

THE SPORTS MOMENT THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

THE
.....
JOHN
.....
CARLOS
.....
STORY

"HOW CAN YOU ASK
SOMEONE TO LIVE
IN THE WORLD,
AND NOT HAVE
SOMETHING TO SAY
ABOUT INJUSTICE?"



John Carlos

WITH DAVE ZIRIN

FOREWORD BY

DR. CORNEL WEST

Praise for *The John Carlos Story*

“*The John Carlos Story* is the remarkable chronicle of an epic life sketched against the defining crisis of race in America. Carlos’s athletic genius on the field is matched by his heroic will to overcome trials and tribulations in his personal life, and to find resurrection in his professional life. This is an inspiring and eloquent story about a great American whose commitment to truth, justice, and democracy were tested and found true.”

—**Michael Eric Dyson, author, *Can You Hear Me Now***

“John Carlos’s life story is an insightful and gripping look at the times he lived and the Olympics he helped make so memorable. He shows us that the one day that made him famous was only the most outward and visible sign of a touching and thoughtful life.”

—**Frank Deford, author, *Bliss, Remember***

“In this breathlessly readable tale, John Carlos finally steps out of that iconic photograph to become the vibrant, fascinating hero we never really knew.”

—**Robert Lipsyte, author, *An Accidental Sportswriter***

“John Carlos tells a compelling story of courage and the consequences of action. He, Tommie Smith, and many other black athletes took a stand against racial injustice in the United States and racial injustice in sports. They were ridiculed by many mainstream commentators at the time, but their actions helped to transform both the sports world and this country. This book is by and about someone who has been and remains one of my heroes.”

—**Bill Fletcher Jr., editorial board member, *The Black Commentator***

“John Carlos was a principal in creating the most iconic sports image of the twentieth century, the demonstration for racial equality and justice from the victory stand at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. The background and evolution of his perspectives and politics from the vantage point forty-plus years later is illuminating, inspirational, provocative, and very much worth the read.”

—**Harry Edwards, professor emeritus, University of California, Berkeley, and organizer, 1968 Olympic Project for Human Rights**

“John Carlos’s story of bravery and sacrifice will warm your heart. But beyond his individual heroism, it speaks to the power of athletes who bodaciously refuse to just ‘shut up and play.’ Carlos and Ziri capture the way that through sports, the actions of a few athletes resonate across the globe.”

—**William Hunter, executive director, National Basketball Players Association**

“If a picture is worth one thousand words, then the defiant image of John Carlos and Tommie Smith with their clenched black-gloved fists raised high in protest at the 1968 Olympics, must be worth at least one thousand more. In *The John Carlos Story*, one of those icons from ’68 uses his own words to describe that picture and a lifetime of substance that ultimately transcends such a famous moment in time. Providing context to history, *The John Carlos Story* rocks with the soulful energy of Black Power in this modern time.”

—**Dr. Todd Boyd, author, media commentator, and the Katherine and Frank Price Endowment Chair for the Study of Race and Popular Culture at the USC School of Cinematic Arts**

“History tells us iconic moments in sports are always enveloped in personal stories of sacrifice, courage, and angst. The lasting images that we see occur in a flash contain enriching back stories that are typically even more significant and tragic than the moment itself. John Carlos and Dave Zirin have combined to tell such a story. The moment that two men stood on the world platform to take a stand after they had become the best in the world is rich, complicated, and, most important, as relevant today as it was in Mexico City. [John Carlos and Dave Zirin] bring out a beautiful and passionate voice of truth to readers in this book about a man who became a legend.”

—**DeMaurice Smith, Director NFL Players Association**

“*The John Carlos Story* is a blow-by-blow detailing of triumph versus tragedy from the jump. Again, Dave Zirin uncovers and illuminates the mere footnotes of this sports history hero with his impeccable balance of truth. This story drills a hole into the myth of black athlete success and worship.”

—**Chuck D, Public Enemy**

The John Carlos Story

The Sports Moment That Changed the World



John Carlos
with Dave Zirin



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First and foremost, all praise to God, the Almighty

To my wife Charlene, my father, Earl, my mother, Vioris, all my brothers and sisters—Earl Jr., Mark and Hepsey—and especially to my brother Andrew who left this world too soon on March 13, 2011.

This book would have meant so much to him

To my beautiful children, Kimme, Travian, Malik, Shanna, and Winsetta, who were strongest when times were toughest

To my friends and associates Blaine Robinson, Dwane Tillman, and C. D. Jackson

To Dave Cunningham, George Foreman, Tommie Smith, Lee Evans, Wyomia Tyus, and every member of the 1968 Olympic Team

Thank you so much to the beloved principal at Palm Springs High School, Ricky Wright

With all my love and sincerity, to those regular folks around the world fighting for justice from the Midwest of the United States to the Middle East. All they want is what we wanted forty-three years ago: dignity and an acknowledgment of our humanity

Foreword



Cornel West

John Carlos is one of the grand figures of the twentieth century. His incredible political courage, indisputable athletic excellence, and indestructible spiritual fortitude sets him apart from most contemporary celebrities. In fact, his fame derives from his courage, excellence, and fortitude. Yet it is only in this powerful and poignant memoir that we learn of what he is made and who made him the way.

John Carlos is the human extension of a great family, great community, and great movement. Earl Vanderbilt Carlos and Vioris Carlos gave birth to John on June 5, 1945. His father, born in Camden, South Carolina, was a strong and proud black man in Jim Crow America. His mother, born in Jamaica and raised in Cuba, was a beautiful and determined woman in Jane Crow America. John was Harlem born and Harlem raised—a native son of the Big Apple. Even as a youth, he was on fire for justice—from his Robin Hood disposition to his precious moments spent with Malcolm X. He was known in the neighborhood for taking a stand for the vulnerable. Like most young black men, John Carlos directed his energy and talent toward sports and entertainment. He excelled in swimming—winning the New York City 200-meter freestyle championships. And he spent time with the legendary Fred Astaire in front of the famous Savoy Ballroom. Yet ugly racism turned him away from swimming to track and field. And he always retained his love of flair. His dyslexia was a major impediment to academic excellence—yet his quest for wisdom is genuine and endless.

John Carlos's decision to attend East Texas State was a pivotal moment in his life. Commerce, Texas, was light-years away from Harlem, USA. And relocating his precious family to Jim Crow Texas was even more adventurous. Yet they triumphed. John Carlos's record-setting performances on the track led him to the historic Olympic Project for Human Rights—the attempt of black athletes to boycott the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Working alongside Lee Evans, Tommie Smith, and D. Harry Edwards, Carlos joined the athletic wing of the black freedom movement. His meeting with Martin Luther King Jr. in New York City in support of the boycott is a lovely story. Needless to say, the buildup to Mexico City, the race, the unforgettable protest (gestures and symbolic socks, gloves, and beads), the solidarity with Mexican students, the deep bond with the Australian athlete Peter Norman, and the vicious treatment after the protest are the heart of this fascinating memoir.

The majestic spirit of John Carlos looms large in the darkness he encounters after Mexico City. In struggles, he suffers, and he shudders. Yet he endures with dignity—along with the help of family, especially Charlene, and friends like Rosie Grier and Mayor Tom Bradley. This courageous memoir is a testament to the triumph of John Carlos in the face of terror, trauma, and stigma. It is the tale of a strong black man who overcame forces trying to crush him—still on fire for justice and with a smile on his face!

Preface



Dave Zirin

It was inevitable that this revolt of the black athlete should develop. With struggles being waged by black people in the areas of education, housing, employment, and many others, it was only a matter of time before Afro-American athletes shed their fantasies and delusions and asserted their manhood and faced the facts of their existence.

—Dr. Harry Edwards, organizer, Olympic Project for Human Rights

It has been almost forty-three years since Tommie Smith, the son of a migrant worker, and Harlem John Carlos took the medal stand in the 200-meter dash at the 1968 Olympics and created what must be considered the most enduring, riveting image in the history of either sports or protest. But while the image has stood the test of time, the struggle that led to that moment has been cast aside, a casualty of our culture of political amnesia.

Smith and Carlos's gesture of resistance was not the result of some spontaneous urge to get face time on the evening news or any desire to boost their profile. It was instead a product of the revolt of black athletes in the 1960s. In the fall of 1967, amateur black athletes formed OPHR, the Olympic Project for Human Rights, to organize an African American boycott of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. OPHR, its lead organizer, Dr. Harry Edwards, and its primary athletic spokespeople, Smith and 400-meter sprinter Lee Evans, were deeply influenced by the black freedom struggle. Their goal was nothing less than to expose how the United States used black athletes to project a lie about racial relations both at home and internationally.

In their founding statement, they wrote,

We must no longer allow this country to use a few so-called Negroes to point out to the world how much progress she has made in solving her racial problems when the oppression of Afro-Americans is greater than it ever was. We must no longer allow the sports world to pat itself on the back as a citadel of racial justice when the racial injustices of the sports world are infamously legendary . . . any black person who allows himself to be used in the above matter is a traitor because he allows racist whites the luxury of resting assured that those black people in the ghettos are there because that is where they want to be. So we ask why should we run in Mexico only to crawl home?

OPHR had four central demands: hire more Black coaches, restore Muhammad Ali's heavyweight boxing title, remove Avery Brundage as head of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and disinvite South Africa and Rhodesia from the Olympics. Ali's belt had been taken by the boxing powers that be earlier in the year for his resistance to the Vietnam draft. By standing with Ali, OPHR was expressing its opposition to the war. By calling for the ouster of IOC head Avery Brundage, they were dragging out of the shadows a part of Olympic history those in power wanted to bury. Brundage was an anti-Semite and a white supremacist, best remembered today for sealing the deal on Hitler's

hosting of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. By demanding the exclusion of South Africa and Rhodesia, they aimed to convey their internationalism and solidarity with the black freedom struggles against apartheid in Africa.

The wind went out of the sails of a broader boycott for many reasons, most centrally because the IOC recommitted to banning South Africa from the games. But as John Carlos makes clear in his book, there were other even more pressing reasons. Athletes who had spent their whole lives preparing for their Olympic moment simply didn't want to give it up. They couldn't agree that the Olympics should be a stage of struggle, not when the sacrifice could be so great as the loss of the opportunity to compete on a world stage after years of predawn training sessions.

There also emerged accusations of a campaign of harassment and intimidation orchestrated by people supportive of Brundage. Although nothing was ever proven, fear of retribution from the Olympic establishment certainly helped to undermine the boycott. Despite these pressures, a handful of black Olympians was still determined to make a stand. Across the globe, they were hardly alone.

The atmosphere in the lead-up to the Olympics in Mexico City was electric with struggle. Already in 1968, the world had seen the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, proving that the US military was mired in a crisis far worse than generals, politicians, and the press had heretofore revealed. The Prague Spring, during which Czech students challenged tanks from the Stalinist Soviet Union, demonstrated that dissent was crackling on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The April 4 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the urban uprisings that followed—along with the exponential growth of the Black Panther Party in the United States—revealed an African American freedom struggle unassuaged by the civil rights reforms that had transformed the Jim Crow South. In France, the largest general strike in world history demonstrated unprecedented alliances between workers and students. Then, on October 2, ten days before the opening ceremonies of the 1968 Olympic Games, Mexican security forces massacred hundreds of students and workers in Mexico City's Tlatelolco Square.

Although the harassment and intimidation of the OPHR athletes cannot be compared to the slaughter, the intention was the same—to stifle protest and make sure that the Olympics were “suitable” for visiting dignitaries, heads of state, and an international audience. It was not successful.

As the time for the 200-meter dash approached, IOC officials fretted that OPHR athletes might succeed in giving expression to the global spirit of resistance that the IOC had hoped to keep from intruding on the “sanctity” of the Olympic spectacle. Brundage took the step of sending track and field legend Jesse Owens to the Olympic locker room to discourage any protest.

Jesse Owens was the most remarkable athlete of his time. On September 12, 1913, James Cleveland Owens was born the son of sharecroppers who toiled in the fields of Oakville, Alabama. The lack of even basic health care meant that Owens lost several siblings to early death, and he had his own brush with mortality when his mother had to cut a fibrous tumor out of his chest with a kitchen knife. But Owens loved to run, and he found glory when he won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics in Hitler's Germany and dealt a humiliating blow to Nazi theories of racial superiority.

But despite all of Owens's accomplishments, he could not outrun the reality of what it meant to be a black man in 1936 upon returning home. Opportunities were scarce, even for a college graduate with four gold medals. By December 1936, he was racing Julio McCaw, a five-year-old horse, in a sideshow spectacle to put food on the table. But after years outside Brundage's Olympic industry, Owens was brought back into the fold to serve the purpose of discouraging a new generation of track radicals.

As sports sociologist Douglas Hartmann wrote in his book *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests*, “In Owens's view, the boycott was nothing but ‘political

aggrandizement,' which he condemned on the grounds that 'there is no place in the athletic world for politics.' Instead, Owens claimed, 'The Olympics help bridge the gap of misunderstanding of people in this country,' thus promoting 'the way of American life.' In a follow-up statement published under the title 'Olympics a Bastion of Non-Discrimination,' the legendary figure added that athletic scholarships help youngsters to attend the colleges of their choice."

As 1968 Olympian Lee Evans told me,

Jesse was confused as far as I'm concerned. The USOC dogged him, and he knew they dogged him. Treating him badly after his exploits in the Olympic games. . . . We were really annoyed with him because he knew what we were going through, yet he pretended that it didn't exist and that just blew our minds when he called a meeting with us in Mexico City. I thought he called this meeting because Avery Brundage sent him there. Jesse Owens was sitting on the fifty-yard line with all the important people of the world, the royalties, the Avery Brundages. They have a special section where they sit in the games right at the fifty-yard line and Jesse, that's where he was sitting. He thought he was one of them. He had forgot that he was once an athlete struggling like we were. So he came and talked to us like he was Avery Brundage or the King of England or somebody and really talking stupid to us and we just shouted him out of the room. And then out of the blue he said, "You know, wearing those long black socks [running socks that were an act of identification with the black freedom struggle] is going to cut off the circulation in your legs." That's what he told us. We said this guy is really out of his mind! This is when we ran him out of there. I still admire him to this day, that's why I say he was confused, coming to talk to us like that because we knew that he was being victimized. He was a victim, and we felt sorry for him actually.

Owens said to Smith and Carlos, "The black fist is a meaningless symbol. When you open it, you have nothing but fingers—weak, empty fingers. The only time the black fist has significance is when there's money inside. There's where the power lies."

Owens's words to Smith and Carlos that day backfired. On the second day of the games, Smith and Carlos took their stand. Smith set a world record, winning the 200-meter gold, and Carlos captured the bronze. Smith then took out the black gloves. The silver medalist, a runner from Australia named Peter Norman, attached an OPHR patch onto his chest to show his solidarity on the medal stand (Norman was far more than just a bystander and also paid a terrific price for his act of solidarity.)

As the stars and stripes ran up the flagpole and the national anthem played, Smith and Carlos bowed their heads and raised their fists in what was described across the globe as a "Black Power salute," creating a moment that would define, for better and worse, the rest of their lives. But the protest was far more to their actions on the medal stand than just the gloves. The two men wore no shoes, to protest black poverty. They wore beads around their necks, to protest lynching.

Within hours, word was out that Smith and Carlos had been stripped of their medals (although that was not in fact true) and expelled from the Olympic Village. Avery Brundage justified this by saying, assumedly with a straight face, "They violated one of the basic principles of the Olympic games: that politics play no part whatsoever in them."

Ironically, it was Brundage's reaction that really spurred the protest and catapulted it into the limelight. As the preeminent sportswriter of the century, Red Smith, wrote, "By throwing a fit over the incident, suspending the young men and ordering them out of Mexico, [Brundage] multiplied the impact of the protest a hundredfold."

In Brundage's unpublished autobiography written years later, he was still muttering about Smith and Carlos. "Warped mentalities and cracked personalities seem to be everywhere and impossible to eliminate," he wrote.

But Brundage was not alone in his furious reaction. The *Los Angeles Times* accused Smith and Carlos of a "Nazi-like salute." *Time* had a distorted version of the Olympic logo on its cover, but instead of the motto "Faster, Higher, Stronger," blared "Angrier, Nastier, Uglier." The *Chicago Tribune* called the act "an embarrassment visited upon the country," an "act contemptuous of the United States," and "an insult to their countrymen." Smith and Carlos were "renegades" who would come home to be "greeted as heroes by fellow extremists," lamented the paper.

But the coup de grâce was delivered by a young reporter for the *Chicago American* named Brecht Meyer. "One gets a little tired of having the United States run down by athletes who are enjoying themselves at the expense of their country," he wrote. "Protesting and working constructively against racism in the United States is one thing, but airing one's dirty clothing before the entire world during a fun-and-games tournament was no more than a juvenile gesture by a couple of athletes who should have known better." He then described Smith and Carlos as "a pair of black-skinned storm troopers." The remarks from Meyer, who was soon catapulted to national network fame, scarred and infuriated Carlos to this day.

The harshest rebuke came from fellow Olympian and boxer George Foreman, who upon winning the gold medal, waved a miniature American flag and bowed to the Mexico City audience. This was perceived by many as an act of anti-solidarity with Smith and Carlos. As damaging as that moment was, it could have been worse. As Carlos explains in these pages, he and Smith narrowly missed being there in the front row for Foreman's display of support for the Olympic "tradition."

But if Smith and Carlos were attacked from a multitude of directions, they also received many expressions of support, including from some unlikely sources. For example, the US Olympic crew team, all white and entirely from Harvard, issued the following statement: "We—as individuals—have been concerned about the place of the black man in American society in their struggle for equal rights. As members of the U.S. Olympic team, each of us has come to feel a moral commitment to support our black teammates in their efforts to dramatize the injustices and inequities which permeate our society."

OPHR and the actions of Smith and Carlos were a stunning rebuke to the hypocrisy at the heart of the Olympics. Brundage's Olympics professed to be about athletics over politics and a venue that brought nations together. But in reality, it was an orgy of nationalism resting on a foundation of politics that excused and legitimized apartheid nations and fascist dictators.

Unfortunately, the OPHR also mirrored a deep flaw found in other sections of the New Left and Black Power movements: women were largely shut out. Many of OPHR's calls to action had statements about "reclaiming manhood," as if African American women weren't victims of racism and couldn't be part of a strong movement against it. Despite this exclusion, many women athletes eventually became major voices of solidarity. "I'd like to say that we dedicate our relay win to John Carlos and Tommie Smith," said Wyomia Tyus, the anchor of the women's gold-medal-winning 4x100 relay team.

Smith and Carlos's display on the medal stand was a watershed moment of resistance. It has been enshrined in the national consciousness and immortalized in popular culture—from Reebok ads with P-Diddy adopting the Smith and Carlos pose to an appearance on *The Simpsons*. Unlike other 1960s iconography—Woodstock, Abbie Hoffman, Richard Nixon—the moment doesn't feel musty. It still packs a wallop. In Harlem, street-corner merchants even today sell T-shirts with the image of Smith

and Carlos emblazoned on them. On HBO in the fall of 2010, you could watch the 2004 documentary *Fists of Freedom*, which told the story behind the protest. On ESPN, a frequent question posed athletes competing in the 2008 Games in Beijing was whether they would “pull a Smith and Carlos” protest the lack of human rights in China—though the question is somewhat off the mark since the two former athletes did not go to Mexico City to criticize Mexico. In 2010, I appeared on a panel on the history of sports and resistance with Carlos, after which a long line of young people born years—even decades—after 1968 patiently waited for his signature on everything from posters and T-shirts to hastily procured pieces of notebook paper.

Why has that moment over forty years ago retained its cultural capital? The most obvious is that people love a good redemption song. Smith and Carlos have been proven correct. They were reviled for taking a stand and using the Olympic podium to do it. But their “radical” demands have since proved to be prescient. Today the idea of standing up to apartheid South Africa, racism, and for Muhammad Ali seems a matter of common decency rather than radical rabble-rousing. After years of death threats and being treated as pariahs in the world of athletics, Smith and Carlos attend ceremonial unveilings of statues erected in their honor. It’s a remarkable journey that says volumes about how new generations have come to appreciate their struggle and sacrifice.

There’s another reason why the image of black-gloved fists thrust in the air have retained their power. Smith and Carlos sacrificed privilege and glory, fame and fortune, for a larger cause—civil rights. As Carlos says, “A lot of the [black] athletes thought that winning [Olympic] medals would supercede or protect them from racism. But even if you won a medal, it ain’t going to save your momma. It ain’t going to save your sister or children. It might give you fifteen minutes of fame, but what about the rest of your life?”

Carlos’s attitude resonates because we still live in a world where racism is evident. If Hurricane Katrina taught us nothing else, it’s that for every Barack Obama and Condoleezza Rice, there are many communities from New Orleans to South Central Los Angeles where poverty on one side and racism on the other form a vice that crushes the potential of too many black Americans.

We are constantly told that “sports and politics don’t mix.” The great Howard Cosell, in a venomous critique, once said that this was “rule number 1 of the Jockocracy.” The supposedly pristine idealism of sports, of competition on an equal playing field, was to be quarantined from that nasty political netherworld where ideas and social concerns threatened to ruin the party.

Today, major sports columnists deliver a flurry of verbal body blows to any athlete who dares to take a political stand. But in an era when the building of publicly funded stadiums has become a substitute for anything resembling an urban policy; at a time when local governments build public stadiums on the taxpayers’ dime, siphoning off millions of dollars into commercial enterprises even as schools, hospitals, and bridges crumble, one can hardly say that sports exists in a world completely distinct from political concerns. When the sports pages are filled with lurid tales of steroid use, high-profile sexual harassment suits, and endless speculation about the personal lives of players like Barry Roethlisberger and Tiger Woods, then we’ve entered a realm of sports reporting as tabloid distraction instead of as a lens to better understand our world.

Critical is the understanding that sports can also be a place of inspiration that doesn’t transcend the political but becomes the political, a place where we see our own dreams and aspirations played out in dynamic Technicolor. “Politics” can seem remote and alien to the vast majority of people. But the playing field is where we can project our every thought, fear, and hope. We want to believe fiercely that it is the one place where ability alone is how we are judged. If you *can* play, you *will* play—no matter your color, class, sex, or ethnicity. This is why boxers like Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali

Olympic stars like Wilma Rudolph and Jim Thorpe, tennis players like Billie Jean King and the Williams sisters, are viewed consciously or not as political beings, carriers of the dream that the playing field for all of us might be made a little more level. John Carlos is central to this tradition and this is why his story feels simultaneously relevant and revelatory. This is someone who was the first person in history to win the 100, 200, and 4x100 races in both the NCAA and NAIA finals. This is someone who stiff-armed a place in the athletic pantheon because he felt like he had something to say, even if it meant paying a hellacious price.

John Carlos's story—a heartbreaking, remarkably principled, and painful journey—holds the potential to bring strength to both civic-minded athletes and sports-minded citizens concerned by the pressing social issues of our times. But it's also more than that. John Carlos's family history is a story of migration, of struggling to make ends meet, of dreaming of a better life, of service in the armed forces, of fighting for democracy abroad and finding it lacking at home. It's a uniquely American story, one that deserves to be told for what it can teach us about the sacrifices made so the next generation can move forward.



To Sleep with Anger

It's ESPN. Owned by Disney. An empire of its own. And they are flying me to Mexico City. They want to film Tommie Smith and me as we return to the infamous site of what they call "the fists of freedom." They had already given us an award at their awards show. The Arthur Ashe Courage Award it was called. People stood and clapped for us. I just can't believe it. I'm no star, no hero. I'm a guidance counselor at Palm Springs High School in California. As recently as three years ago, I was lonelier than a raindrop in the Sahara. No one wanted to talk to me. No one wanted to say my name. Some young reporter found me in my office in California and asked if after all these years I felt embraced. "I don't feel embraced, I feel like a survivor, like I survived cancer," I told him. "It's like you are sick and no one wants to be around you, and when you're well, everyone who thought you would go down for good doesn't even want to make eye contact. It was almost like we were on a deserted island. That's where Tommy Smith and John Carlos were. But we survived."

Then I was just a survivor and I was simply alone.

Now I'm waiting to get on this plane and go to Mexico City because people want to hear what I think. A man of African descent is about to walk into the Oval Office, and the cameras want to record a story about the progress made by black people and how far we've come. If they want to hear the story, they're talking to the wrong man. I have a story. You better believe I have a story. But it's not that story.

It starts by understanding what is happening to me right now. No, not getting on this plane to Mexico City. Right now, a young man is staring at me, smiling. He comes up to me, a little scruff and beard on his chin, a twinkle in his eye and a half smile. No *hello*. No *how are you*. I know what's coming next because it happens too many times to count. He throws his fist in the air, bows his head and says, "I just had to do that." Then he scampers off. No autograph request. No "Hello, Mr. Carlos." No goodbyes. My friend asks me if that happens often. I try—and fail—to look annoyed, but I can't hide the crinkle at the corners of my mouth. I say, "Every damn day"—and at that moment—for just a second—my knee doesn't feel like someone took a sledgehammer to it, courtesy of a Philadelphia Eagles training camp many years ago (I'll get to that part of the story later). My eyes don't sting with infections. My kidneys don't feel like I just went fifteen rounds with Rocky Balboa. I am twenty-two again. And I feel a joyous sense of a life well lived.

Because here is the secret: I still feel the fire. It's been forty years, but if I shut my eyes, I can still feel the fire from those days, and if I open my eyes, I still see the fires all around me. I didn't like the way the world *was*, and I believe that there needs to be some changes about the way the world *is*. I'm still feeling the fire about the way history can take these sacred moments of struggle and sell them back to us by the pound. I feel the fire about the way my heroes Malcolm X and Paul Robeson have become postage stamps. I feel the fire that Muhammad Ali has become a walking postage stamp, a man without a voice. I feel the fire that Dr. King is a commemorative cup at McDonald's. I'm angry that all our political teeth have been subjected to a pop culture root canal.

Let's start with that phrase defining who we were: "The Revolt of the Black Athlete." You can talk

that to the cleaners right now. It's a way of keeping us on the playing field, safe, sweet, and sellable. ~~don't think of it as the revolt of the black athlete at all. It was the revolt of the black man.~~ Athletics was my occupation. I didn't do what I did as an athlete. I raised my voice in protest as a man. I was fortunate to grow up in the era of Dr. King and Paul Robeson, of baseball players like Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella. Roy used to come into my dad's shoe-repair shop on 142nd Street and Lenox in Harlem. I could see how they were treated as black athletes. I would ask myself, "Why is this happening?" Racism meant that none of us could truly have our day in the sun. Without education, housing, and employment, we were going down the drain—from "family hood" to "neighborhood" to just "the hood." If you can't give your wife or son or daughter what they need to live, after a while you try to escape who you are. That's why people turn to drugs and why our communities have been destroyed. And that's why there was a revolt. That's also why I wrote this book. Not to tear anyone or anything down, but to rebuild.



Harlem World

Harlem. Born and raised. I came to this earth on June 5, 1945. I was a breech birth, which meant that I arrived with my backside facing the world, making it that much more difficult for everyone around me. Funny that.

626 Lenox Avenue was my first address. It was roughly half a block from the Savoy Ballroom, maybe just another stone's throw to the Cotton Club. If you don't know the names of those two magical places, then you need to look them up. This was where you could find music, dance, and the finest performers of the twentieth century. Right in the heart of Harlem, where the days were rough and the nights came alive as the swells came uptown because we were the home of the best. Growing up, it made me feel—to be so close to so much greatness—that I didn't have to sit on the back of anybody's bus.

Yes, I was there in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance. And then I watched it become a casualty, strangled in the crib, crying for the music that had stopped playing. Harlem back then is what I would call “salt and pepper.” It was white folks, black folks, and a community of togetherness, at least to my young eyes. We were like a salad bowl, so to speak, at that particular time. The nation was segregated, Harlem was integrated. But then, just as we saw people marching down South for integration on our television screens, with the dogs and the hoses, I began to see this exodus. I was nine years old. The white folks decided to pack up and leave Harlem, and they took their savings with them.

You know what real estate costs in Harlem today? I bet they regret it now. But this process, called gentrification, comes at its own price. Way too much of Uptown has become off limits, as we've been just priced out. I am glad my old stomping grounds aren't a war zone anymore, but I feel like I can't go home again because my home is a memory.

Among my circle of friends, I was one of the fortunate kids because I had a mom and a dad in the household. The drug epidemic was just starting its slow burn in Harlem, and among too many members of my community, it hung around our necks like a noose on fire. There was “King Kong,” which was like drinkable PCP. The drugs always had an easier path into single-parent homes. A lot of people lived their lives around drugs and alcohol until it crushed them. Fortunately for me, I had a mom, a dad, two brothers, and one sister who stayed clear of all the junk. Sometimes it felt like luck, sometimes it felt like someone was watching over us, and sometimes it just felt like we were all so focused on getting out, we stayed clear of what would have chained us to a sinking ship.

My father's name was Earl Vanderbilt Carlos. He was born in 1895, just thirty-two years after the Emancipation Proclamation, a sharecropper's son in Camden, South Carolina. He fought in the First World War, in which he won a whole series of citations for bravery in a segregated army. Ask him about the war and he'd tell you that the white officers treated him one way and one way only: “Like shit.” By trade, he was a carpenter, but his skill set was with a pair of shoes. He was a man with a trade that today hardly exists and probably seems as remote and distant as being born in the nineteenth century and winning medals in the First World War. He was a cobbler, a shoemaker with his own shop, a slick combination of bunched muscles and nimble fingers. In my eyes, when he roamed the

shop, he was a man of authority and a trade that stretched back in time. But on the side, he was one's cobbler. "Big Earl" Carlos was a hustler and a gambler of the first order.

"Big Earl" made it clear, though, that the hustle was for after work and not a replacement for the hard labor that built the stability our family depended on in a neighborhood that could be a roller coaster of excitement and pitfalls.

My father was a workingman. He would open his storefront doors at seven o'clock in the morning and keep them open until eight at night sometimes. He treated his three young boys like men. He wanted to make sure we had freedom to do our thing and learn our way, but he was very stern about certain things, like going to school. He said, "You better put time in at that desk until the end of the day."

Then came the hustle.

That wasn't just my daddy. That was almost every black man in our neighborhood at that particular time. Black men, in particular, just couldn't make it off the salaries that they were earning at that particular time. They always had their little ballroom craps game going, or a poker game, they were running the numbers, that kind of thing. And I remember when the poker game was at my house, my mom would sell dinners to folks gathered around the table. My father would stop the game and every last person there would have to drop something in the till. And drop they would. Me and my brothers, Andrew and Earl Jr., would be serving drinks, bringing them food, whatever we could do. I saw a bunch of fellas talking, eating, smoking—and some with math skills in counting cards that would shame a professor at MIT. I think this is just a snapshot of a lot of families doing what they had to do to make ends meet.

My mom, Vioris, was born in Jamaica and raised in Cuba until she was seventeen. She was a nurse's aide at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. My mom worked days, and then she switched to the night shift so the small wages a nurse's aide brought home were just a pinch higher, but every pinch counted. For everyone out there who ever had a mom work nights—midnight to 8 a.m.—you know what that does to a family. You wake up with a bad dream, you're not going to wake up Earl Vanderbilt Carlos, so you miss your mother terribly. But at the same time, you are filled with a special kind of awe that someone would sacrifice so much for you, your brothers, and your sisters. A family can go one of two ways when the mother works such difficult hours: it can split you apart or bring you together. We stayed together. We stayed together because we saw it like we were all in the same boat and part of the same project. School was just one part of our lives. Everyone worked, and everyone hustled. My brothers and me worked in my father's shop. And I, along with my crew, opened the casino doors for the swells over at the Savoy Ballroom.

I always had my crew—five or six fellas who I still count among some of the best friends a person could ever have. We rolled together day and night, and we lived to hustle. How couldn't we? If you lived in Hershey, Pennsylvania, you'd probably dig on chocolate. Well, if you lived next door to the Savoy Ballroom, you'd hustle. It was a magnet, a force of nature that is difficult to describe to young people today who hear music in stadiums or through headphones. There we were in Harlem, and even on a weekend, there was a constant flow of folks coming up there with big rolls of cash they were down on a flash. Everyone came through the Savoy—from Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong to Ella Fitzgerald and Lena Horne. We opened doors for every cab that rolled up from downtown, and they would hand us money like it was nothing. But our real thing was performing right there out in front of the Savoy. We were the pregame show, the performance before the performance.

My crew and I would go down to LC's ice cream factory down by the Harlem River, and we'd walk away with a stack of empty canisters. Then down by the Savoy, those ice cream buckets became

drums, congas, timbales, or any kind of percussion you could imagine. Give us half a dozen ice cream canisters, and we could hold a beat. Then a couple of the fellas in my crew would keep drums going while the rest of us would sing harmonies. This wasn't any effort to do any kind of Harlem or even Motown sound. We took it to the "way-back machine" and sang the old standards that fit the tastes of the swells striding in from their cabs and limousines. Think about songs like "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" or "Swanee River." The guys would do a little soft-shoe dance to our ice cream bucket drumbeat, and then I was in charge of hustling around asking for gratuities for our top-notch performance. It was really something special. Sometimes people would say that we were the real show, and then they would just go into the Savoy for drinks.

One individual who used to come through the Savoy on a regular basis was Fred Astaire, the dancer and movie star. Astaire would always stop to watch us, tapping his foot to the beat. Then he would never fail to flip us a silver dollar. Please remember that this was a time when a silver dollar was like all the money in the world to us kids. As he walked away, he'd say, "You kids always give a good show for the money." Fred Astaire didn't know it, but he gave me something that has stayed with me throughout my life. Whether I was running track, playing football, or speaking to young kids, I was always going to make sure that I gave people a show. Astaire taught us that you had better give a damn about the value of flair.

But that wasn't all I learned at the Savoy. No, the education was much deeper than that. Here I was in Harlem, and the majority of people coming into our uptown paradise were white people coming from downtown. I also saw how even when our African American royalty, "Satchmo," Ella, "Lady Day," would be performing, they would always have to go in through the back door. This spoke to me in a very special way. Growing up in Harlem, I didn't know I was "black." I was a human being like Johnny Carlos, son of Earl Carlos. That's who I was. But going down to the Savoy I saw who was serving up the good times and who was being served. I saw who ate well and who provided the entertainment. It made my mind work overtime, thinking about issues that young people shouldn't have to ponder. Seeing the great black performers every week made my buttons burst with pride; at the same time I wondered why they had to sing for their supper.

The issues mattered to me because I was starting to realize in these preteen years that I also had a set of skills people would pay to watch.

Athletics

The great challenge is to put it into words. I always knew I was different just because of the way I could move, the way my body felt the breeze whip by when I would pump my legs. From the time I first laced up sneakers, I just felt this sense of being quicker and stronger than the next person. It was just a fact of life. I first figured it out in the neighborhood: not on the track, but in the dust and on the street corners. I figured it out in circumstances that weren't a game. My older brothers didn't like to fight. They were four years, five years older than me, and they didn't want to, as we said, "throw hands." Unfortunately, the more they didn't want to fight, the more other people wanted to fight them. I would have to go out and take on their bullies. It was like my family chore. I would have to go out and keep those big kids off my brothers. It's true that I was smaller, but my hands and my feet both had a life of their own. After I landed a couple of jabs, or after some big corner boys realized they couldn't lay a hand on me because of my speed, they would come to the correct conclusion that the Carlos boys weren't worth the trouble.

People who saw me fight kept trying to get me involved with sports. Being good at sports meant status, it meant style, and it meant you were noticed. For me this was particularly attractive because I was the kid wearing the dunce cap in the corner at school. That's not just an expression. My teacher literally made me wear a dunce cap in the corner. Back then, the word "dyslexia" wasn't even in the dictionary, but dyslexia was my affliction, and school was an exercise in humiliation. Sports saved me from being an outcast. Ask anyone who's been called a "dumb jock," and as nasty a phrase as that is, it's certainly preferable to just being called "dumb."

When I started playing sports, the last thought on my mind was taking part in track and field. Running is what you did to get away from bullies or the police. Running is what you did to train for other sports. It never crossed my mind that track and field would be my calling. I played basketball and could certainly hang on the courts. But so much time was spent wasted on arguing over who fouled whom and talking trash that it bored more than inspired me. I was the guy who wouldn't high-five any teammates or say a word except to yell at people, "Just play the damn game!" After a while, my mind was turned off.

I wanted a sport where chatter wasn't a part of the equation and maybe that's why my first love was swimming. I was intrigued with absolutely anything that had to do with water. At that time, it just seemed like every single time I turned on the radio, I heard about another person swimming the English Channel. First of all, I wanted to know what in the world was the English Channel, why in the world he was trying to swim it, and what would he possibly get in return for doing it? My father explained to me that the English Channel was a substantial body of water, and he was probably swimming that great distance to establish a record, or he's doing it for self-satisfaction, or perhaps for just a measure of fame. That just sparked more questions. "Well if he's swimming it, how does he swim? Does he swim with a knife in his mouth? How does he fight the sharks off? What happens when he needs to go to the bathroom?"

My curiosity took over, and I would constantly be asking my father questions about the art of swimming. This was like asking a bald man about his favorite shampoos. My father was not a swimmer himself. He used to always tease me and say he swam like a rock: straight to the bottom. But he was a good man, and even though he didn't know a blip about swimming, he took time off work to go to the public library and research exactly how a person would begin to go about the task of swimming the English Channel—just so he could answer my question. Remember this is before the Internet. Research wasn't something a shoemaker and sharecropper's son did easily. But he did it, and piece by piece, he explained to me exactly how a person would go about swimming the English Channel. "Well that's what I want to do," I said. "I want to swim the English Channel."

Olympics

Of course I listened to every sport on the radio, but nothing captured my mind, heart, and spirit quite like the Olympic Games. When I first learned about the existence of the Olympics, my reaction was different than anything I had ever felt when listening to baseball or basketball or football or any of the other sports that I'd seen people play in the neighborhood. The sheer variety of sports, the idea of the finest athletes from around the globe gathering and representing their countries: it was different, and the fact that it was every four years just made it feel like an extra kind of special.

I asked my father about it, and he told me, "John, this is where all the nations in the world put their problems aside and focus on athletic competition." He explained the medal system—gold, silver, and

bronze—and said to me, “You would have to be one of the top three in order to win any medal, and those who make it to that platform are the ones who can really, honestly, and truly be classified as one of the greatest.” That just enhanced my desire to make it as a swimmer, and now I could add to my dream that not only was I going to swim the English Channel, not only was I going to go to the Olympics, but based on the history my father had laid out for me, I was going to be the first black to represent America in the water. I was twelve years old, and I just knew that this was what I needed to do: I wanted to make the Olympic team and win a medal. I would do whatever it took to make that happen.

I just loved being in that pool and my great aspiration was to go to the Olympics as a swimmer. I liked swimming freestyle and with little training I won a citywide 200-meter freestyle championship.

Swim club coaches and officials took me aside and told me that if I took my raw skills, and put in a lot of grueling, serious work, they could see me taking it all the way to the Olympics. Now I might not have liked talking trash on the court or in the pool, but on the corners, I ran my mouth and talked up all the time. I would say, “Mark it down, Johnny Carlos is going to go to the Olympics as a swimmer!”

I talked about it every day, and it got to the point where my daddy, after talking around it for some time, decided to have our “come to Jesus” talk. It was in his shoe shop. He had heard me running my mouth, and so he decided he had to do something that I know was incredibly difficult for such a good man: he intervened on my dream. Remember, Earl Carlos was an older man who had made the journey from the cotton fields to a shop near the Cotton Club. He took me aside, his eyes heavy with what he felt like he had to say. “Johnny, I don’t want to see those hopes get up too high,” he said. He said it as gently as he could, but he made it clear to me that I was going down a path where there would be more barriers than opportunity. To make it as an Olympic swimmer, you needed private coaches, private pools, and pay-to-play swim clubs. He just wanted me to see the hard facts in front of my face. Big dreams die hard. I loved swimming so much, so I kept raising arguments.

Finally this sixty-two-year-old man took his twelve-year-old son by the shoulders and said to me, “John, you’re not going to be able to go to the Olympics for swimming. It’s not about the fact that you’re the best. I know you’re the best. But you need to listen to me, and I will say it again: there is nowhere you can train. And you have to train to go to the Olympics. So where would you train?”

You never think about that as a kid. You just think you’re Superman. You just do it. And he repeated the question: “No, son, where would you train?” And he pointed out that I couldn’t train in the Harlem River because two or three kids every summer would drown trying to swim in the Harlem River. “You can’t go to the public pool because there’s no room to train because everybody’s in there trying to cool off,” he said. Then he read my mind. “And you can’t go to a private club,” he said.

“Why not Daddy?” I asked. “Is it because you can’t afford to pay for me to join a club? You know I work at the Savoy and I work in the shop. We can do it!” He shook his head and said, “No, Johnny, it’s not that.” I started to get angry. “Well what is it?” I demanded. And he said, “The color of your skin.”

“What do you mean the color of my skin?” I asked. He said, “Well this is why they haven’t had any black swimmers up until this point to represent America, because they don’t allow the blacks to join the private clubs. And you have to be involved in a club that’s connected to the Olympic people in order to train.” He explained that they train three times a day in the finest pools with the best coaches and that just wasn’t a place where I’d be welcome—because of the color of my skin.

Now keep in mind, and I say this with humility, no one ever had to tell me that black was beautiful. I grew up in Harlem and let’s just say that even at the tender age of twelve, I had the

beauties at the Savoy calling me tall, dark, and handsome. My ego needed its own zip code. And no here I was hearing that because of the way I looked, I'd be on the outside looking in. It didn't make sense. It was like hearing that the sky was green.

All the worse, the person opening my eyes to this piece of knowledge was the proudest, strongest man I knew. Unless Earl Carlos was fixing shoes, he was never on his knees. Daddy tried to break the tension by cracking some jokes, saying he could train me if I wanted to come in last. I remember smiling, but it was a gesture for him and not for me. I was dejected and depressed. For the first time in my life, racism had bitten me and left a mark. For the first time, I felt like something less than other. The dream to swim had been snatched away.

Without question, there were public pools in Harlem. But you had to take only one look at the pools and see that they weren't fit for serious swimming. There was a pool in my neighborhood called Colonial Pool where all the black kids and parents would go during the summer to cool off and splash around. It was only open in the summer and you would have kids jumping in with their jeans on and wearing sneakers. I knew that the Colonial Pool wasn't an option. A short train ride away was a well-tended public pool with empty lanes that served a white neighborhood. I asked my Daddy if we could go there every week to practice. I was getting desperate and honestly, I knew what he was going to say, but I had to hear him say it. "Well, Johnny, let's talk that out," he said. "You've crashed that pool before. What happened when you and your friends jumped in the water?" I didn't have to say the answer because Earl Carlos knew. When we jumped in the water, the parents would get up and call their kids out, like something was going to roll off us and roll onto them. It was like the way people would run if there was a dead animal or something worse floating in the water. Before, I thought it was a neighborhood thing, that they didn't want outsiders in their pool. At that moment I realized that it wouldn't have mattered if I lived next door to the pool. The problem was skin-deep.

My dad saw the look on my face, processing a whole series of emotions. He was a blunt man and made no apologies for that. He said to me, "This is the exact reason why you need to get it through your head that you will never be an Olympic swimmer. Whether it's a public pool or private pool, you can't even get in the water, then you better believe that this is done before it even starts." Then he looked at me with a challenging look, because he knew his son like he knew himself. "Swimming is out," he said. "So what are you going to do? What are you prepared to do about it? Will this stop you from making it to the Olympics?"

My face, which was all twisted with sadness, became more of a serious scowl. "No, Daddy, I ain't letting that stop me," I said. "I'm going to have to do something else." It was on to the next sport, and it was a very logical choice, given some of my "extracurricular" activities. This time I was going to make it in boxing. In short order, I put swimming out of my mind and joined the Golden Gloves. I was already throwing hands on the corners, protecting my brothers, and with the gloves on, it was just the same game with less bruising on my knuckles. In the ring, I could put a man to sleep with either hand and people started whispering in my ear that this would in fact be my ticket to the Olympic Games.

There was one problem with this plan, and that was the one opponent I had no hope of defeating: Mama. If my Daddy pulled me out of the pool, Mama yanked those gloves right off my twelve-year-old hands. Mama stepped in and said that I was her baby boy and she would not sit by and see me get hurt or my sweet face marked up. She wasn't emotional about it. Remember, Mama was a nurse working the night shift. That means she saw what's called "blunt force trauma" on a daily basis. She knew even back then that there was a lot more to boxing than ending up with a busted lip or a bloody nose. Back then in the gym, they called it getting "punchy." She knew it as a concussion. Today we know so much more about how getting those concussions at a young age ruins your life when you get

older.

Mama normally had trouble making me do anything, but even when you're a born-troublemaker like me, I couldn't defy her. When mom looks you in the eye and makes you promise to stop doing something, you do it. She looked at me across our kitchen table, her hands folded nervously in her lap, and made me say it: "I promise you that I will quit boxing." I looked at my hands and I knew I could put a man down for the count with either hand. It was a gift, but it was a gift I had to let go. I gritted my teeth and did it for her. Now that I'm on the older side of life, with my mind sharp as it is, I'm forever grateful to her.

Now we were all clear that it wasn't going to be boxing, and I still dreamed of the Olympics, but I wasn't sure what would be next on the list. I still never imagined it would be track and field. When I would, when there was nothing to do, have races around the projects, around the ditches and through the gutters, and I would leave my crew in the dust. But to me, running meant three things. It was what you did to train for other sports, it was what you did to deliver messages as fast as possible through the projects for the grown-ups—our version of the Internet—and it was what you did to escape the police. That last reason was at the heart of my extracurricular activities, and it's what eventually made people notice my running to the point where I finally found my calling.

Robin Hood

I used to love the movie *Robin Hood* with Errol Flynn. I loved seeing the adventures of the man who robbed from the rich to give to the poor. I led a crew of young men who committed ourselves to doing the same thing, and the streets of Harlem were our Sherwood Forest. After all, I didn't have the option to swim and I wasn't allowed to box. I needed some extracurricular activity and I had the energy to do something.

It was always a simple plan. I would lead my crew under cover of night and break into the freight trains that would be parked right across from us under the 155th Street Bridge. These trains were barely guarded and were easy pickings. Each of us would pick up 25-pound boxes of food, make our way back across the bridge, and feed people in the community. I would be running with two boxes—that's 50 pounds on my shoulders—coming across that bridge. Even with that weight, I would be able to outrun the night watchmen and the police.

This on its own gave me a reputation in the community. People would watch from their windows and say, "That boy Johnny Carlos can outrun the guards and the police with 50 pounds on his shoulders!" As time went on, this unique exercise made me stronger and stronger, from my shoulders down to my thighs. I didn't realize that this "exercise" in giving back to the people was also giving me a level of physical training that, coupled with natural speed, would put me on a world stage.

I'm well aware that all this might sound strange: breaking into freight trains and carrying 50 pounds on my shoulders and then giving all the food to the poorest people in Harlem. Hell, it sounds strange to me now, but at the time it made a whole lot of sense. A lot of the men in Harlem at that particular time were missing in action. There were a lot of fathers that were MIA from their families. There were a lot of mothers trying to raise kids on their own. There were a lot of men being swallowed up by the drugs, the heroin that we called "King Kong," the lack of jobs, or the prisons. It was difficult or even damn near impossible for a single mother to raise a family if she had two or three kids. When a parent was missing in action, that meant a lot of kids didn't have anything in their iceboxes or cupboards. We are talking about more than empty bellies. We are talking about food deprivation, just

walking distance from the Cotton Club.

I understood how lucky I was—in my own house, with two parents who worked day and night and made a stable living. That's not to mention two brothers and a sister doing the same. We had a five-income household! On a regular basis, I would bring a lot of my buddies home to eat lunch, and then they'd come back uninvited, like stray puppy dogs, for dinner. I remember Mama saying, "Johnny, I hate to break it to you, but we can't feed everybody. This is a home, not a cafeteria!" I knew she was right, but at the same time, I thought what I was doing was even more right. But I didn't have control over my Mama's kitchen. My friends—and the friends of my friends, and their friends—needed to eat as well. I needed another way to get them food because Mama was going to put a padlock on the icebox if I wasn't careful. I needed another plan. I knew they had the freight trains over there in the yards outside of the old Yankee Stadium. Three of my partners and I began to go on expeditions. These were the three guys in my crew whom I was absolutely tightest with and I knew wouldn't breathe a word of this to anybody. I told them, "Man, we're going to go over to those freight trains and see what those guys have inside that we can circulate into the community." My boys asked if we were going to get paid. I said, "Fellas. This isn't about us. This is about Robin Hood. We are hitting those trains and putting it right onto the streets of Harlem." On our first trip over, our stomachs were a mess of nerves. We didn't know what was on those trains. We didn't know if a watchman or some drifter with a blade might be about, but most of all none of us wanted to end up in juvie. We stepped softly on the trains, around some sleeping security guard, and made it into the storage car. It was filled top to bottom with frozen foods: every vegetable from spinach to succotash. The next car was filled with baby clothes. It was everything we needed in Harlem and didn't have—and it was right across the bridge! What would Robin Hood do?

Standing there in that train car, my crew looked at me, and we all had the same question: "Were we actually going to go through with this?" At that moment I had my doubts. My father was a very serious-minded man, a very strong American, a veteran, and someone who hated racism but loved his country and thought he went through hell in the First World War to make this place better for black folks. My mother had that same character, working the night shift—and the two of them being as charitable and honest a pair of parents as anyone could ever hope to have in their lives. They brought up the Carlos children to walk the straight and narrow, to respect the law of the land, and they pounded this into our heads at every opportunity.

I was as frozen as that succotash standing in that car, hearing their voices in my head. But I heard different voices swirling around at the same time. I didn't want to go against anything my father and mother taught us to believe in, but I couldn't deny that those voices felt more connected to my heart and soul. These voices spoke to me of the fact that all across the South people were breaking a law called Jim Crow. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a God in my mother's eyes and wasn't he breaking the law? And that's when it came into my mind that there are always two laws that need to be weighed: man's law and God's law, and God put food everywhere on the planet before man stepped in. God made this earth so no child would ever have to go to sleep with a rumble in their tummy or not have clothes. That was the law I was ready to follow and to die for.

I looked at my buddies and told them, "Alright, fellas, load up and get those boxes on your shoulders and let's run." We then went around Harlem handing out food and clothes like *Robin Hood and his Merry Men* in Technicolor. We had a reputation for doing the right thing and being able to lose ourselves in the shadows. But often times, we escaped just by the skin of our teeth. Often we had to think and plan ahead. One night, we navigated across the 155th Street Bridge. There was a man in charge of opening up the bridge when the ferryboats would ride through. All night, he would sit in the

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