

THE STORY – A SYNOPSIS

Act One

New Rochelle, New York, 1906. A large Victorian house on Broadview Avenue. America has entered the Gilded Age, an era of industrialization, when prospects for wealth and happiness seem to be boundless. Everything is new and anything is possible.

This house was built by Father, who has derived his wealth from the manufacture of fireworks, flags and bunting and other “accoutrements” of patriotism. Mother takes pride in providing comfort for Father and other members of her family including her Younger Brother, a genius at explosives who works in Father’s fireworks factory, and her son, the Little Boy. Mother considers herself to be fortunate that Father protects and provides for her.

This is also a time of turbulent cultural and social transformation. Tens of thousands of African Americans are migrating from the rural South to the industrialized North and millions of newcomers are arriving at the immigration port of Ellis Island, all in search of a better life.

In Harlem, happy crowds dance to the music of ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker Jr. In Latvia, a widower named Tateh dreams of escaping with his daughter, the Little Girl, to America.

America is filled with famous characters; mesmerizing master illusionist Harry Houdini, who astonishes audiences with his death defying escapes...financier and great acquirer J.P. Morgan, the wealthiest man in America...radical anarchist Emma Goldman, a champion of social reform...chorus girl Evelyn Nesbit, mistress of the brilliant and debonair architect, Stanford White, who has been murdered by Nesbit’s jealous millionaire husband, Harry K. Thaw
(Ragtime).

On the dock of New York Harbor, Mother reluctantly bids farewell to Father who is joining Admiral Peary on an expedition to the North Pole **(Goodbye, My Love)**. Night Falls. As the boat

travels across the dark water, Father sees a ghostly glow in the distance. It is a rag ship sailing to America, carrying refugees fleeing from western and eastern Europe, including Tateh and the little Girl. Father admires the courage of the Newcomer. Tateh wonders why anyone would be so foolish as to leave a land of such freedom and opportunity (**Journey On**).

On the stage of a vaudeville house in Manhattan, Evelyn Nesbit performs a strange song and dance routine, re-enacting her testimony at the trial of her husband (**The Crime of the Century**). Harry K. Thaw is found guilty by reason of insanity. Pandemonium breaks out. Seizing her opportunity for publicity, Evelyn kisses Younger Brother, who is infatuated with her, for a news photographer. She then saunters away, leaving Younger Brother, who is faithfully attended each day of the trial, heartbroken and disillusioned.

In New Rochelle, Mother, who admires Evelyn's carefree spirit, begins to plant in her garden. She finds a black infant by. Shocked by her discovery, Mother wonders who could abandon their child in such a manner (**What Kind of Woman**). The police arrive with Sarah, the scared and mute mother of the child, who they found hiding in the cellar of a nearby home. Before the police can charge Sarah with attempted murder and take her away. Mother intervenes, saying she will take responsibility for Sarah and her baby. Mother brings them into her home. On Ellis Island, crowds of immigrants, including Tateh and the Little Girl, arrive with hope for a better life in their hearts (**A Shtetl Iz Amereke**). Tateh is delirious with joy and optimism, thinking of the wealth and fame of such men as J.P. Morgan and Houdini (**Success**). He is determined to get his share of the "American dream." On the street of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a district crowded with Hebrew stores and street merchants, Tateh and his daughter set up "shop" for the day. Fearful of losing his daughter, Tateh attaches her to him with a rope.

From his cart, the impoverished Tateh calls out to passersby, offering to cut out and sell to them paper silhouette portraits, with very little success. Months pass. It is winter, Tateh's daughter is

hungry and his desperation increases. A man stops, but instead of buying a silhouette, he asks Tateh to sell him the Little Girl. Enraged, Tateh attacks the man and is ultimately subdued by a policeman. Full of self-doubt, Tateh wonders whether America's golden promise was only a lie. In his disillusionment, Tateh has a vision of Harry Houdini, the master magician and escape artist **(SuccessReprise)**. Inspired to escape his own confining circumstances, Tateh packs his belongings and leaves.

In the Temp Nightclub in Harlem, Coalhouse Walker Jr. entertains the crowd. While introducing one of his numbers, her reminisces about his love for a woman named Sarah, how he lost her, and vows to win her back **(Getting' Ready Rag)**.

Henry Ford and his assembly line appear before Coalhouse in an apparition as he watches intently while a Model T is built. This is the new mass production technology that will transform the country and the world. Coalhouse buys one of these new cars **(Henry Ford)**.

In the Bronx, on the outskirts of New York City, Tateh sells his cart. He and the Little Girl board a northbound trolley. Tateh learns the little he has will take them as far as Boston. At the railroad station in New Rochelle, they meet and converse with Mother and the Little Boy **(Nothing Like The City)**.

In Rochelle, outside the Emerald Isle firehouse, Coalhouse, driving his new car, asks the firemen for directions to Broadview Avenue. Chief Willie Conklin forbids Coalhouse to pass by and forces him to turn back.

In the attic room of the house on Broadview Avenue, Sarah sings a lullaby to her child. **(Your Daddy's Son)** Coalhouse arrives and asks to speak with Sarah. Sarah refuses to see him. Coalhouse leaves, but persistently returns every Sunday for several weeks, hoping Sarah will speak with him **(Weeks of Sunday)**. Finally, Mother invites Coalhouse in for tea. Coalhouse tells Mother he is a musician, and she invites him to

play a tune on the piano. Coalhouse obliges, playing a ragtime melody.

Five months pass. One Sunday, Father returns home unannounced from the North Pole. He is surprised to see Sarah, her baby and Coalhouse in his house and to learn about Sarah's predicament. Father expresses his disapproval. Mother reprimands Father for his uncharitable remarks. Father wonders if he has been away too long. Mother ponders why they have grown apart, and are unable to experience the love that Coalhouse has for Sarah, a sentiment shared by Younger Brother. Sarah finally heeds Coalhouse's words of love and comes downstairs. Coalhouse embraces her (**New Music**). Coalhouse takes Sarah and their baby for a ride in his new model T. Coalhouse promises Sarah that this is the beginning of a new life and a better time for them and their son (**Wheels of a Dream**).

In the mill town of Lawrence, Massachusetts, Tateh works in front of a loom for 64 hours a week for just under six dollars. One week, the workers are shortchanged. They go on strike. At a rally at the workmen's hall in New York's Union Square, Younger Brother listens to Emma Goldman denouncing the exploitation and oppressive working conditions in Lawrence and throughout the United States. Goldman calls for a general strike in support of the striking mill workers. Inspired by her passionate words, Younger Brother calls out his support (**The Night That Goldman Spoke In Union Square**).

Within three days, every mill in Lawrence is shut down. The strike goes on for weeks. Workers, especially children, weaken and die. Families in Boston, New York and Philadelphia offer to take the children in. In New Rochelle, Father refuses to help.

In Lawrence, Massachusetts, factory owners call in the militia to protest their property. Tateh puts the Little Girl on a train that will take her to one of these homes and to safety. A riot breaks out (**Lawrence, Massachusetts**). A policeman cracks Tateh on the skull. Tateh stumbles among the bloody bodies of the victims, then hears the panic-stricken cries of his daughter as the

train begins to move. Tateh runs and ultimately pulls himself onto the train. He comforts the Little Girl with a flipbook of silhouette images of her skating that move as he flicks the pages (**Gliding**). A conductor is attracted by the moving picture book and buys it from Tateh.

In New Rochelle, Coalhouse and Sarah drive by the Emerald Isle firehouse in the Model T. Again, Willie Conklin and the firemen block their way. Coalhouse asks Sarah to leave with the baby and wait for him down the road. Willie speaks abusively to Coalhouse, demanding twenty-five dollars, claiming Coalhouse is driving on a private toll road.

Coalhouse leaves the car and finds a policeman, but the officer refuses to help. The firemen vandalize and destroy the car. Coalhouse returns to see what they have done. Coalhouse vows to find justice. Increasingly frustrated and outraged by bureaucratic ineptitude and the law's delay. Coalhouse proclaims he will not marry until his property is restored to him (**Justice**).

Sarah is shattered, but she is determined to help Coalhouse. She attends a rally for the Republican vice-president candidate in New York (**President**). Attempting to speak with the candidate, Sarah breaks through the police barricade. Mindful of the recent assassination of President McKinley, the police, thinking Sarah is armed, club her with their nightsticks. She dies. Coalhouse, Mother, Younger Brother, Tateh, Emma Goldman and Sarah's friends mourn her death (**Till We Reach That Day**).

Act Two

In New Rochelle's Main Street Theatre, Harry Houdini performs his final escape of the evening (Harry Houdini, Master Escapist). Houdini is handcuffed inside the packing case, then Willie Conklin and his firemen place the Little Boy and a package of dynamite inside with him. The firemen nail the case shut and it is lifted above the stage. The case explodes in mid-air and falls open. It is empty. Suddenly, in his bed in the house on Broadview Avenue, the Little Boy sits up, wide awake. Houdini's escape was

a dream, yet the Little Boy senses that many people are about to die.

Coalhouse Walker Jr. has begun a reign of vengeance and terror, killing firemen and burning down firehouses (**Coalhouse's Soliloquy**). Most of the white society is scandalized and panic stricken. Some black people consider Coalhouse to be a larger-than-life hero. Coalhouse declares he will agree to end the violence when his car is restored to him in its original condition and Willie Conklin is turned over to him (**Coalhouse Demands**).

In New Rochelle, reporters and photographers descend upon the house, searching for information about Coalhouse. Tension grips Mother, Father and Younger Brother. Afraid that Coalhouse will return to his home in search of his son, Father upbraids Mother for taking Sarah in, blaming her "foolish female sentimentality." Younger Brother defends Coalhouse and attacks Father for his complacency and disregard for the acts of injustice and violence that have unleashed Coalhouse's fury. Younger Brother angrily leaves.

To relieve the pressure, Father takes the child to a baseball game. Father's expectations of a civilized afternoon are disrupted by the rowdy behavior of the many immigrants in the crowd (**What A Game**).

Back home, reporters continue to besiege Father and his family. Father suggests that the family take a trip to Atlantic City to escape the harassment. He will join them on the weekend. Evelyn Nesbit and Houdini appear, extolling the pleasures of life by the sea (**Atlantic City**). Father wonders why he and Mother are drifting apart (**New Music Reprise**).

On Atlantic City's boardwalk, elegant vacationers are filmed by the Baron Ashkenazy, a director. The Baron introduces himself to Mother and her family and tells them about his career in the new motion picture industry (**Buffalo Nickel Photoplay, Inc.**)

As evening falls, Evelyn Nesbit and Harry Houdini stroll by and meet. Disillusioned, they commiserate about their lives as entertainers (**The Crime of the Century / Harry Houdini Master Escapist Reprise**).

The next morning, Mother and the Baron chat while his daughter and the Little Boy play together. Mother is attracted by the Baron's charm; he is drawn to her kindness. The Baron confides that he is not really a Baron. He is Tateh, a poor immigrant Jew who wants to give his daughter a better future. Mother is moved, and says she is happy their children are friends (**Our Children**).

In Harlem, Younger Brother searches the streets for Coalhouse, but he is greeted with derision and told to leave. He meets one of Coalhouse's followers who take him to their hideout. Coalhouse, watches from the shadow. He sees a young couple in love, and thinks back to when he first met Sarah (**Sarah Brown Eyes**).

At the hideout, Coalhouse asks Younger Brother what he wants. Younger Brother tries to respond but, overcome with emotion, is unable to express himself. All he can say is he knows how to blow things up. Coalhouse replies he has rules that must be followed (**He Wanted To Say**). Coalhouse vows that with Younger Brother's genius and dynamite, he will unleash an act so terrible that no white man will ever mistreat a black person again.

In Atlantic City, Father tells Mother he has been called back to New York City. Coalhouse and his men have taken over the Morgan Library and threatened to blow up the building and its priceless contents unless his demands are met by that evening. The authorities believe Father, as someone who knows Coalhouse, can help them negotiate a peaceful settlement. Father promises Mother that when this crisis is over, their lives will be as they were before Mother found Coalhouse and Sarah's baby, that they will once again be happy. Mother tells him things will never be the same (**Back To Before**).

In New York, a Crowd of police and reporters maintain a vigil outside the Morgan Library. District Attorney Charles S. Whitman,

speaking through a megaphone, tells Coalhouse that Willie Conklin is restoring his car. However, Whitman refuses to hand the fire chief over to Coalhouse. Whitman promises Coalhouse that both he and Willie will receive fair trials, and demands that he come out of the library. The authorities, including J.P. Morgan, begin to lose patience. Father arrives and identifies himself to Whitman, saying he believes Coalhouse will listen to Booker T. Washington.

Inside the main entrance of the library, Coalhouse sits, surrounded by red silk walls, and many priceless artworks. Bundles of dynamite are everywhere. Among his men is Younger Brother.

Booker T. Washington enters. Coalhouse respectfully tells Washington he always tried to follow Washington's words of wisdom and action. Washington replies that Coalhouse's actions are the destruction of everything for which he had fought; ending hatred and encouraging greater understanding and peaceful co-existence. Washington, reminding Coalhouse about the legacy he will leave his son, urges him to give up and leave the library, promising that he will intercede on Coalhouse's behalf during his trial **(Look What You've Done)**.

Coalhouse agrees to surrender on the condition that Coalhouse's men can leave unharmed. Younger Brother and Coalhouse's men angrily protest their leader's change of heart, saying either they all will go free or they all will die together. Coalhouse insists that they leave. Washington departs.

The voice of the hostage is heard at the door. Younger Brother unbolts the door. It is Father. Recognizing Younger Brother, Father angrily tells him he owes his sister, Mother, an explanation. Younger Brother asks Father to tell Mother that he has always loved and admired her. Father tells Coalhouse that his restored car is ready and outside the museum. As he prepares to leave, Coalhouse urges his men to tell his story to ensure his struggle was not in vain **(Make Them Hear You)**.

Coalhouse's men leave the museum and drive off. Assured that his men are safe. Coalhouse thanks Father for his family's kindness and prepares to leave. Coalhouse asks Father whether he will be killed. Father replies "No," that the authorities are decent men. They shake hands. Coalhouse walks out the door and is greeted by a volley of gunfire. Father screams.

Following Coalhouse's death, Younger Brother drives south to Mexico where he joins the great peasant revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. In Sarajevo in 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand is assassinated, triggering World War I.

In the Atlantic in 1915, Father is among 1,200 men, women and children who perish when the Lusitania is torpedoed by a U-boat off the Southwest coast of Ireland. After mourning for a year, Mother accepts a marriage proposal from Tateh. Together with the Little Boy, the Little Girl, and Coalhouse and Sarah's son, they move to California to make a new home and start a new life **(Ragtime / Wheels of a Dream Reprise)**.

"The era of Ragtime had run out, as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano."

For more information check out <http://www.ragtimethemusical.com>