A novel about an older Manhattan magazine executive's pursuit of a young, brown girl. Together they initiate a quest for Scott Joplin's lost operas and the identity of a black model from the Gilded Age whose statuary images represent America.

Yo Columbia!

YO COLUMBIA!

How America's National Symbol Came Down Off Her Pedestal and Found Her Groove

A Novel

by

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THE COLUMBIAD—BOOK 6

Seven stand-alone Novels about an Irish-American Family in the 20th Century

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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PART 1

Chapter 1

Jim heard about her long before he met her. His friend, Beatrice, teaching a pro-bono night course on Women's Studies at Brooklyn College, was the first to mention Ruth's name.

Sterling Beatrice. It was she who had provided aid and support during the soar and crash times following the breakup of Jim's second marriage, even though her advice, like her vaunted reputation for integrity, sometimes revealed an itchy streak of Puritanism. She treated him with care, however, holding back criticism, choosing instead to help anchor him with a steady grip-hold as he clung to the slippery slope of divorce court proceedings.

A nurturer for old friends and new, Beatrice was fascinated by one of her students, and whenever the conversation turned toward the younger generation, Ruth Morisong's name popped up. Her full name was Columbia Ruth Morisong, but sometime between the Kennedy assassination and the Vietnam War, the child found the name Columbia hard to pronounce. She was, according to Beatrice, tough and energetic, cynical and amazingly bright. A senior, Ruth had mastered all the classes in the English Department and by the time she entered her final year, the only courses left open for her to conquer were the graduate seminars. She was self-centered and had a flair for the dramatic and all the teachers adored her. Her language skills could charm a native guide and, most importantly, Beatrice said, she possessed an uncanny ability to unfold the hearts of others. Later in the school year, the administration would ask Ruth to deliver the valedictorian address, but she would refuse,

informing the graduation committee that she had nothing to say. She was brown and she was beautiful, a beige blending of her black father and white mother.

During the holidays that welcomed 1979, Beatrice invited Ruth to one of her parties. Jim was out of town and missed the opportunity to meet her, but some of his buddies went, and he received a full report.

One said, "That black girl came. Actually, she's more brown than black—sort of coffee colored with extra cream. You know which one? The one Beatrice's always yakking about? Besides being gorgeous, turns out she's a health nut. Goes to the gym three times a day—morning, noon and night. And she's slightly outrageous. The party is going along and this Ruth woman is talking about how she matches weights with the big guys on the Nautilus. Says how strong her legs are and what terrific thighs she has and some guy says, 'Prove it.' So she lifts up her skirt to her crotch and says, 'OK, feel this.' And she's really athletic and makes her muscle explode into this great contour. She says, 'Go ahead. You always wanted to feel a black girl.' And all these big white bohunks are standing around—'No way. That's trouble down there'. . .'I'm not touching that thing.'—until finally some chucklehead goes over and puts his paw on her leg and she says, 'Higher. Go ahead. Squeeze it. Harder. Give it a good feel.' And the guy says, 'Pure steel.' And she says, 'Damn straight!' But that's not the end of it.

"All this, mind you, at a trendy East Side party with a lot of thin, pale girls who couldn't lift a broom. So she says, 'And I'll leg wrestle any guy here.' She's laughing at us. As if rules didn't apply, like she had jump-started herself into the world, wondering who all these old ducks were swimming around in her lily pond 'Course Beatrice likes to stir the pot so she says, 'One of you guys must have something hiding in your pants,'

and this bonehead says he'll leg wrestle her and the two of them get down on the floor and her skirt is floating up over her double-bubbled butt and the guy and she are lying feet to feet, and pretty soon some voyeur comes over and says he'll be the referee. Two, three, go and they start hauling and kicking, and they get all twisted up and before long they're next to each other, and the guy's getting distracted because she's giving it to him as good as she gets. Finally she's practically on top of him. Two beautiful round bulbs behind, poking out of this slim body looking all the world like an African sculpture. And she just laid this guy's leg right down. So, she gets up and lowers her drapes and takes a bow. A moxie girl from Brooklyn with thunder thighs. Like a tornado cruising through a trailer park."

His buddy told Jim that she was the hit of the party. Everyone remarked on her beautiful, valentine face, and all agreed she was a phenomenon who augured something new. But they paid too much attention to her, and in the end, she felt she was on display, so she put down her apple juice and left them to their white devices.

"There goes the next generation," Beatrice told her guests. "Last one up this century."

That wasn't the only story Jim heard about her. Some time later, he was having drinks with a *Time* rep relating a tale about a summer sales meeting—how this girl had charged up an entire magazine staff.

"This Ruth woman was working as an intern over the summer with Beatrice at *Sports Pictures* when one of the promotion managers—Bob Bristles, you know him?—he takes a fancy to her and he finagles a deal where she goes down early with him, somewhere in the Carolinas, to handle the advance work for their annual sales meeting. But what Bristles doesn't tell her or anybody else is that they'd be bunking in together for

a couple nights, because he's reserved this hut out by the ocean like he's Gauguin in Tahiti with a yen for native girls.

"She's not born yesterday of course, and she calls her own shots. The first night, she's driving him crazy, because she's running around in her skimpies, so when she takes off all her dainties and hops into bed, he goes to make the big attack and she tells him to put away his equipment, she's going to sleep. The guy's going nuts. Here's the most exotic thing he's ever seen between two sheets next to him. So, he wakes her up in the middle of the night and she kicks him so hard, he may never have kids of his own. Now the guy's not only frustrated, he's hurting. In the morning she gets up for a run on the beach and comes back, showers, walking around in the buff, sitting on the bed painting her nails. Meanwhile the guy is sticking his toothbrush in his eye trying to sneak a peek in the mirror. That night, same thing. By now, the guy is making love to his pillow. He snuggles up to her and BOOM, he gets it in the balls again."

The rep continued, "The next afternoon, their boss is due to fly down to check details. It's still early, the meeting doesn't start for a couple days, and the boss is thinking he can get in a couple rounds of golf, and sure enough, at the last minute, the publisher says he wants to bail out early too, and they both arrive. Bristles, the little promotion weasel, 'fesses up and tells them what's going on down in the little grass shack, so, of course, they want to check out the view themselves. For the next two days, these guys are getting up at six o'clock in the morning coming by for *meetings* whenever she's en toilette. She doesn't pay any attention to them, just goes about her business, washing her undies. And to top it off, she's out on the verandah standing on her head doing her exercises and she's all moving parts. Now, they're all going crazy—did I tell you she's black?—and so they go out and get drunk that night and come

back reeling in to see her—talking about how she had these smooth, hard nipples like chocolate kisses—and she wakes up and starts talking to them like they're having an ice cream social. Sits up in bed, and they're all lusting after her, so the publisher says, 'Honey, it's time for you to get to know your bosses better.' Do you get the picture? But she's not at all distracted. 'Maybe we could play cards,' she says. Play cards! They'll be telling that one after the lights go out in Brooklyn. They don't know if she's putting them on or not, so the boss makes a grab for her and she starts screaming. It's past midnight and her voice carries so the grounds guard comes running up—wouldn't you know it, he's this big black guy—and in a flash those bozos head for the dunes. Name's Ruth. You know her?

"Next day, here comes Beatrice and hears the whole story and there's hell to pay. You know how she can get. She ships the girl home after threatening half of management. In the end, they give this Ruth a big bonus to get her the hell out of Dodge before the whole team takes the pipe, so she pockets the money and gets on the first plane to Europe and hasn't been heard from since. Probably married to a duke by now, and living in a villa on the French Riviera."

To Jim, her story was just another flash-in-the-pan story. Surviving New Yorkers nourish themselves with stories like hers—about starbabies who come to town with rockets in their pants, rise in a vertical flash and as quickly fizzle. Saloon stories mostly. But Jim wasn't up for any more bar talk. He preferred to head home so he could close out the claptrap of office hours and wrap himself in the sounds of his FM, aware that his own life was in flames and music his only firebreak.

A few days later, a holiday, Jim sat tilting on the uneven flooring of his nonconformist nest amid piles of cultural debris, listening to Steve Post on WNYC and reading the *New York*

Times spread before him on a kitchen table that wobbled beside a window overlooking the gardens behind Bank Street. Jim didn't merely read the *Times*, he wrestled with it; by day's end his crumpled paper, smudged and folded like bad origami, looked like it had been sleeping on the subway for a week. Elsewhere the shelves and surfaces of his three-room apartment were littered with the souvenirs of his creatively hinged preferences: stacks of LPs in national heaps with separate piles for American and Russian works; a bookcase filled with odd literary reviews, plus old ballet and concert programs. On the walls were oils, prints, and photographic artwork indicating a taste now essentially out of style, more modern than post-modern. Clustered behind him on the living room wall, hung a lifelong retrospective of smiling friends and family.

He had been separated from his prickly second wife long enough to have established a singular stamp on the place, his one-bedroom reflecting a quirky turn of mind, messy with mementos of indiscretions that warned all comers of an emotional confusion worthy of certain Metropolitan Opera extravaganzas. With no wifely interference, and cavalier about the running time of his own drama, he was comfortable among his books and music, no matter that his life lay slightly askew like the uneven flooring that waved beneath his shoes. The date on the paper read July 4, 1980.

He was a big man, well preserved in a rugged city way—mortally aware that his belts were growing longer and that he spent less time combing his hair. His urban closet was a dark cave—black business suits and blacker shoes, and except for some lighter weekend fare at the end of the rack, a work-dominated space. With his matching black Irish features, he was still attractive enough to be noticed, even though he never wasted five seconds mooning about his appearance and felt that

the biggest time killer on green earth was shopping for any kind of personal embellishment. He held that improving one's image was mainly an internal battle and that a few pits and stains on the outside didn't much matter. Most of the guys from his mid-century generation had seen muddy war service and figured that it only took a minimum amount of primping to scrape off the slop of foreign battle in order to get on with their real lives. Having served history, they were secure about parading amiably in their own times. They had helped create and shape the age by their own grit—tolerant of the ruffled appearance of fellow sloggers. Natural guys, gifted with one-liners, wise-cracking in ranks. A herd of civilians, preferring substance over style, yearning for their girlfriends, shuffling through the war zones, more interested in the fickleness of their own courage than fashion. They had witnessed swaggering columns enter battle, only to see them march back shaken and dark beneath the eyes. Jim, younger, had missed the major events of his generation, both the draft and combat, too young for his older brother's war. But the Forties, with their sentimental feelings and clogged emotionalism, remained his defining time.

Aside from Jim's interest in the arts, other signs indicated that he was a serious news junkie. There was a large-scale wall map, distinguished by the sight of stretched-out Greenland looming over the world like a gloomy ice age, that hung over his desk in one corner of the living room. Pins with colorful flags flying from them were scattered across the latitudes of the map's broad surface—the only clue regarding their meaning implicated by a clustering of pins in the familiar-sounding names of battle towns in northeast France. Elsewhere on the map, scissored cut-outs had been pasted over the outlines of newly named African countries allowing Jim to cover up their colonial past and distinguish them from their older, cruel under-

names. He was a man who loved atlases and encyclopedias, and when pressed, would explain to friends that he was queer for maps. Close buddies already knew he was obsessed by WWI, and that he spent his solo vacations visiting the massive graveyards on the Somme, and the ones near Verdun and Ypres—the only places on earth where dead men walked and whispered how important it was to engage in public passion.

An inveterate news listener, Jim was among a number of citizens addicted to National Public Radio, the information outlet created for people like him who felt an affinity to the older broadcast medium. As for TV, his identity as a militant supporter of Huntley-Brinkley best defined his long-term tastes; he would surely have followed that pair into the jaws of hell. No doubt Jim would also have trailed NPR's Bob Edwards as far as the inferno's portal, but his plunge into the flames would depend on the issues. For racial equality and school integration—yes. As to animal rights for cats and dogs—no.

Currently, he was fixed on more personal problems, how to balance his inner stirrings and his outward obligations—the normal conflict of when and how to give one's emotional angels and demons equal opportunities to fly. He knew his maverick feelings could jump up from nowhere, come tap-dancing out on a whim, and rush him off in several conflicting directions at once. He tried to cope with these emotions intelligently but wondered if a strict intelligence was the best teacher. It wasn't that he worried about appearing smart; he was more concerned about being right and showing that he cared.

We were taught to hold in our feelings, he mused—to suffer in silence, follow the rules and learn to commute from public to private places with no emotional stops in between. But he had dismissed that kind of conventional advice long ago. When he was young, his reaction was to rebel against the middle-class.

Nowadays, he was still inclined to break free but in a more constrained way. Love, sex, children, the arts and the life of the mind were the guides that instructed his existence. He wished to pursue them to the detriment of all others except the need to maintain income sufficient to pay the bills in his drawer.

As the evening progressed, he felt a need to talk to Beatrice, his regular lifeline to reality. Prior to picking up the phone to call, he could visualize her stretched across a couch, wearing gold-rimmed reading glasses, a long, light gown floating along her sturdy body, book in hand, not concerned enough about turning fifty to do much about it. Tall and broad-shouldered, Beatrice retained a basic country flavor, as if earthy elements prospered in her seed line. As sophisticated as she had become, there were ever meadows in her past and various wildflowers.

Jim said to her, "I'm bored—sitting around here like a prisoner in my own cell. Does anyone in your neighborhood know Miss America well enough to fix me up?"

"On the 4th of July? I doubt she's in. She's probably out picnicking. Isn't this her birthday? But if you want, I'll check around. How about a cold shower instead?" Beatrice asked.

"Freeze my gonads just because I'm moody? No thanks. Besides I have this other problem—I'm experiencing a sudden rage for order. It comes in waves, like hot flashes. Maybe it'll go away before I have to dust shelves and straighten things out."

Beatrice said, "Better give in to it. Or you'll begin telling yourself that everything is going to work out all right if you only get your life organized. I needn't remind you that kind of thinking scares the hell out of your more skeptical friends—because you're never going to get your act together. We love you, but we know you're basically messy."

"Don't forget reckless. And a crusty insistence on being independent. But none of that means I want to be alone."

College friends, Beatrice and Jim had shared a thousand cups of coffee both in campus sweet shops and after graduation when they settled independently in New York to work in publishing. He clearly remembered their first meetings when Beatrice arrived on campus, a small-town girl from upstate who thought of Jim as Mister Manhattan. She later admitted that he was the confidant, free-wheeling companion she had been searching for, the one who might help her dispel the clouds of repression that hovered over her and the rest of their age group. When Beatrice came to know him better, she would say it was really his audacity and spirit she most admired. She would travel down on school breaks to visit him in the city, and they would visit art galleries and go to foreign films and he would share with her some of the stylistic points of his broader ways. As tour guide, Jim insisted that young Beatrice experience a variety of city moods. He would energetically rouse her at 6:00 a.m. so they would be first in line for standing-room tickets to *South Pacific* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. He remembered how she glowed when his parents treated them to dinner at restaurants from the Gilded and Jazz Ages: the oom-pah land of Luchow's and the old speakeasy, 21. By day, they walked in downtown neighborhoods and at night would listen to jazz at Nick's in the Village. Once he carried her luggage into the Stork Club at 11:30 in the morning, staying just long enough at the bar to swipe an iconic ashtray before she rushed to catch her train. College friends who roam New York's streets together often become lifelong friends—trailing along misty memories.

"You have this stubborn obstinacy about not following the crowd," she said. "But it limits your catch of standard beauties

who are looking for security and cashboxes. Better than even, you're probably just lonely."

"More like bored. Loneliness is a sin against the intellect—a kind of character flaw."

"You'd better follow your feelings, Jimbo. If you're hurt, talk about it."

"Even if I wanted to follow my feelings, I'd need a couple emotional transfusions just to catch fire. Why can't I be normal like most people?" he said.

"Your fans wouldn't want you any other way."

"You mean I have to stick to being eccentric? It gets harder every year."

Beatrice said, "Know what your problem is? It's that you're only half-alive when nobody loves you. You're like a wound walking around in search of a nurse."

"Beatrice, sooner or later, we'd better live together."

"Not a chance. With all your clutter?"

"I'm surrounded by housekeepers when what I really want is a virgin princess."

"Get a life. It's 1980."

"How about a used divorcee?"

"Now you're talking today's market." Her voice dropped, "Jim, try quality."

"But quality takes so much time." Finally, he said, "I know."

He was experiencing one of his periodic romantic awakenings, wondering if there was still someone out there looking for him, even though he was aware that his social life was trembling somewhere along the string of a hyperactive yo-yo. Clandestinely, he was currently bouncing between two or three women, friends and lovers alike, able so far to ward off any of his wife's process servers. However, he had recently stepped off the merry-go-around; all those stale stories and tears

at dawn were alerting him to the perception that he might better retain a small piece of his own integrity if he sought out a singular meaningful relationship.

In the end, he said to her, "What I really worry about is whether I even have the ability to love again. I keep wondering if my connection to life hasn't already unglued."

Beatrice said with confidence, "You have every right to expect you'll find a new woman. Don't fret. Just get some sleep. And, happy Fourth."

But Jim was skeptical. Tarnished by the romantic wars, the history of his love life was as disheveled as his digs. He hoped that he wasn't doomed to expire amid the clutter of this apartment, to be found some morning buried on the floor beneath a heap of Russian operas and yellowed copies of *Playbill*. If this is what he faced, he'd better get busy finding a new soulmate, that is, if he still had a soul of his own to share. Out of the disorder of this room and the chaos of the city, he would have to find the energy to seek a new love.

When it began to grow dark, firecrackers, illegally obtained in Little Italy's duty-free war zone, erupted outside Jim's living room window. He walked over and peered down on the street where he could see neighborhood kids running back and forth between the mini-explosions, the little ones shocked backwards by the sudden bursts. Kids had always responded to him as a natural ally. His bell would be the first one that children rang when it came time to solicit contributions for the athletic league or UNICEF, or for Halloween treats.

Jim's love of children was genuine and where and whenever appropriate he made it clear he would frankly prefer their company to that of adults when matters pertaining to trust, truth-telling and fairness were the issues. He told his own children that he thought the perfect age of mankind was 10, as

no other provided such a natural harmony between nature and friendship. There was still a vine of Huckleberry in him.

He reached into his cabinet and pulled out a half-dozen packages of sparklers that he had secured in a remote county of New Jersey that still maintained an independent reading of state laws. Descending onto the street, he was greeted by the kids as their bulky equal. Joining their excitement, he chased the older boys when they flipped a string of peewees at the small fry. Where parents were available, Jim asked permission to distribute sparklers to their offspring and would teach the younger ones how to light and hold the dazzlers.

For an impatient man, Jim took his time with children. As crazy-busy as he was at work, he maintained the ability to brake time when he spoke to kids. He would listen carefully, slow down his speech, give them ample time, and rib them if they could handle it. Without hurrying or pressuring them. For children and friends, Jim knew patience was mandatory.

"Jim. Jim. Please?" a kid asked.

"My brother needs one," said another.

"Can I have a sparkler, mister?" one little girl asked.

"See," Jim said, bending down to her, carefully demonstrating how to hold the metal stem. "It doesn't hurt even when you grab for the little stars it makes."

He celebrated the nation's birthday in her reflecting eyes.

Back upstairs, he turned on his stereo. Much of Jim's life revolved around music—its harmony capable of relieving him of the unsaid things he felt but couldn't express. He spent part of each day in front of the turntable or piano, always reserving time to listen to a classical dj who called himself the Wizard, spouting off again tonight about his obsession—finding Scott Joplin's lost operas, coaxing listeners to root out the ragtime composer's missing works.

The Wizard's voice, in farm Midwestern, came filtering through the speakers "Say you come across a broken-down player piano in an antique store or country inn. I know you're on vacation and getting ready to put on the lobster bib down at Fishcake Mary's, but take a minute and poke through that pile of sheet music sitting aside the old clunker. Won't hurt you to bend down and check inside the piano bench either. Joplin's operas didn't just disappear. They're setting out there someplace next to an old pianola, plumped up like Sleeping Beauty, waiting for you to lay a kiss on musical history."

Like most people living alone, Jim Mahoney had a tendency to talk to his electrical appliances, "Jabbering about those musical orphans again, Wiz? You've told us about them a dozen times. And when somebody finally finds them, what are you going to do? Mount them at La Scala? Why don't you tell us what you're really looking for? I've searched under my Aeolian a hundred times and all I come up with are dustballs."

In the corner of his living room stood Jim's ornate player piano cast in the earliest years of the century, a relic handed down through his paternal line from family farms out in Iowa. Except for a few family photographs, it was the one tangible bond Jim Mahoney shared with the father he lost in infancy—a loss so profound, Jim knew he could never recuperate from the injury in one lifetime. Instead, for half his existence, he strained to uphold a disconnected polemic about music and ideas with his favorite dj. Between selections of American classical music and political bombast, Jim had designated the Wizard his surrogate parent.

"I've even got my subscribers looking for them," Jim said out loud.

Many New Yorkers who care about the arts survived as Jim did by holding down a paying job—in his case a position in the

sales department of a glossy photographic magazine—but then pursued more heartfelt interests during their off time. Though his regular job gave him agita, he was bound by tremendous economic pressure to maintain his income level. There were not only alimony payments to his first wife but a big educational payout for his kids, all three of whom were in college. Nevertheless, on the weekends, he turned off the commercial path to pursue his real interest, his voluntary involvement in a losing cultural venture. Some of his friends spent their avocational energies singing in amateur choirs and raising money for tours, or working complimentary hours in an art gallery, volunteering as museum docents, or following the auctions. Jim's extracurricular efforts went toward publishing a newsletter espousing America's classical music, and in that percussive arena he interacted indirectly with the Wizard whose illegal radio broadcasts covered the more serious spectrum of the century's native music. Homegrown compositions and the old man's views on national politics were the calibrated crosspoints that attracted Jim to the Wizard's spot on the dial, though he often quarreled with the old man's assumptions and conclusions. However, Jim maintained an ongoing affection for his radio host, whose voice crackled through the airways in parental obbligato—the Wizard his fill-in-the-blanks father. Never seen and only heard sporadically.

The Wizard was going on "You hear a lot about music detectives poking around dusty libraries in Italy and Germany, spending wads of foundation money looking for lost works. But all you have to do some Saturday night when you're singing around a pianola is look under the lid and one of those Joplin operas might be staring right back at you. Go ahead, just lift the hood. Never know what you'll find under there. Aunt Maggie's

drawers. Or a stash of genuine liver pills. Might surprise yourself if you don't watch out."

Jim knew the story. How Scott Joplin, after helping introduce ragtime at Chicago's 1893 World's Fair, stirred up a national craze with his *Maple Leaf* and other rags. How he then turned his attention to more serious work, first to a ballet, later to the writing of his first opera. Confident that the opera would be well received and investing the money he earned from his popular songs, he assembled a cast of performers in St. Louis, rehearsed them, and floated the entire ensemble upriver. Somewhere along the steamboat towns and farm communities of the middle Mississippi, interest in his ragtime opera sputtered, but Joplin, ever resourceful and always able to attract paying customers, reverted to minstrelsy and kept the tour solvent. In the hectic bustle of one-nighters along Iowa's southern shore or the blufftowns further north, the opera was lost. The name of the work: *A Guest of Honor*.

The second of Joplin's missing operas traveled an even darker road and information about its existence was scarce. There was even wide debate and skepticism as to whether this second opera had ever been composed at all. What speculation existed placed its creation midway between his two other operas, about 1906. The libretto, rumored to be dangerously ahead of its time when the presentation of radical subjects meant jail in many states, centered on the love affair of an interracial couple whose passions came together at a long-ago Midwestern fair. Oddly, the Wizard was one of the few people alive who had firsthand knowledge concerning its background.

Joplin's final opera, his hallmark *Treemonisha*, the one that inadvertently contributed to his eventual madness, luckily survived and Jim had heard about its recent successful staging

in Atlanta, Houston, and Washington—fifty years too late to save the composer's mind.

Jim figured there was little possibility of ever locating either of the lost opera manuscripts—*Guest* or *Fair.* Additionally, the Wizard was at least eighty by now and his chances of mounting a real campaign to uncover them didn't seem feasible. For all Jim knew, the old man might have white hair hanging down to his belt, be sporting a dunce hat with moons and stars on it, and be holed up in some amber-crusted cave with his sidekick and fellow radio announcer, Ripple.

Jim reasoned that if either of the missing operas existed, a copy might be lying in a barn somewhere in the Midwest, perhaps moldering in the traveling trunk of a long-silent violinist. The only problem was—which barn? But if one of those scores endured and he could actually beat out the competition finding them, he presumed his reputation and that of his odd-job newsletter would be secure. Maybe he could even turn his hobby into a paying proposition and scuttle his regular day pay, something he was desperate to do. If so, he'd better get busy. If he could only spend three or four months researching in the small libraries along the Mississippi. But he'd have to hurry. He knew that a team of kids from Julliard was already searching for the lost works, and they were technically way ahead of him, hooked up as they were to computers able to browse entire libraries while he was still pecking away on a typewriter, smudging his fingers on carbon paper.

The Wizard was saying "The one who finds *Guest of Honor* will make a real contribution. But it's important that you should know something special about the other one, the opera they call the *Columbian Fair*. Know why?"

He recognized the tone of voice; the old man had something new to relate. Jim's eyes flew around the room as he simultaneously leapt up. He'd better record this part. Where did he put those damned cassettes? Fumbling around the stack of books and videos and piles of photographs, he brushed aside one stack of aesthetic clutter after another—his impatience symptomatic of his general frustration—until he came up with a blank tape and slid it into his recorder.

The Wizard was saying "I've never told you this before. But there's something else I'm looking for if we ever find the *Fair* opera. "

"I knew it," Jim yipped. "You old faker. Holding out on us all this time."

The Wiz said "If that score is anywhere near the same piano I think it is, there might be a keepsake close by. When I was just a kid learning to play hymns on the piano—I must have been six or so—I was visiting in the Midwest with my Iowa buddy and he took me to see this farmwoman who lived nearby and she owned an Aeolian upright, a real good roller, and I saw with my own eyes a big thick manuscript of a score that had Scott Joplin printed on it. It was called *The Columbian Fair* and this farmlady told us it was an opera for sure. She and my friend had even seen it performed."

"We know this part, Wiz. You told us—your buddy and all," Jim said impatiently.

The Wizard continued "But their deaths complicated things, one sooner, then the other. First the farmlady dies and wills her piano to my friend, Art, a kid my age. Then in our late teens, he and I meet up again in France during the First War and we're not back home ten years and my buddy dies too. Here's where I need your help 'cause I'm not getting any younger. If that *Fair* score is still sitting with my pal's pianola, then there's

something else you might find with it, something of value, something I promised my friend a long time ago that I'd retrieve for his family."

"You old dodger," Jim hooted toward his stereo.

The Wizard continued "It's a keepsake, a piece of jewelry. My conscience would be a lot cleaner if you helped me find it. When you get as old as I am, the promises you forgot to keep take on a monster size. So, don't let me down. Stay looking for *Guest* and *Fair* both. Finding them's important because we're not finished figuring out what the connection is between Gottschalk, minstrels and ragtime on the one hand and jazz, blues and Gershwin on the other. The Joplin operas might be keys to the puzzle."

"Brought in Gottschalk one way or the other, didn't you?" Jim spoke out.

The Wiz said, "Joplin must have loved Louis Moreau Gottschalk, sort of his musical father, both from downriver. You know what Gottschalk's name means don't you—*God's fool*. Not some wise fool in rags hanging around the back of a cathedral but a real Frenchified New Orleans dandy. Old Moreau is sacred to us pianoplayers. Shagging his cakewalks and contradances up and down the coast and islands of North and South America—the first composer we ever had. All us musicians pray to him. All of us God's fools," and off he went on his musical sideroads.

When he finished, the Wizard began playing songs on his studio upright, commemorating both Independence Day and America's musical lineage—played Gottschalk's *Union*, a rip-roaring patriotic piano banger. He accompanied himself on his own keyboard, singing along with some of the embedded melodies like *Yankee Doodle*.

Jim appreciated the way the Wizard cross-referenced the country's musical and political heritage, but sitting around listening to the radio on a summer holiday wasn't exactly what Jim called real life. He wished that he had made plans for the long weekend though he was painfully aware that whatever social diversions he arranged might open him up for retribution by his second wife. He had to be careful because the year's mandated separation—a requirement to ensure divorce from his high-powered spouse—was still in effect and she had sworn vengeance if Jim did anything to embarrass her or undermine her lofty executive position during the waiting period, threatening lawsuits she knew he couldn't afford—at least not while his kids were in college. With alimony payments already choking him, he would never be able to maintain solvency if he was hit with a complaint. He knew he was jailbait if he scandalized her, and he feared the imposition of attorney's fees more than incarceration. In jail, he'd at least be able to mail out tuition checks that wouldn't bounce. He knew his own life mirrored the plot of a Gothic novel, a twisted tale with painful turns and hysterical outbursts. What he feared was that its scary message might not have a redemptive ending.

I'm three-quarters dead, he said to himself, and I'm still unfinished, goosing at a life that refuses to congeal, always misconnecting, the ends never rounding out into a satisfying circle. Always disappointed that fulfillment never comes around whole or locks into place. I'm discontent. Always wanting something. Obsessed with the idea that rewards are never quite enough, always knowing I want more. Dissatisfied, but still infatuated with a belief in love. All my eggs are in love's basket but I'm feeding on dry feathers. Maybe the ends don't have to join. Maybe the strands of me will never weave into authentic

fabric. What I wonder is, is this how I prefer myself—unraveled? A wild-haired lover.

He sat long into the night, reading and listening to the Wizard play the standard repertoire of the national holiday—Sousa's *Washington Post*, Berlin and Cohan rousers and *America the Beautiful*, written by a woman stunned by the brilliance of the White City of the Great American World's Fair. Plus the several versions of *Columbia! Gem of the Ocean* buried in the orchestral works of Ives—these last, for Jim, true national fireworks.

Midway through his patriotic proceedings, the Wizard commented, "I want to play the score from the last musical I ever saw on Broadway, an Irving Berlin show called *Miss Liberty*. The story's about an American reporter who goes to Paris to interview Bartholdi's model for the Statue of Liberty. Reminds me we should try to find the model who posed for that Sherman statue up by Central Park—the woman called Victory, the one across from the Plaza Hotel. We know the son-of-a-bitch riding the horse behind her, old 'War is Hell' himself. But who's that woman leading him? You won't have to go to Paris to find her, 'cause Saint Gaudens made that statue here."

"What are you after now?" Jim asked. "That statue of Sherman up on 5th Avenue near Central Park South? You'll never stop bothering us, you old codger."

Late that night, Jim Mahoney, feeling better for having spoken with Beatrice, sat down at his father's ancient Aeolian, opened his Joplin playbook and began fingering his way through the ragtime repertoire. The keys began to jump as he launched into the right-hand syncopation of the black composer's rags, drags and marches—notes flying, his left hand shuttling back and forth in a steady bass, music sparkling off-the-beat in lively clusters. In the rag's clever hesitations, Jim

awaited his own input of grace—the keyboard all but cakewalking, letting out its ebony spirit, recreating one man's strutter's ball. Finger figures in bright attacks of creativity—first dancingman soft, then erupting in joyous vibrations, the sounding board echoing as if it had a soul of its own. Jim's head was swimming in another man's genius. *All I need are arm garters*, he thought.

When Jim began playing *Cascades*, one of his favorite Joplin pieces, his fingers were flying, replicating the rushing sound of fallingwater flowing down a stream of steps from a palace that sat on a rise above the great St. Louis Fair, nestled in the rivercity that was one of the black composer's adopted homes.

After playing for a while, Jim placed a reconstructed LP of Joplin's own piano rolls on his turntable. And as the black man's spirit emerged from behind the cranking paper of mechanical reproduction, Jim began to play against the sounds emanating from the speakers by improvising, his fingers answering the original themes, interlacing notes with the composer. It was like playing with Joplin himself.

Though classical music was the realm to which Jim's cultural interests aspired, ragtime was where his talent came to roost. In expressing himself, he labored to produce something positive from his cluttered life, hoping to convince himself that music was worth the fight against chaos. He was also paying homage to his father, whose only voice Jim ever knew or heard was embedded in this instrument—even though Jim had years ago transferred parental command to the unseen Wizard.

Jim knew that he needed to re-invigorate himself in some immense way. To take hold of his life and make a final effort to revive the better part of his nature. Late that night he vowed that he'd help the Wizard find the lost Joplin operas and while he

was at it, actively seek to capture the golden girl who still eluded him in the passionvale of his fiftieth year.

A novel about an older Manhattan magazine executive's pursuit of a young, brown girl. Together they initiate a quest for Scott Joplin's lost operas and the identity of a black model from the Gilded Age whose statuary images represent America.

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