's on Lenox—gave him a new confidence that contributed to an uptick in commissions.

Conk or no conk, nothing was happening in the store that Monday. "Not

a single soul," Rusty said as they carried Hazel Brown's sofa to the gently used section, his voice a lament, which Carney found endearing. Rusty reacted to routine sales patterns like a farmer scanning the skies for thunderheads.

"It's hot," Carney said. "People have more things on their mind." They gave the Heywood-Wakefield prime placement. The gently used section occupied twenty percent of the showroom floor—Carney calculated to the inch—up from ten percent last year. It had been a slow creep for the used merchandise, once Carney noticed its pull on the bargain hunters, the payday strollers, the just-walking-by types who wandered in. The new goods were top-notch, he was an authorized dealer for Argent and Collins-Hathaway, but the secondhand stuff had durable appeal. It was hard to pass up a deal when faced with choosing a warehouse delivery or walking out that day with a wingback lounge chair. Carney's careful eye meant they were getting nice furniture, and he took the same care with the secondhand lamps, electronics, and rugs.

Carney liked to walk his showroom before opening. That half hour of morning light pouring through the big windows, over the bank across the street. He shifted a couch so it wasn't up against the wall, straightened a SALE sign, made neat a display of manufacturer brochures. His black shoes

tapped on wood, were silenced by the plush give of an area rug, resumed their sound. He had a theory about mirrors and their ability to reflect attention to different quadrants of the store; he tested it on his inspection. Then he opened the shop to Harlem. It was all his, his unlikely kingdom, scrabbled together by his wits and industry. His name out front on the sign so everyone knew, even if the burned-out bulbs made it look so lonesome at night.

After checking the basement to make sure Rusty had put the TVs where he'd asked, he retreated to his office. Carney liked to keep up a professional appearance, wear a jacket, but it was too hot. He wore a white short-sleeve shirt, sharkskin tie tucked between the middle buttons. He stuck it in there when he packed the radios so it wouldn't be in the way.

He ran the day's numbers at his desk: down what he'd paid for the radios years before, down the money for the TVs and the Brown lady's furniture. Cash on hand was not heartening, if the heat kept up and the customers stayed away.

The afternoon dwindled. The numbers didn't fit, they never did. This day or any other. He double-checked who was late on their payments. Too many. He'd been thinking about it for a while and decided to end it: no more installment plans. His customers loved them, sure, but he couldn't

afford the lag anymore. Sending collectors wore him down. Like he was some crime boss dispatching muscle. His father had done some work like that, banging on the front door, everybody on the hall looking to see what the fuss was. The occasional follow-through on a threat…Carney stopped himself. He had his share of deadbeats and was a soft touch when it came to extensions and second chances. He didn't have the traffic right now to extend himself. Elizabeth would reassure him and not let him feel bad about it.

Then it was almost closing time. In his mind, he was already a block from home when he heard Rusty say, "It's one of our top sellers." He looked through the window over his desk. The first customers of the day were a young couple—pregnant wife, husband nodding earnestly at Rusty's patter. In the market, even if they didn't know it maybe. The wife sat on the new Collins-Hathaway sofa, fanning herself. She was going to drop the baby any day. Looked like she might deliver right there on the stain-resistant cushions.

"Can I get you a glass of water?" Carney asked. "Ray Carney, I'm the owner."

"Yes, please."

"Rusty, can you get the young lady a glass of water?" He removed his tie

from between the buttons of his shirt.

He had before him Mr. and Mrs. Williams, new additions to Lenox Avenue.

“If that sofa you’re resting on is familiar, Mrs. Williams, that’s because it was on *The Donna Reed Show* last month. The scene at the doctor’s office? It’s really taken off.” Carney ran down the attributes of the Melody line. Space-age silhouette, scientifically tested for comfort. Rusty gave Mrs. Williams the glass of water—he’d taken his time, to ease Carney’s transition into the sale. She drank from the glass, cocked her head, and listened thoughtfully, to Carney’s pitch or the creature in her womb.

“To be honest,” the husband said, “it’s so hot, sir, Jane needed to sit down for a minute.”

“Couches are good for sitting—that’s what they’re for. What line are you in, Mr. Williams, if I may ask?”

He taught math at the big elementary school on Madison, second year there. Carney lied and said he was never that good at math, and Mr. Williams started talking about how it’s important to get kids interested early so they don’t get intimidated. Rote, like it came from some new teaching manual. Everybody had their pitch.

Mrs. Williams was due in two weeks with their first. A June baby.

Carney tried to come up with a folksy bit about June babies but couldn't pull it off. "My wife and I, we're expecting our second in September," he said. Which was true. He pulled the picture of May from his wallet. "That's her birthday dress."

"Truth is," Mr. Williams said, "it'll be a while before we can afford a new couch."

"No harm in that. Let me take you around," Carney said. Not to feign interest after a glass of water would be impolite.

It was hard to conduct a proper showroom tour with one party anchored in a spot, panting. The husband shrank from the merchandise when he came too close to it, as if proximity plucked money out of his pockets. Carney remembered those days, everything too dear and too necessary at the same time, just him and Elizabeth making their way in the world as newlyweds. He had the store then, paint still fresh; no one thought he'd make a go of it except her. At the end of the day when she propped him up and told him he could do it, he puzzled over these alien things she offered him. Kindness and faith, he didn't know which box to put them in.

"The modular setup makes every inch of your room livable," Carney said. He sold the virtues of Argent's new sectional, which he really did believe in—the new saddle finish and tapered legs made it appear to float in

the air, look—as his thoughts ran elsewhere. These kids and their striving. Actors did this every night, he figured, the best of them, delivering their lines while sifting through last night's argument, or suddenly reminded of overdue bills by a man in the fifth row who had the same face as the man at the bank. You'd have to come every night to detect an error in the performance. Or be another member of the company, suffering your own distractions and recognitions at the same time. He thought, It's hard to make your start in this city when you have no help—

"Let me see it," Mrs. Williams said. "I just want to see how it feels for a moment."

She'd popped up. The three of them stood before the Argent, the turquoise cushions like cool water beckoning on a hot day.

She had been listening the whole time, sipping. Mrs. Williams took off her shoes and lay across the curved left arm. She closed her eyes and sighed.

They did a deal for a smaller than usual deposit, with a generous installment plan. Ludicrous, the whole thing. Carney locked the door behind them after they finished the paperwork to prevent another lapse in judgment. Argent's Metropolitan line was a sound investment, with its chemically treated bouclé cushions and Airform core, voted most

comfortable by four out of five respondents in a blind test. It would last a long time, through one kid and another. He was glad he hadn't told Rusty or Elizabeth about eliminating time payments.

Rusty clocked out and it was just him. Down for the day after all the cash he dropped. He didn't know where the rent was going to come from, but it was still early in the month. You never know. The TVs were smart and they were a nice couple and it was good to do for them what no one did for him when he was young: give a hand. "I may be broke, but I ain't crooked," he said to himself, as he often did at times like this. When he felt this way. Weary and a little desperate, but also high-hearted. He turned off the lights.

TWO

"Oh, Ruby—yes. She was sweet," Elizabeth said. She passed the water pitcher. "We played volleyball together."

In keeping with their history, his wife remembered the dead lady's daughter, but had no high-school recollection of the man she was going to marry. Carney and his wife had biology class together, and civics, and one downpour Thursday he walked her four blocks under his umbrella, out of his way even. "Are you sure?" Elizabeth said. "I thought that was Richie Evans." Her teenage memory rendered him a blank space, like the one left after she cut out a paper doll for May. Carney had yet to devise a comeback

to her teasing about his inconspicuous profile back then: “It’s not my fault you were you.” He’d think of it one day.

Dinner was Caw Caw chicken. The recipe came from *McCall’s,* but May pronounced it *caw,* and it stuck. It was bland—the main seasoning appeared to be breadcrumbs—but they were fond of it. “What if the baby doesn’t like chicken,” Elizabeth asked one night. “Everybody likes chicken,” he responded. They had a good thing going, the three of them, wonky plumbing aside. The new arrival might alter the dynamic in the house. For now, they still had their unspoiled delight in Elizabeth’s main dish, served tonight with rice and stewed green beans, pale ribbons of bacon adrift in the pot.

May squeezed a green bean to mush. Half went in her mouth, the rest on her polka-dot bib. Under her high chair, the linoleum was a mottle of stains. May took after her mother, and her grandmother, had those big brown Jones women’s eyes that took in everything and gave no more than they decided to permit. She had also inherited their will, mulish and impenetrable. Take a look at those beans.

“Alma go home early?” Carney asked. With Elizabeth on bed rest, her mother came by most days to lend a hand. She was great help with May, if not the kitchen. Even if dinner hadn’t been one of his wife’s trademark

dishes, tipping him off, the food tasted good, which meant Alma hadn't had a hand in it. Elizabeth's mother cooked the way she did most things, with a healthy sprinkling of spite. In the kitchen it manifested on the tongue.

"I told her we didn't need her today," Elizabeth said. A euphemism for Alma meddling too much, necessitating a cooling-off period after Elizabeth lost her temper.

"You didn't do too much?"

"Just to the store. I had to get out."

He wasn't going to make a fuss about it. After she fainted a month ago, Dr. Blair told her to take a break from work, stay off her feet. Let her body devote itself to the job at hand. Stillness went against her character; the more she had on her plate, the happier she was. She had resigned herself to a few months of humdrumery, but it drove her batty. Alma's constant harping made it worse.

He changed the subject. The store was quiet all day except at the end, he said. "They live in Lenox Terrace. He said he thought they still had some three-bedrooms available."

"How much?"

"I don't know, more than what we pay now. I thought I'd take a look."

He hadn't brought up moving in more than two weeks. No harm in taking

the temperature. One source of Alma's carping was the size of their apartment, and for once Carney agreed with her. For Elizabeth's mother, their small apartment was another way her daughter had settled for less than she deserved.

Alma used the word *settled* the way the less genteel used *motherfucker,* as a chisel to pry open a particular feeling. Elizabeth had settled for her position at the travel agency, after her parents' careful maneuverings to elevate her, turn her into an upstanding Negro doctor, upstanding Negro lawyer. Booking hotels, airplane flights—it was not what they intended for her.

She'd settled for Carney, that was clear. That family of his. From time to time, Carney still overheard his father-in-law refer to him as "that rug peddler." Elizabeth had brought her parents to the store to show it off, on a day Moroccan Luxury happened to deliver a shipment. The rugs were marvelous specimens, couldn't keep them in stock, but the delivery men that day were disheveled and hungover—they usually were—and on seeing them slide the rugs down the basement chute, Mr. Jones muttered, "What is he, some sort of rug peddler?" Knowing full well the range of home goods Carney sold, all of which were of fine quality. Go into a white store downtown, it was the same stuff, Moroccan Luxury sold all over. Not to

mention—what was wrong with selling rugs? It was more honorable than grifting the city out of taxes, Mr. Jones's specialty, no matter how he dressed it up.

And their sweet Elizabeth had settled for a dark apartment with a back window that peered out onto an air shaft and a front window kitty-corner to the elevated 1 train. Weird smells came in one way, trains rumbled in the other, all hours. Surrounded by the very element they'd tried to keep her away from her whole life. Or keep down the block, at least. Strivers' Row, where Alma and Leland Jones had raised her, was one of the most beautiful stretches in Harlem, but it was a little island—all it took was a stroll around the corner to remind its residents that they were among, not above.

You got used to the subway. He said that all the time.

Carney disagreed with Alma's assessment of their neighbors, but yes, Elizabeth—all of them—deserved a nicer place to live. This was too close to what he'd grown up in.

"No need to rush," Elizabeth said.

"They can have their own rooms."

The apartment was hot. In her bed-rest term, she often stayed in her housecoat all day, why not? It was one of the few pleasures left to her. She wore her hair in a bun, but some strands had gotten loose and were

plastered to her sweaty forehead. Tired, skin flushed red under brown in her cheeks. She flickered then, as Ruby had that morning, and he saw her as she was on that rainy afternoon under his umbrella: almond-shaped dark eyes under long lashes, delicate in her pink cardigan, edges of her mouth upturned at one of her strange jokes. Unaware of the effect she had on people. On him, all these years later.

“What?” Elizabeth said.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said. “The girls can share.” She had decided the baby was a girl. She was right about most things so had a certain bravado with this fifty-fifty proposition.

“Take her Caw Caw and you’ll see how much she likes to share.” For proof, he reached over and plucked a piece of chicken off May’s plate. She howled until he plopped it in her mouth.

“You just finished telling me you had a slow day and now you want to move. We’ll be okay. We can wait until we can afford it. Isn’t that right, May?”

May smiled, at who knew what. Some Jones girl course of action she’d planned.

When Elizabeth rose to start the girl’s bath, Carney said, “I have to step

out for a bit."

"Freddie show up?" She had pointed out that he only said *step out* when meeting his cousin. He had tried varying his phrasing, but gave up.

"He left a message with Rusty saying he wanted to see me."

"What's he been doing?"

Freddie had been scarce. Lord knew what he'd gotten his paws into.

Carney shrugged and kissed them goodbye. He carried the garbage out, trailing greasy dots all the way to the sidewalk.

* * *

Carney took the long way to Nightbirds. It had been the kind of day that put him in the mood to see the building.

This first hot spell of the year was a rehearsal for the summer to come. Everyone a bit rusty but it was coming back, their parts in the symphony and assigned solos. On the corner, two white cops recapped the fire hydrant, cursing. Kids had been running in and out of the spray for days. Threadbare blankets lined fire escapes. The stoops bustled with men in undershirts drinking beer and jiving over the noise from transistor radios, the DJs piping up between songs like friends with bad advice. Anything to delay the return to sweltering rooms, the busted sinks and clotted flypaper, the accumulated reminders of your place in the order. Unseen on the rooftops,

the denizens of tar beaches pointed to the lights of bridges and night planes. There had been a bunch of muggings lately, an old lady carrying groceries hit on the head, the kind of news Elizabeth fretted over. He took a well-lit route to Riverside Drive. He went around Tiemann Place, and there it was. Carney'd picked 528 Riverside this month, a six-story red brick with fancy white cornices. Stone falcons or hawks on the roofline watching the human figures below. He favored the fourth-floor apartments these days, or higher, after someone pointed out that the higher views cleared the trees of Riverside Park. He hadn't thought of that. So: that fourth-floor unit of 528 Riverside, in his mind a pleasant hive of six rooms, a real dining room, two baths. A landlord who leased to Negro families. With his hands on the sill, he'd look out at the river on nights like this, the city behind him as if it didn't exist. That rustling, keening thing of people and concrete. Or the city did exist but he stood with it heaving against him, Carney holding it all back by sheer force of character. He could take it.

Riverside, where restless Manhattan found itself finally spent, its greedy hands unable to reach past the park and the holy Hudson. One day he'd live on Riverside Drive, on this quiet, inclined stretch. Or twenty blocks north in one of the big new apartment buildings, in a high-letter apartment, J or K. All those families behind those doors between him and the elevator,

friendly or not, they live in the same place, no one better or worse, they were all on the same floor. Or maybe south in the Nineties, in one of the stately prewars, or in a limestone fortification around 105th or thereabouts that squat like an ornery old toad. If he hit the jackpot.

Carney prospected in the evening, checking the line of buildings from different angles, strolling across the street and scanning up, speculating about the sunset view, choosing one edifice and then a single apartment inside. The one with the blue window treatments, or the one with the shade half down, its string dangling like an unfinished thought. Casement windows. Under those broad eaves. He wrote the scenes inside: the hissing radiator, the water spot on the ceiling where the rummy upstairs let the bath run and the landlord won't do a thing about it but it's fine. It's nice. He deserves it. Until he tired of the place and resumed his hunt for the next apartment worthy of his attentions, up or down the avenue.

One day, when he had the money.

The atmosphere in Nightbirds was ever five minutes after a big argument and no one telling you what happened. Everyone in their neutral corners replaying KO's and low blows and devising too-late parries. You didn't know what it had been about or who'd won, just that nobody wanted to talk about it, they glance around and knead grudges in their fists. In its heyday,

the joint had been a warehouse of mealy human commerce—some species of hustler at that table, their bosses at the next, marks minnowing between. Closing time meant secrets kept. Whenever Carney looked over his shoulder, he frowned at the grubby pageant. Rheingold beer on tap, Rheingold neon on the walls in two or three places, the brewery had been trying to reach the Negro market. The cracks in the red vinyl upholstery of the old banquettes were stiff and sharp enough to cut skin.

Less dodgy with the change in management, Carney had to allow. His father's city disappearing. Last year the new owner, Bert, had the number on the pay phone changed, undermining a host of shady deals and alibis. In the old days broken men hunched over the phone, hangdog, waiting for the ring that changed their luck. Bert put in a new overhead fan and kicked out the hookers. The pimps were okay, they were good tippers. He removed the dart board, this last item an inscrutable renovation until Bert explained that his uncle "had his eye put out in the army." He hung a picture of Martin Luther King Jr. in its place, a grimy halo describing the outline of the former occupant.

Some regulars beat it for the bar up the street, but Bert and Freddie hit it off quickly, Freddie by nature adept at sizing up the conditions on the field and making adjustments. When Carney walked in, his cousin and Bert were

talking about the day's races and how they'd gone.

"Ray-Ray," Freddie said, hugging him.

"How you doing, Freddie?"

Bert nodded at them and went deaf and dumb, pretending to check that there was enough rye out front.

Freddie looked healthy, Carney was relieved to see. He wore an orange camp shirt with blue stripes and the black slacks from his short-lived waiter gig a few years back. He'd always been lean, and when he didn't take care of himself quickly got a bad kind of thin. "Look at my two skinny boys," Aunt Millie used to say when they came in from playing in the street. If Carney hadn't seen his cousin, it also meant Freddie'd been staying away from his mother. He still lived with her in his old room. She made sure he didn't forget to eat.

They were cousins, mistaken for brothers by most of the world, but distinguished by many features of personality. Like common sense. Carney had it. Freddie's common sense tended to fall out of a hole in his pocket—he never carried it long. Common sense, for example, told you to not take a numbers job with Peewee Gibson. It also told you that if you took such a job, it was in your interest not to fuck it up. But Freddie had done both of these things and somehow retained his fingers. Luck stepped in for what he

lacked otherwise.

Freddie was vague about where he'd been. "A little work, a little shacking up." Work for him was something crooked, shacking up was a woman with a decent job and trusting nature, who was not too much of a detective when it came to clues. "How's the store going?"

"It'll pick up."

Sipping beers. Freddie started in on his enthusiasm for the new soul food place down the block. Carney waited for him to get around to what was on his mind. It took Dave "Baby" Cortez on the jukebox with that damn organ song, loud and manic. Freddie leaned over. "You heard me talk about this nigger every once in a while—Miami Joe?"

"What's he, run numbers?"

"No, he's that dude wears that purple suit. With the hat."

Carney thought he remembered him maybe. It wasn't like purple suits were a rarity in the neighborhood.

Miami Joe wasn't into numbers, he did stickups, Freddie said. Knocked over a truck full of Hoovers in Queens last Christmas. "They say he did that Fisher job, back when."

"What's that?"

"He broke into a safe at Gimbels," Freddie said. Like Carney was

supposed to know. Like he subscribed to *Criminal Gazette* or something. Freddie was disappointed but continued to puff up Miami Joe. He had a big job in mind and he'd approached Freddie about it. Carney frowned. Armed robbery was nuts. In former days his cousin stayed away from stuff that heavy.

"It's going to be cash, and a lot of stones that's got to get taken care of. They asked me if I knew anyone for that and I said, I have just the guy."

"Who?"

Freddie raised his eyebrows.

Carney looked over at Bert. Hang him in a museum—the barman was a potbellied portrait of hear no evil. "You told them my name?"

"Once I said I knew someone, I had to."

"Told them my name. You know I don't deal with that. I sell home goods."

"Brought that TV by last week, I didn't hear no complaints."

"It was gently used. No reason to complain."

"And those other things, not just TVs. You never asked where they came from."

"It's none of my business."

"You never asked all those times—and it's been a lot of times, man—