

Comes the Electric Circus is a novel that reflects the tumultuous changes from the traditional 1950's to the mind-blowing 60's. The story of the romance between two young Manhattanites, at a time when New York became the world's capitol of finance and the arts.

COMES THE ELECTRIC CIRCUS

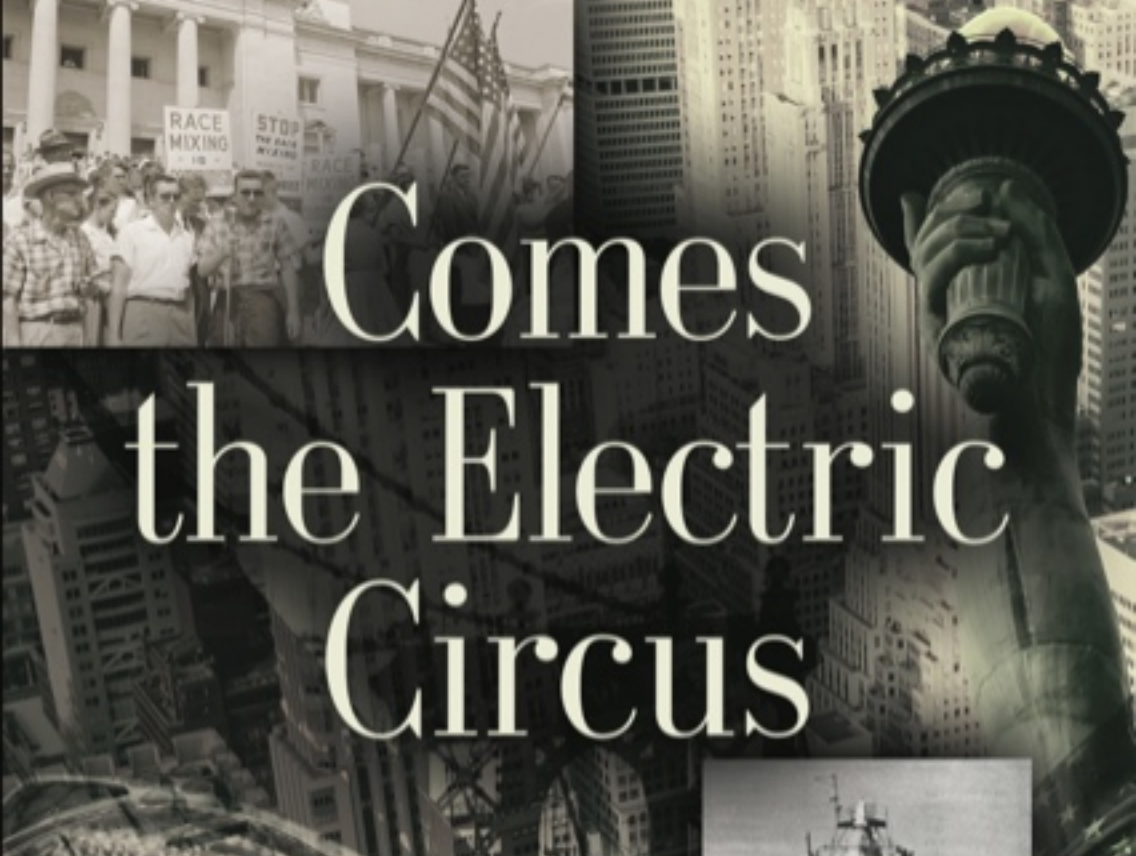
by Gerald F. Sweeney

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Comes the Electric Circus

THE COLUMBIAD - BOOK 5



GERALD F. SWEENEY

COMES THE ELECTRIC CIRCUS

Gerald F. Sweeney



THE COLUMBIAD – BOOK 5
Seven stand-alone novels about an Irish-American Family in
the 20th Century

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Prologue

The Fifties were bopping along in a casual, lackadaisical manner. The cataclysmic times of WWII and its stepchild, the Korean War, were receding. Most Americans, except those citizens with the shakes over Russia and the Atom Bomb, were busy celebrating the good life—prospecting upward in a pleasant suburb, constructing a family home and bank account and retreating from the horror of world conflict and misery. People were content driving their new, pastel-colored automobiles to the shore so they could lie in the sun and leave the hard questions for Ike in the White House.

Now that the immediate damage of the War and Depression lay behind, puffed-up economic boosterism was back in business. An ostensible peace hovered over North America, even though joint early-warning air raid systems were erected against Soviet foolishness. Citizens went about the business of finding comfort and sufficient excitement to satisfy their itches. There was a lot of waiting around for the next pay period—meanwhile a new gas range may have arrived along with travel brochures and magazines filled with colorful consumer enticements. But a cloud bank of Russian aggression prevented the full sunshine of real peace to cast a safe, wide shadow.

Meanwhile, American culture lay snoring except along a few blocks of downtown New York. It would be another five years before the nation would begin to wake up.

The Sixties with its changes were not yet visible. When the new age arrived, the flower children swept aside the beliefs of generations. If Jim and Alice had adjusted their foresight, their path may have been different. What odds for success did a couple have caught on the hinge that closed off an era of uptight righteousness and swung open to the kaleidoscope of an electric circus?

Fantasy wove the dreamscape that life might allow soulmates to rejoice, knowing that love is sacrosanct and abiding. But there are only so many miracles.

PART 1

Mid-1950's

“Mahoney looking for Casey. Casey looking for Mahoney.”

The maître-d, in mock despair, threw up his arms. “What they think I am? A secretary machine?”

Manhattan was shivering toward a chilly weekend. The smoky bar at Headquarters on 49th Street was only two deep this Friday afternoon; the smart ones already half-way up the ski slopes of the Berkshires, Green and White Mountains.

Giorgio pursued his rant, stomping along the wooden slats behind the bar, “Three times they call.” His frontal pouch wobbled as he walked, a belt-busting bounce.

In high mimicry, “‘This Miss Casey. Please tell Mister Mahoney I be coming late.’ Phone rings again ‘Hello, this Mister Mahoney. Could you please let Miss Casey know I’m running behind?’ Driving me nuts.”

He hesitated and started gesturing again, “Mahoney calling for Casey. Casey calling for Mahoney.”

“Just let the phone ring,” snapped one of the nattily-dressed bar-stool pigeons, his striped rep tie crisp and shiny within his woolen jacket.

“Then I miss all the dinner reservations,” the Italian major-domo replied. “Good I taking holiday in Sicily.”

Headquarters Restaurant was beginning to fray by 1955, its walls still crowded with WWII emblems of famed military units and displays of shoulder patches that made history. Functioning chiefly as the nearby NBC network's watering hole, the large space still attracted former GIs who came like pilgrims to this shrine honoring their once powerful regiments and armed divisions. They would reminisce for a moment before ordering their martinis and perhaps wonder briefly about their mortality. Scratch the surface of these men in grey flannel suits and one could find old tank commanders who pushed their monstrous machines through the mud of France in '44, or bombardiers who lit up German cities with cluster bombing and Navy flyers who flew against Japanese carriers at Coral Sea. They were Jim Mahoney's heroes but he didn't share these combat memories. He was too young for the big War. He did spend the Korean Conflict in desultory fashion as a draftee fighting the battle of North Carolina as an M.P. He had been stationed at a raucous army base, where he policed the 82nd Airborne's saloons on Saturday night. For Jim, his army life was a basic waste of two years.

While Giorgio fumed, Jim was entering the Midtown Tunnel on his way back from a week working on the road. All he wanted to do this late January night was connect with Alice Casey but his plane had landed an hour and a half behind schedule. He stopped to phone but she wasn't in her office, so he tried Headquarters a couple times without luck. The impatience of his new feelings spurred him on, unsure if she would still be waiting for him. His romantic instincts roared at full throttle. On the prowl for something greater than an affair, his heart had been accelerating for months, hoping he could re-arrange the intricacies of his life, annul

the pain of his previous relationships, allowing him to again observe life through the lens of love.

He was tall, thin, black-haired and Irish, and felt like he was on the upswing. Some people lead lives of take-offs and tailspins—not gaining enough height or burning out too soon. His normal trajectory flowed evenly between good times and bad though he had taken more than one dive in his life. Entering college in 1947, he realized he knew nothing and was unprepared for adulthood so he was forced to scramble toward maturity. With the help of Bernard Shaw, Philip Wylie, Henry Thoreau, Graham Greene, Beethoven, Saint Francis and a book bin of others, he was wheels up now and spiritually flying above the clouds. But currently grounded, battling Manhattan traffic.

Meanwhile, Alice was filling up her steno pad, poring over copious notes at a production meeting that had dragged on for hours. NBC had made a commitment to broadcast a new coast-to-coast show called *Wide, Wide World* featuring their key talent, Dave Garroway. The intent was to shake up the season with a Sunday TV special carrying a budget nearly the size of the *Today Show*, the latter so flooded with talent that it had spawned most of the staff for *WWW*, including Alice. During the meeting, the anxiety about the network's first live transcontinental broadcast had the producers on edge. And when the brass breathed fire, Production Assistants like Alice kept their heads down.

Tall, full-bodied with a pixie-cut hairdo, Alice was the most stunning woman in the conference room. At twenty-one, she was a step ahead of her contemporaries. As vulnerable as any child from a poor and fatherless family, and lacking an advanced education, she had transformed herself with the help of a strong feminine household into an urbane witty

woman of delight, a woman any society would admire—forthright, humorous and caring. Her passion was not for Impressionist paintings or German philosophy. Her interest was in other people—lively, sharp friends capable of creating shards of electricity that ran between those who had the knack for making secure personal connections. Now latched onto Jim, she anticipated her evening with him but found herself delayed by the production meeting. She had stepped out a number of times to alert Giorgio that she would be late.

Jim and Alice's relationship was still in its budding phase. Their developing feelings for one another were formed in an era when young people dated extensively because sex was not a prerequisite. There were less people on the planet then and fewer distractions that impeded human contact, a time that encouraged daily phone calls with friends and numerous busy evenings out. Those in the youthful New York social swim usually recognized one another if not by sight, at least by name or gossipy reputation. And even if unknown, these swains and swans had an abundant curiosity about other socialites their age. Alice's name appeared on far more Rolodexes than Jim's; he had been away at a distant college and afterwards in army camps, but his name was spreading. Hers was already widely known.

They had first met the summer before.

The wide dome of sky that circled over the Hampton beaches hovered pleasantly each August. Clever New Yorkers knew that there were other playful beaches along the Mediterranean and Caribbean shores and that there were older and wiser coves and bays pooling in Asia, but they also had an inkling that with the growth of American influence, they were deployed along the sandy edge of Atlantic greatness.

Confidence in one's self proved to be a stimulant for these expanded feelings; self-pride was honored along this shore. Weekend celebrations tended to confirm that these up-and-coming young people shared a lively reputation as tastemakers.

This was Jim's second summer grifting off the looseness of lazy Hampton summer days—skimpy clothes, socially generous hosts and a camaraderie that valued easy invitations to picnics and open-house cocktail parties. If people thought they fit into the Hampton's social structure, they simply joined in.

Jim spent most summer weekends at the beach. He and dozens of other Manhattan workmates bunked at comfortable inns like the one in Westhampton Beach called the Howell House. Guests would appear late on Friday night after a hundred-mile drive or train ride to be greeted by Mrs. Carmody, a cheerful but strait-laced innkeeper who maintained an unhealthy interest in whose door key was shared by whom during the course of a night's stay. Crowding the bar in her spacious parlor around midnight, newly-arrived weekend guests would be informed of the many parties and fetes scheduled for the next evening. The young glitterati, after a hard work week and a long commute, soon collapsed, finally able to relax. They sometimes woke to clear blue sea air but on most occasions rose to find a low-lying haze that would slowly burn off after breakfast.

About ten on those mornings, revelers, clear-eyed and fragrant with sunscreen, headed for the ocean at the end of Beach Lane. There they congregated in wide circles—two or three wide rings of friends—on the sands of a public sea concession called Rogers Beach. Next door below a rambling, brown-shingled house rented by a sharp group from Time Inc., another swimming circle gathered. At Rogers, Jim

settled down with one of his buddies, stretched and swam and jumped the waves for an hour before lying on his towel to soak up the rays.

The latest gossip, world, national and local, was consumed by noon when the fair-skinned members of this hedonistic tribe broke for lunch, either back at their rentals or in downtown restaurants where they sat at tables of eight and twelve, leaving a few olive-skinned sun worshipers to darken at the beach.

Jim felt about as comfortable as he was ever to feel on these long, languorous summer days. He was jubilantly alive, had survived his war and after a spiritual and physical depression over religious faith and thwarted sexuality, he reunited with his peers with his values somewhat intact and his creative urges soaring. He wanted to be a writer and his head abounded with stories, plots, plays, even an opera. His palette never seemed to go dry but there were no canvases or publications for proof of labor.

Those with fragile skin spent their afternoons at Westhampton Beach away from the ocean during the heat of the day. Already pink from their morning outing, they napped or visited or sat around reading. After lunch, Jim stopped at the popular “dentist’s house,” named for the half-dozen tooth docs who spent their weekends and vacations here. They included a friend of Jim’s, a Catholic guy who grew up in the boroughs. Brad was a sensitive ex-seminarian and the pair had enjoyed each other’s company in town and here at the beach. Brad impressed Jim with his good humor and generous spirit.

“You’re up!” Jim said after he entered the unlocked door. The house was set down on the bayside away from the ocean, a nest that seemed to sink in the sand. Its distinction was a well-recognized sculpture of a whale on the outside chimney.

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“Almost caught me napping,” Brad replied. “The ocean knocked me out.”

“Thought I’d drift by and see how you’re doing. Any plans for tonight?”

“Sunset party in Quogue. Then a blast at a friend’s place. And you?”

Jim relied, “A house party in Southampton with some publishing buddies.”

Brad fixed iced coffee and they spread out on the wide porch overlooking the large bay behind the barrier beach.

They were straight-up guys who enjoyed one another’s company. Each appeared solid to the other. Both serious people with a light touch who accepted what life offered. Their feelings remained vulnerable to the horrors of their age but their strong wills stood up to the angst. New York blowhards, awash with money, were their common enemies.

Their conversation often turned political. As newshounds, they were steeped in a world that shook from the inherent chaos of the Cold War. They kept up on events and quickly fell into a discussion concerning the plight of Eastern Europe, leading them inevitably, as in all their talks, to an evaluation of how these world-shaking events pertained to the Democratic Party, their institutional bedrock. Though for Brad, there was also the Catholic Church.

“What the Russians are doing in Poland and the Baltics is suffocating people,” Brad said. “No allowance for opposition.”

“Maybe this new European Union idea will help. At least put up a barrier.”

“Maybe the EU can coordinate with NATO.”

“Events feel like they’re coming to a head,” Jim replied. “People who lived through it must be getting that 1939 feeling that things are about to bust apart again.”

When their drinks were consumed, Brad said that he needed to step over the dunes to the house next door. Something about planning a joint party.

“Come along,” he said, and the pair walked across the sand. “A lively bunch from NBC share the house.”

Standing in the living room were two animated young women, one a chubby girl named Angelina; the other a tall, attractive woman, whom Jim thought stunning. Alice was wearing a long, lacy beach gown and looked like she had just bubbled up from paradise.

“Hey Brad. Haven’t seen you since last summer’s hurricanes,” Angelina said. Tropical storms came through the Hamptons every year in the Fifties.

“Yeah. Remember how Dune Road looked like a debris field?”

Alice, with her distinct English accent, said. “My boss, Dave Garroway, lost his beach house up the road. The ocean broke through to the bay and knocked it off its foundation and scattered it across the dunes.”

“Friend of mine,” said Jim, “saw her family cottage floating out to sea in the ’38 storm—bobbing along toward Spain.”

“You should have hitched a ride,” Alice teased.

“But then I would have missed meeting you.”

He wasn’t shy about acknowledging his attraction for her. She in turn accepted his effort to rouse her.

“I’m always around. You’d have found me, I’m sure,” Alice suggested.

“But why has it taken so long?” Jim asked.

“You’ve been busy elsewhere, no doubt.”

“But I should have been paying more attention to priorities.”

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She came back at him, “You’ll have to find someone to re-arrange them.”

“I think I just did.”

Brad and Angelina stood aside, spectators to an unfolding flirtation.

Who is this young braveheart? Alice wondered.

“And to whom do I owe the pleasure of addressing?” Alice jibed.

“Mahoney, mam. James Francis Mahoney. And you must be queen of the NBC airwaves. I’ll have to memorize your call letters.”

She played along. “Better wait until you get a clear signal.”

“But my antenna is already vibrating.”

“Maybe you’d better dial down before you get sunstroke.”

For weeks after, he couldn’t get her off his mind. He kept thinking of Alice standing there regally that summer day. He hesitated calling her as he was still recovering from two romances—one long and difficult that almost did him in; the other with a rich girl that was short and unrewarding. The women he enjoyed were outgoing and verbal, full of energy and buzz. Another factor in his delay in contacting Alice was because he was in the process of learning a new job; he had taken a merchandising position with a farm magazine and was busy travelling—a road job to promote advertiser’s brand awareness throughout the South. Essentially, he was waiting for a calm spell before hoisting himself back up onto the romantic road. His worn out valentine battery needed recharging. He also needed to make some decisions about an army novel he was writing.

Alice next caught Jim's attention at a wedding in the fall; he was again taken by the lightness of her spirit, startled by her poise and chic. Alice possessed an alert Irish face, an aristocratic nose and blue eyes, framed by a short haircut. She was outfitted in a cocktail dress that flared out in a bouffant that gave the impression of petals opening. She generated warmth; her charm an invitation to initiate a conversation. She was one of the few women not draped in a veil, making her look all the more forthcoming, fresh enough that she needn't hide behind any spidery allure. Jim made an attempt to engage her at the reception, but the social mix wasn't conducive to a conversation, except for a few passing words.

"My summer friend," she said, greeting him.

"I see you're extending your sunshine into other seasons."

"I would shine for you any time. But don't get lost in the shadows," Alice teased.

"I'll have to turn up my marquee lights."

"They're bright enough for me," she said in her London accent that had been passed along by her English mother.

Their eyes and instincts briefly brightened within their overheated needs and they were each sufficiently interested to ask friends about the other.

During lunch hour a week later when Jim was in town for a meeting, he spotted Alice walking down Fifth Avenue. With her strolled three sharp-looking guys, talking animatedly. He was struck by her confident carriage. She acknowledged Jim, remembering him from the wedding, and had been curious enough about him that she had delved deeper into his long-term relationship with the notorious Fawn Evans, a blond dynamo who had once worked at the network. Alice's research had confirmed that they were no

longer together. Her greeting in passing came with only a trace of a smile, but he could see she was surprised and pleased to see him. Each time they saw one another, there was a spark.

An annual Christmas visit to Luchow's Restaurant to view the immense tree and strolling oom-pah band had become *de rigueur* among New Yorkers. There, at an NBC pre-holiday party, Jim arrived with network male friends, hoping to catch a glimpse of Alice. He was about ready to launch his campaign to woo her, praying that she had not made other romantic arrangements in the meantime.

Luchow's retained its turn-of-the-century look: six immense, high-ceiling dining rooms, wreathed for the season and anchored by a half-block-long bar in a wide saloon that could contain a small convention. The entire restaurant was decorated by Bavarian woodland nymphs, moose heads and Tiffany windows. He saw her across the room wearing a red velvet dress and was amazed at his own interest. For an hour, he wasn't able to get close enough to talk.

Finally, walking up to her, Jim said, "I see Father Christmas has sent his beautiful daughter."

"All tied up in bows," Alice replied.

"Is that b-e-a-u-s?"

"There are still a couple openings in that category if you're interested." She disarmed and flattered him at the same time.

"Will I get a chance to see you over the holidays?" he asked, raising his eyebrows in hope and anticipation.

"My calendar is pretty well booked for now. But let's try in the new year."

His expectations took a turn for the better after that. He knew he was ready to gallop after her in full pursuit.

He didn't have to wait for 1956. Jim saw her again at a holiday party in Queens. A mutual acquaintance, who lived with four stewardesses in a big house in Jackson Heights near LaGuardia, celebrated most weekends with dozens of friends from Manhattan. The mix of young communication industry hotshots and globe-trotting glamour girls was spur enough for partygoers to travel to a borough house party where sleeping arrangements of various configurations were available.

"Our paths cross again," Jim said when he approached Alice.

"We were destined to engage," Alice answered. Her large blue eyes actually did sparkle. "And now that the deed's been done, can we just get on board with it?"

"On board and a bon voyage it will be, sailing into an ocean sunset."

"Only if you teach me to swim."

"I'll save you. Don't worry."

"My hero."

Jim guessed she had grown up in England, her broad "A" a verbal embellishment that surprised and delighted him. Her accent distinguished and highlighted everything she said. It separated her and isolated her from typical New Yorkese, whose vocalizers would sometimes ridicule her uppity tones. To Jim her voice had music in it.

They were interrupted by a group of her network friends. Among them Jim recognized the chubby girl from the beach along with a fey-looking guy who looked sad, as well as a perfect preppy lifted out of the pages of *Esquire*.

Toward midnight, when the party began to settle into the cushions and pillows, both Jim and Alice's entourage chose to leave. He accompanied her and her friends on the subway to Queens Plaza before they separated.

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“Do you know who lives down the street from that flying sorority we just left?” asked chunky Angelina. “Louis Armstrong! In the summer with the windows open, they say you can sometimes hear him playing his trumpet.”

“A neighborhood filled with the sounds of the hot jazz,” said John, the one in the bow tie. “You’ll have people cakewalking down the sidewalk.”

“Joshua and his golden trumpet right here in Queens,” Alice added.

“Fought the battle of Jericho... OK. So it’s Jackson Heights.”

“Satchmo knocking down the walls of prejudice,” added Tracy, the guy who wore an expression that was a speck lonely.

“No better model,” said Jim, an eclectic fan of both jazz and liberalism.

As they rode on the subway, Jim could see that both John and Tracy were standard size. John, out of Yale Music, had that forever freshman look—long neck, glasses and a certain trimness, wearing his Paul Stuart duds in style. Tracy, on the other hand, was rather loosely draped in Bohemian clothes, half way between an artist’s smock and a gardener—a look not always appreciated at the network where the executives all wore the same Madison Avenue suits and fedoras. Angelina, who was the *Today* show’s budget director, dressed colorfully, and would ever resemble her Italian grandmother.

Reviewing the guests at the party, Alice said, “It was fun to connect up with Alex and Mardi again”—old *Tonight Show* friends. “I hadn’t seen them since their wedding.”

John: Mardi looked like she had taken the convent veil. So subdued. Not like the Mardi with a horsey laugh I used to know.

Angelina: Marriage must have brought out the lion in Alex. He was roaring at her to do this and that. I'm hoping she has the spunk to stand up for herself.

Tracy: Remind me to stay single and independent. The only consent agreements I ever want to sign are the ones with my landlord and maybe my shrink.

John: Their wedding was a joke. So Victorian. Her train must have stretched halfway down Fifth Avenue.

Tracy: I heard it had tire tracks on it.

John: They had to bunch it up in a ball just to get into the church. And the reception was so dull. The band must have slept through the whole swing era. All they could play was the businessman's bounce from the Twenties. Ta Dum. Ta Dum. Ta Dum.

Tracy: Save me from all that... Remember how dull the toasts were. With friends like that—don't bother to introduce me.

Angelina: And how scared Mardi looked? Reminded me of a bride friend who told me on her wedding day, 'I may have just made the biggest mistake of my life.' Why do women want to tie themselves up in such knots?

Tracy: People torturing themselves. Phew!

John: They're doing penance for all the good times they're missing.

Tracy: I'm voting for the first free-love candidate that comes along. First thing everybody does is tear up their wedding contract... Nuptial laws. Sounds like something Himalayan.

Angelina: Spare me that parade down the aisle. Remember! Jack's mother was drunk. Walking on her knees getting in the pew.

Tracy: And her hat—a bird sanctuary.

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John: The recessional sounded like a steamboat calliope.
Toot! Toot! Tootle! Toot!

Angelina: And when the vows came. We all know how sexy Mardi is. She must have held her breath when the priest asked if there were any reasons they shouldn't be married.

Tracy: Half the brides are pregnant anyway.

Jim noticed that Alice had not joined in the conversation. He had searched among the half-dozen network people in the crowd for signs of romantic alliances but could not discover any love links between Alice and her workmates.

When they parted, he made it a point to tell her that he enjoyed talking with her and Alice responded pleasantly.

"The new year is almost upon us," he said.

Alice replied, "I'm looking forward to it. And seeing you."

They were both ready.

Jim was away the week after New Year's on business and because he didn't have Alice's home phone number, he was obliged to call her office. Busy and not always at her desk, he had to leave word, reaching her finally on his third try.

"I'm glad you didn't give up," Alice said over the wobbly long-distance call.

"I'm prepared. I have a pocket full of change."

"You must look a little funny when you walk."

"Noisy as well," Jim said.

"I hope your trip is going well. Been anyplace interesting?" she asked.

"Yes. I discovered Savannah. A good walking city. Lots of cozy little squares. The food is good. As good as Charleston. Plenty of fish."

"How about the nightlife?" Alice asked.

“A little livelier in Charleston... Tell me, how have you been?”

“Exhausted working on *Wide, Wide World*,” Alice replied. “Not getting much sleep.”

“I was hoping you’d be available for dinner this weekend,” Jim offered.

“That would be great, I want to get to know you better,” she said in her open style.

“Same here. How are you doing for dinner on Saturday?”

“I’m free,” Alice said.

“Good news. You’ll have to give me your address.”

“How well do you know the Bronx?”

“Not at all, I’m afraid.”

“Then we’d better meet downtown,” Alice suggested. “How about the Plaza?”

“You’re on. How does seven sound?”

“Perfect.”

“I’ll be the one with a twinkle in his eye,” Jim said.

“Keep it there because we’re going to have some fun.”

They met in the Palm Court’s elegant surroundings where a string quartet played softly on a raised podium.

Alice entered the indoor garden with an assuredness beyond her years and an intrinsic flair seldom found in New York’s boroughs, including Manhattan. It wasn’t that she was out and out beautiful, but she was so attractive and carried herself with such élan, fanned by a whiff of arrogance, that the room sensed a difference in the atmosphere. The cocktail crowd turned to view her entrance. Her freshness and clean looks made other people pleased to be under the same tent with her. They could see she had a touch of the princess. A perky princess. A princess from the Bronx.

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She wore a green dress that outlined her shapely body as she strode across the room. Jim stood to greet her and shook her outstretched slim hand encased in an immaculate white glove. No hat nor veil.

“We’ll finally have time for ourselves,” Alice greeted him.

“And a fine time it will be,” Jim replied, seating her in a small chair. “You can see by the dropped jaws that you’ve already conquered the room.”

Alice shifted her neck slightly and with lowered eyes surveyed the nearby tables and saw that she was the momentary focal point. “It’s the new hairdo.”

Her close-cropped cut was so extreme that it called for people’s notice.

“At the moment, I just want to impress you,” she spoke out boldly.

“No concern there. You had me the moment you walked in.”

Re-redirecting the spotlight, she said, “You look very well turned out yourself, sir. A regular Jim—pun—Dandy.”

Jim, in suit and tie, had a reputation for being a rumpled sack, slightly out at the elbows. He took her compliment as a necessary slice of social decorum.

“Have you been off skiing in the Berkshires?” Jim asked as she removed her gloves and after they ordered; she a martini, he a scotch and water.

“I was thinking about going up this weekend,” she smiled, “until I received a better offer.”

He felt that she intended to hold him in her palm and he was willing to be a recipient of her largess.

“Do you usually ski with your friend from Westhampton? She seemed friendly.”

“Angelina? Yes. We’ve been up on the slopes together. She’s the glue that holds the rest of us NBC women together. We bring her our troubles and she calms us down with her wise woman talk. If that doesn’t work, she keeps us sane with the comfort food she cooks up for us in Little Italy.”

The enunciated crispness of her voice penetrated Jim. Neither low nor high-pitched, her speech was one of the first characteristics that roused his appreciation. Her accent and her seeming aloofness might be off-putting to some. To Jim she presented a challenge that only intrigued him.

“Will she be working with you on the new show?” Jim inquired. Among young strivers in Manhattan, career talk often became the conversational gist of most openings.

“No. She’s too important on the *Today Show*. They can’t spare her.”

“Who’s heading up the production staff?”

Alice seemed surprised by the detailed questions. Then she remembered that he was familiar with the company’s operations owing to his past love interest. She hesitated and replied, “Our boss, Bob Bunting, was one of the producers on *Today*. We’ve all been part of his team at one time or another, so mostly we’re just regrouping.”

Jim’s former girlfriend had worked in publicity at the network and was known to Alice. Her shadow stood between them and would have to be extinguished.

“I’ve always been a big fan of NBC,” he said.

Jim preferred the network to the more business-oriented CBS though he respected the latter’s Ed Murrow above all other broadcast reporters. Still NBC felt more humane; its spirit was not wholly gobbled up in commerce. The network, Jim perceived, maintained a sense of empathy that allowed it to portray life in a warm way, more nearly representing life’s

foibles and delights. Such an attitude had a better chance of reverberating in his belief system.

“That surely means we’ll be pals,” Alice said. “I’m a loyal tigress when it comes to the network.”

The waiter brought their drinks and they toasted one another.

“To a happy outcome!”

“And a long friendship!”

Alice took a sip and asked, “I want to know more about what you do. Tell me about your job. You’re with *Countrywide Journal*, right?”

“Right. I’m in merchandising. That means supporting the ad staff. My territory is the South.”

“What exactly do you do?”

“I travel around and visit distributors—wholesalers—of companies advertising in the magazine and give them a pep talk about all the advantages of rural sales and how *CJ* helps them reach their barnyard customers. And I call on farm equipment retailers and truck dealers and pipe the same song. I let local business people know how their manufacturers are supporting them down on the farm.”

“Do you actually sell advertising?”

“No. That’s a job for the fat cats.”

“At least you get to travel,” Alice said, not so interested in merchandising. “You liked Savannah, I remember.”

“The trip down that way was fun. When I was drafted in the army, I was stationed at a North Carolina base for a couple years and also spent some time in Georgia, so I know a bit about upland Dixie, but not much about the coast. Now I can stay at resorts like the Cloisters on the weekend. A beautiful place on the ocean. Lots of southern charm. They schedule harp concerts in the afternoon on the veranda overlooking the sea. Very civilized.

“Or I visit old plantations. One called Orton Gardens is this ante-bellum mansion on the Lower Cape Fear. Early river culture. The mansion itself is magnificent. And they say its gardens in the spring bloom with all kinds of azaleas, wisteria, jasmine, you know, live oaks hung with Spanish moss. Makes me understand why the rebels wanted to protect their way of life. Until you remember that it was all based on a slave economy, and then you figure that what you’ve seen is a tainted mirage. Anyway, side trips add some flavor to the job.”

“I have a couple of job perks,” Alice offered. “We see a lot of talent on the *Today* set, movie stars and big names. We sometimes get to know them at the breakfasts we serve. Faye Emerson doesn’t like bagels—that sort of thing. I had a nice assignment last week. The *Today* director knows I’m a big Giants fan. . . Are you?”

“No, White Sox.”

“We’ll have to do something about that. . . White Sox?”

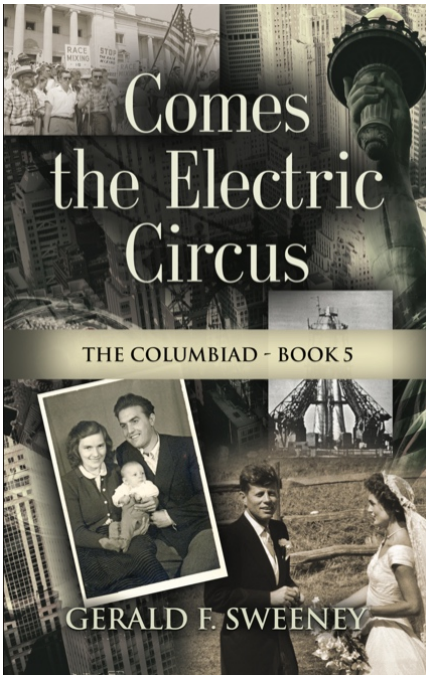
Bronx residents were either Yankee or Giant fans; down river resided the Dodgers. But who had ever heard of a White Sox supporter?

“Yeah,” Jim said. “I was born in Chicago and I had a baseball-happy aunt who took me out to Comiskey Park as a kid. I had to kneel on my seat to see third base.”

Alice continued, “Anyway Sal Maglie, the Giants pitcher, one of my heroes, was going to appear on *Today*. And we have this operation where limousines pick up the talent at 4:30 A.M., and give them a ride to the studio. So they let me be his escort and for forty-five minutes before dawn last Wednesday, I had Sal Maglie all to myself. Talk about a treat!”

“Did he show you his fastball?”

“No, but he showed me a strong left arm.”



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