

**INNOCENT
THOUGHTS**

By
William Missouri Downs

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

ARLEN WEINBERG - A Jewish Anthropology Ph.D. Candidate
IRANOLA ALDRIDGE (IRA) - A Black Lawyer

TIME: Noon - A hot June day, not long ago.

PLACE: A jury room in a Chicago City Court.

SETTING: Room 256A, a plain government-issue room lost somewhere in an aging, dull stone municipal building. Industrial gray is the main color. A large table and chairs, perhaps used for jury negotiations, dominate the room. In the corner are a water cooler, candy machine and Mr. Coffee. One wall holds an ancient map of the United States. From above, yellowing pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln look down on an American flag that is bent and stiff from years of hanging in the same position.

Act One

THE LIGHTS RISE: ARLEN WEINBERG, an anxious Jewish Ph.D. candidate, stands alone in the sweltering room. He clutches a satchel, a ripped Macy's bag and a large envelope. He has a small dirt spot on his knee. He sports an odd tweed beret with a fuzzy ball atop. Inspecting his watch, he decides not to stay. Just as he makes the door, IRA ALDRIDGE invades the room. He's a big-boned black lawyer who isn't having a good day. IRA dumps a pile of legal briefs on the table. All the way down the hall he's been muttering an intense conversation with himself which now spills out.

IRA. *(Quietly ranting to himself)*...It's the brotherhood, man! We're up against a bunch of little blue cardboard yesheads! Mistakes cannot be made! Get it over with! Put the show on, so the damn judge can make his all-important *smelt run* by Friday! God, bitchin' makes me hungry. *(He dials the phone. Suddenly he changes and speaks in tough street wise Black English. On the phone)* It's Ira. How it be? ...Don't give me that shit. ...256A. ...I'm talkin' Italian wonder bread here. All meat. Double meat. It can be anything but smelt! ...Don't be talkin' trash to me. ...Got it? Good. *(He hangs up and goes back to his business voice, Standard American with a slight Southern tinge.)* Smelt! What in hell is a smelt?

ARLEN. *(Befuddled)* A small, silvery, fish. 'Bout yea big.

IRA. Who would eat somethin' called that!

ARLEN. They're not bad. *(Trying to make a joke)* Nothing compared to Gefilte Fish.

IRA. *(Not listening)* You know the judge's office is air-conditioned!? Marble lined and air-conditioned! Got himself rosewood while I get Protestant gray! What do you bet he's got himself some feather wavers up there?

ARLEN. Excuse me?

IRA. What you bet?

ARLEN. ...Are you asking me if I want to make a wager? I don't bet. My mother used to once a year but--. *(For the first time, IRA stops long enough to notice ARLEN.)*

IRA. Who the hell are you?

ARLEN. I have an appointment.

IRA. Not here you don't. This room is reserved, get out.

ARLEN. This is 256A?

IRA. Whatever number, it's reserved, you're out of here. *(IRA exits.*

ARLEN grabs the phone, wipes the receiver with a hankie and dials.)

ARLEN. *(On phone)* Uwanda. It's Arlen. ...Arlen. ...Yes. My meeting...

The noon meeting. ...I know it's at noon. Where is it? ...It's not locked. I left it open. ...Well, thank you but that wasn't necessary--. Uwanda?

...Hello? *(He's been cut off. He re-dials.)* Uwanda. Look, when you get another call you put me on hold by pushing the "hold" button--. Hold on!

...You're right. I'm sorry I don't mean to yell. ...Very sorry. Can I ask you something? ...let it wait. The man I was to meet. Was he... I don't know quite how to ask... Was he... ah, hell, was he white? *(IRA re-enters with a box of legal briefs and dumps it with the others.)* I'll call back.

(ARLEN hangs up.)

IRA. Want somethin'?

ARLEN. Do I?

IRA. Well, I'd wager you didn't come here so I could stare at your silly hat.

ARLEN. I was sent for.

IRA. ...You're not Tokeeyokee Sato?

ARLEN. It's Toyota Sato but that's not me. I'm Weinberg. Arlen Weinberg. Call me Artey.

IRA. Doctor Ar-tey Weinberg.

ARLEN. Not Doctor, yet. Working on it. University of Chicago.

(ARLEN offers a hand. IRA ignores it and sorts the pile of briefs. Beat.)

That's okay. *(Beat)* Doctor Sato couldn't make it. *(IRA ignores him.)* You and I spoke this morning on the phone? *(Still nothing.)* By the way, I'm okay.

IRA. *(Puzzled)* You're okay, fine.

ARLEN. What I mean is, out front, just now, in the cross walk.

IRA. Cross walk?

ARLEN. The zebra crossing. I'm the one you ran down. Well, bumped shoulders. Dropped everything. You walked off so quickly. Just wanted to let you know I'm okay. No damage done.

IRA. Fine.

ARLEN. Ripped my bag though. ...Some dirt on my pants. New pants.

IRA. I.D.?

ARLEN. Me?

IRA. Yes.

ARLEN. I understand. This place is really bizarre. Out in the lobby just now, I saw a convict spit on what I think was his attorney... Driver's license okay? *(IRA inspects ARLEN's I.D.)*

IRA. What the hell is this?

ARLEN. It's an Israeli drivers license.

IRA. Thought you were American.

ARLEN. I am.

IRA. Old snapshot.

ARLEN. Guess it's time to get a new one. What can I say, it's me.

IRA. Hell, I know you.

ARLEN. Thought so. We were--.

IRA. My daughter took some Intro to Archaeology class from you or something.

ARLEN. Daughter?

IRA. Don't worry, you gave her an "A".

ARLEN. It's a big class. Well over a hundred. Wouldn't know.

IRA. Said you were in some sort of shit with the administration.

ARLEN. Me? Not really. A mere misunderstanding. I'm new to teaching. New routines. That's all.

IRA. Photographs?

ARLEN. They got a touch dirty. When I fell.

IRA. Had time to examine them? *(IRA clears a place on the table.)*

ARLEN. Took a look in the cab on the way over. Your messenger was late. There're a few things that aren't clear. That's not unusual. Always a gray area. Things left ambiguous. Just the nature of the beast...

(ARLEN's voice drifts off. IRA has extended one of his huge open hands toward him. ARLEN gently pulls away.)

ARLEN. ...What?

IRA. The photos, may I see them?

ARLEN. Oh! Yes. Of course. *(ARLEN hands over the envelope. IRA opens it, takes out a dozen black-and-white 8x10 photos and sets them out side to side.)*

IRA. The actual photos from the grave were lost, or so we're told. With these morons you never know. These cops got the intellect of garbage men and are better organized!

ARLEN. I think I've made a mistake...

IRA. Gave me a sample of pickled smelt. A jar full of dead fish. Thought I was goin' to bring up my breakfast. Who the hell would eat somethin' called *smelt*?!

ARLEN. ...I'm looking for a lawyer who's *defending* a policeman.

IRA. You found him.

ARLEN. A cop. I mean... A *white* police officer.

IRA. All lawyers bitch about their clients. An unwritten law. (*IRA pulls a few more photos out of his briefcase and slaps them down in front of ARLEN.*)

IRA. These were taken in the lab, but they get the point across.

ARLEN. These are the same ones—

IRA. Court T.V. is out there. God but I look like hell on television. As if I'm about to pop. It's like the whole damn world is spyin' in on me. I'm walkin' down a dark alley with these cable-pushers. By the way, talk to the press and you're fired.

ARLEN. I've--.

IRA. Man, I'd love to get my hands on the damn Hollywood Jew-types who thought this up. How can you concentrate with five hundred watt klieg lights burnin' your neck?

ARLEN. (*Holding up the photos.*) I've seen--.

IRA. And what the hell are those neon lights about? Even my *mother* would look guilty under those floodlights.

ARLEN. I've seen these!

IRA. What do you want, the real thing? Forensic report? Gotta tell me. Can't read minds.

ARLEN. Just information.

IRA. Hold on. You're the one wrote that article in the Journal of Forensic Sciences or something on the killin' of that prehistoric woman ditched in the LaBrea tar pits?

ARLEN. You read that? Got to be five years ago--.

IRA. What was the motivation, some hominid cut her throat cause she didn't clean the beaver pelts right?

ARLEN. Most likely it was human sacrifice--.

IRA. But you don't know.

ARLEN. She was murdered more than six thousand years ago and dumped in a tar pit; the exact motivation can be hard to come by.

IRA. They were human beings?

ARLEN. Sort of.

IRA. Then motivation is easy. *(Uncomfortable beat. IRA pours coffee.)*

Yep, didn't like how she cleaned the beaver pelts, thought he'd get himself a little of that vivacious young Homosapien who lived in the cave-condo next door. Coffee?

ARLEN. Thank you. Sugar, two. *(Holding up his thumb and finger)*
And about yea much creamer.

IRA. *(Not looking)* How much?

ARLEN. Like that.

IRA. Like what?

ARLEN. Like... Make it the color of Lena Horne. *(IRA stops and stares at ARLEN.)*

ARLEN. Thought I'd break the tension. Minor joke. Sorry.

IRA. First thing we'll do is qualify you as an expert witness.

ARLEN. Just being exact.

IRA. Elicit your formal qualifications through a series of agreed upon questions and answers.

ARLEN. Thought lawyers liked that.

IRA. Education, fieldwork, articles published. So write me down some questions. *(IRA pushes a pad and pencil in front of ARLEN.)*

ARLEN. But the LaBrea thing was different. I've specialized. All my fieldwork--.

IRA. Dear Professor--.

ARLEN. I'm an adjunct instructor--.

IRA. After lunch we continue our defense. The prosecution is in fine order, the jury suspicious, our expert witness has dropped out on us, the judge hates my guts because I'm not a smelt addict, and I've got one thin hour to bring you up to speed!

ARLEN. Speed?

IRA. To testify, man. Your expert testimony. The reason you're here.

ARLEN. His condition is serious?

IRA. Who?

ARLEN. Your expert.

IRA. She.

ARLEN. Sorry, "she".

IRA. One of the finest forensic anthropologists of our time. Doctor Connie Jones from Canada.

ARLEN. Can't say I've heard of her.

IRA. Course not, she's black.

ARLEN. ...And from another country. I don't think it's just because she's black. I know several people in my field that are black, I mean, African-American.

IRA. Really, who?

ARLEN. *(Caught off guard)* Well, there's a... George... George... ah...

IRA. Can't come up with a Black last name?

ARLEN. *(Immediately)* Jefferson!

IRA. George Jefferson?

ARLEN. ...No relation to the old television thing. Gets kidded about that a good deal. *(ARLEN tries to laugh it off. IRA doesn't find it amusing.)*

IRA. George Jefferson - perhaps you could give me his number.

ARLEN. Gosh, I don't know. Don't have it on me but I--.

IRA. If you weren't interested your secretary should've said somethin' this mornin'.

ARLEN. I want to be interested, but... don't know if I qualify.

IRA. Any anthropologist--.

ARLEN. But I'm not board certified--.

IRA. Certification isn't necessary--.

ARLEN. I'm used to dealing with bones that are considerably older.

IRA. Any anthropologist with some experience in human osteology qualifies as an expert in the field of forensic anthropology. Besides, you're the only one who'd accept on such short notice.

ARLEN. But I've specialized--.

IRA. I know that, you know that, what do you bet, if we work together, we can keep the jury from knowin' that?

ARLEN. Seems sort of dishonest.

IRA. This is a court of law. You don't hafta be honest, just authoritative! Hell. Let's start. Perhaps you're the wrong one for the job and then you won't hafta make a decision. Tell me somethin'?

ARLEN. About... the bones?

IRA. Yeah. (*ARLEN puts on his glasses, silly half-glasses that are far too old for his years. He holds the photos up to the light.*)

IRA. Thought you said you'd studied'em?

ARLEN. Just reorienting myself.

IRA. (*Condescending*) Oh. (*Beat*) Are we oriented now?

ARLEN. Almost.

IRA. (*Beat*) How 'bout now?

ARLEN. ...Yes.

IRA. Oh good! Talk to me.

ARLEN. What?

IRA. Talk!

ARLEN. Sorry.

IRA. Speak!

ARLEN. First, anthropology is not an exact science and on top of that I'm a physical anthropologist, not a cultural anthropologist. All of my fieldwork has been near the Dead Sea. Doctor Sato is the one who--.

IRA. Give it the old college try.

ARLEN. Well okay. I'd say he was a slender man. Again, I am not--

IRA. Please, without apologies.

ARLEN. Five-foot-nine, maybe.

IRA. Jesus.

ARLEN. Bad?

IRA. No, good. The victim lied on his driver's license. Said he was five-foot-eleven. You got it right.

ARLEN. Head trauma.

IRA. And that's how he died?

ARLEN. (*Still looking at the photos*)

No, there's evidence it healed. Most likely an auto accident or war wound. Maybe, six, twelve months before death.

IRA. Age?

ARLEN. He didn't have any teeth so--.

IRA. They were pried out after the murder so that dental records couldn't be used.

ARLEN. ...In that case, mid-thirties. Maybe.

IRA. Race?

ARLEN. I'm not good at human variation.

IRA. Human what?

ARLEN. Variation. We don't call it "race" in the bone game anymore, it's "human variation."

IRA. So, you can't tell his "human variation" by lookin' at his bones?

ARLEN. Not really.

IRA. That's not what I've heard.

ARLEN. With the interbreeding that's gone on, it's becoming difficult to tell an American black man's bones from a common white.

IRA. Or a white's bones from a common black?

ARLEN. Sure. I guess it works both ways. *(Beat)*

IRA. That's it?

ARLEN. What more do you want?

IRA. Give me somethin'. Sound like an expert.

ARLEN. Right. Expert. Ah. The orbits of the eyes are lower, the inter-orbital distance is wider and the nasal aperture is broader, less sharply defined. But this doesn't necessarily mean that this is the skull of a--.

IRA. All that from twenty-one-year-old bones! Your science, professor, fascinates me.

ARLEN. I'm an adjunct instructor--.

IRA. How did the victim die?

ARLEN. I'd be guessing.

IRA. An authoritative guesstimation is admissible.

ARLEN. Strangulation.

IRA. How do you know?

ARLEN. Photograph number... seven. The cartilage around the laryngeal region has fossilized. In particular the thyroid cartilage... It's the thing that moves up and down when you swallow.

IRA. Please tell me you won't be talkin' down to the jury. Use laymen's terms, the Adam's apple, but don't be talkin' down to them.

ARLEN. Gotcha. Layman's terms. Of course. The Adam's apple, it shows... discontinuity. *(IRA places several folders in front of ARLEN)*

IRA. Take a bow. Forensic anthropologist, forensic pathologist, coroner's reports all agree with you.

ARLEN. I don't think I can add anything--.

IRA. Come on, Weinberg, you've done this before.

ARLEN. No. I'm just covering for Doctor Sato--.

IRA. That's right, I'm to report to him about how you do. What is he, head of your dissertation committee?

ARLEN. Yes. But he's on a dig in China. He's found the dorsal section of a Homo Habilis that may well predate our oldest African find.

"Dorsal," means part of the spine.

IRA. Hey Weinberg! If I don't want you talkin' down to the jury, how the hell do you think I feel about you talkin' down to me? I know what "dorsal" means.

ARLEN. Sorry.

IRA. What you're tellin' me is that you have very little experience with courtroom etiquette. (*Cutting*) "Etiquette" means procedure and rules.

ARLEN. (*Staid*) No, I have little knowledge of... whatever.

IRA. Then you must know that "truth" is trivial. It's the question not the answer that matters. All you need to do is question. Are you a child molester?

ARLEN. Beg pardon?

IRA. A child molester! Do you do the deed with children? "Yes" or "no".

ARLEN. No!

IRA. See, I ask a question, you answer. It's over, right? Now, if I were to ask the same question in front of Doctor Sato, or the Chicago Tribune, or let's say Court T.V., you'd answer the same way, wouldn't you?

ARLEN. (*Guarded*) Most certainly would.

IRA. But your answer wouldn't matter. The fact that the question was asked is enough. Good people don't have bad questions asked about them, therefore the jury'll think you're guilty. You must've done somethin' or the question wouldn't have been asked. The same is true here. As you say, Weinberg, it's not an exact science, there are possibilities - there are questions.

ARLEN. (*Beat*) Look. I might not be the right one to--.

IRA. You want out?

ARLEN. No. I just may be the wrong one to... facilitate--.

IRA. Your qualifications aren't great, but acceptable, you've made several good guesstimations so far. You're a fine stop-gap 'til we can get a real anthropologist--.

ARLEN. I am a real anthropologist—

IRA. Then why wouldn't you want to help?

ARLEN. ...Didn't know so much was involved.

IRA. Or are you actin' this way because you didn't expect a black lawyer.

ARLEN. A what?

IRA. An African-American.

ARLEN. That's not it.

IRA. Durin' our brief conversation this mornin', I put on my 'phone voice'. It sounds terribly white, (*Imitating a white person*) "Hello. Gosh yes, I'll get right on it. Meet around noon? Lovely!" (*Then in his own voice*) I'm bilingual, man. For white people I talk white, for brothers, black. I find a white voice opens more doors, don't you?

ARLEN. Wouldn't know.

IRA. Nothin' personal. It's business and business is good. (*Beat. With a nervous laugh, ARLEN tries to be chummy.*)

ARLEN. Isn't it amazing? What we've come to as a society? You have to disguise your voice so white people won't think you're black, African-American. That's pathetic, deeply pathetic. I've always believed we should try to amalgamate all voices--.

IRA. Matter of fact, I thought you might be black.

ARLEN. Oh. Really? Why?

IRA. Your black secretary told me you just got back from Africa. Thought you might be a black man, puttin' on your phone voice too. Now wouldn't that make a joke? Two black men talkin' white to each other. But then, of course, your last name let me know that couldn't be true.

ARLEN. Sorry to disappoint.

IRA. Apology accepted. You're Jewish?

ARLEN. Last time I checked.

IRA. Probably want to know what type of pay we're talkin'.

ARLEN. I'd like to know but not because I'm Jewish.

IRA. Three hundred dollars an hour. You're already on the clock. What's your minimum call? Twenty hours? We're talkin' six-thousand dollars for one day's work, *Weinberg*. You're pleased with that figure?

ARLEN. That'd be just fine.

IRA. You're happy?

ARLEN. I'm happy.

IRA. Then I'm happy! (*IRA digs through his briefcase.*)

ARLEN. Unusual case. I mean a black/African-American defending a... white cop.

IRA. Lieutenant McDill is defended by a team of lawyers. I'm only special because of my *human variation*.

ARLEN. "McDill," that's right. Real law-and-order-cop. Afraid I don't care for him much.

IRA. You don't?

ARLEN. I mean, I like that he's law-and-order, but his personality, what I've read, rubs me the wrong way.

IRA. So overall you *do* like him?

ARLEN. If you want me to.

IRA. Perhaps you'd like a personal audience with him. Matter of fact, he's down the hall right now, tapin' an interview with the 700 Club. Announced he saw the light of Christ, yes the Lord, came to him in his minimum security cell. He's talkin' Made-For- T.V. movie, man. Family Channel shit. Course he was nothin' twenty-one years ago. Nothin' but a wise-ass street cop. A middle class white guy who was pissed because the neighborhood was bein' taken over by the "Negroes."

ARLEN. Funny. I read about this case just last night and--.

IRA. You missed my starrin' role on court T.V.? Got caught up in one of their snake-cables yesterday. Nearly fell flat on my ass.

ARLEN. No, I read about it on the plane. Just got back. Transatlantic flight. Still have a little Jet lag. Or as Doctor Sato always says, *Jet Rag*. (*ARLEN chuckles at his own joke. IRA just stares at him.*)

ARLEN. *Jet Rag*. He's Japanese. Get it? It's a joke.

IRA. Had no idea you were such a news hound.

ARLEN. Just getting caught up. Africa doesn't have the most developed newscasts. Matter of fact, where I was they didn't even have TVs.

IRA. (*Mock shock*) And where was this?

ARLEN. A dig in Botswana. Perhaps you know the place?

IRA. Nope. What's it like?

ARLEN. You don't know the place?

IRA. Said no.

ARLEN. Interesting. My first trip to the Dark Continent. Wish it could have been longer. Sorta popped in and popped out. All of my work has been done near--.

IRA. The Dead Sea, I know.

ARLEN. Needed a change, the opportunity came and I said 'what the hell' and jumped.

IRA. *(Pushing each word)* What. Is. It. Like?

ARLEN. Oh! The chief of the Baroove people welcomed me with a box of black snuff. Put it on my desk.

IRA. Must be quite a conversation piece.

ARLEN. Had a great little guide. A funny, vulgar man, called 'Mpotulo?' who brought me palm wine every night. A lot of children tagged along behind him to the dig site.

IRA. Find anything?

ARLEN. I don't think they were *all* his but they might have been. You never know. No one seemed to understand that we were there to work. Many were sick. Lots of AIDS, which they attributed to evil spirits. Mpotulo always did this colorful dance, sort of a jig, you know, to ward off evil spirits.

IRA. A jig?

ARLEN. Well, it wasn't really a jig.

IRA. You said "jig"?

ARLEN. What I meant was, more of a... Let me show you. It was something like... *(ARLEN attempts to show what the evil spirit dance looked like. He shows off a few awkward hops. He stops when he sees that IRA. is glaring at him.)*

ARLEN. *(Uncomfortable)* It... a... reminded me of a rare Indian dance I once witnessed. I mean Indian the country, not Indian, you know like... *(ARLEN stops and laughs at himself.)*

ARLEN. You know what I almost did just then? I almost went "Woo Woo". You know, like an Indian. *(On "Woo Woo" ARLEN pats his hand on his mouth in a childlike imitation of an American Indian. It's a small gesture, barely complete before he realizes how silly he looks and stops.)*

ARLEN. What can I say? Sorry. Nervous. You know. First time.

IRA. *(Pushing each word)* Find. Any. Thing?

ARLEN. Oh! The week before they postulated that they dug up a rib of Australopithecus Robustus but they couldn't be sure--..

IRA. So you packed it into your luggage and whisked it off to the lab for further study.

ARLEN. Matter of fact, you'll never guess what I have with me. *(ARLEN opens his Macy's bag and hauls out a colorful garment.)*

ARLEN. What do you think?

IRA. What the hell is that?

ARLEN. Why it's a Dashiki! Bought it in Durban. This one is for Selma. My significant other. She's a decorator. Haven't seen her yet - going to surprise her.

IRA. I'll bet she's the one who got you the hat with the red bally thing.

ARLEN. How did you know?

IRA. Wild guess.

ARLEN. We always get each other something when we're out of the country. (*Off the Dashiki*) I hear they're very comfortable.

IRA. Wouldn't know.

ARLEN. You should try one. Pure cotton, not that cheap manufactured stuff you pick up here, but real African cotton. We're going to display them as wall art in our condo.

IRA. (*Under his breath*) Next to the mah-jongg table?

ARLEN. Excuse me?

IRA. You're a liberal, aren't you?

ARLEN. A what?

IRA. Lib-er-al. As in "Namby Pamby..." As in "Lip Service..."

ARLEN. I didn't mean...

IRA. No, go on! You're usin' dashikis as wall art. I'm thrilled. Perhaps you want to show me the African fertility beads you picked up real cheap. I'm all ears!

ARLEN. Perhaps now is not the time.

IRA. No. Please, continue!

ARLEN. No. Let's drop it--.

IRA. You're sure now?

ARLEN. Yes.

IRA. Look Weinberg, I'll try to delay your entrance as long as possible. Try to time it so we only get through your qualifications before dinner. That way, you'll be able to work with the team tonight.

ARLEN. Team?

IRA. We hafta do some moldin' to make you convincin'. We also hafta get rid of that annoyin' habit of yours to bring up the end of sentences, as if everythin' was a question? As if you were askin' permission to have an opinion?

ARLEN. If I'm so rough, why did your daughter recommend me?

IRA. She didn't.

ARLEN. Oh.

IRA. What more do you need, Weinberg?

ARLEN. Nothing. Information perhaps. Facts.

IRA. Fine. The bones of a black man, who disappeared twenty-one years ago, are discovered buried in the dirt basement floor of the brownstone where Lieutenant McDill and his wife once lived. The apartment building was bein' torn down when the grim discovery was made. Next mornin', wreckin' crews, came to work to find a man, fittin' McDill's description, diggin' at the exact spot the bones were uncovered. And so, after a little investigation my client has been wrongfully accused of killin' one Proxy Green. Twenty-one years ago Proxy was his "boy." The buildin' janitor who was workin' his way up to buildin' super. Then he made the mistake of bein' seduced by the missus. Mrs. McDill, bored with her marriage and a husband who was never home, was after her "Negro experience." Wanted to check out the myth of black sexuality. It's alleged that Lieutenant McDill found out about their... liaison and took steps to bring it to a conclusion.

ARLEN. The alleged victim's name was?

IRA. Green.

ARLEN. But the first name was... different.

IRA. Proxy.

ARLEN. Unusual.

IRA. Apparently his mother heard the word on television, Perry Mason or some such shit, liked it and named her son. Got a problem with it?

ARLEN. No.

IRA. Then why the strange look?

ARLEN. Strange look, not at all. Matter of fact, I was just thinking that the African-American culture, it's so...*(Trying to find the right word)* ...zesty ...rich.

IRA. An ignorant woman names her son Proxy and that makes our culture rich?

ARLEN. I meant 'free'.

IRA. Free from what?

ARLEN. ...Constraints.

IRA. What? Like, closer to nature?

ARLEN. That's what I meant.

IRA. Blacks are closer to nature. Didn't know this. Closer, what, to animals? Closer to beasts? Monkeys?

ARLEN. Didn't mean anything. I was just--.

IRA. Oh, you don't mean anything. Everything's okay then. *(IRA goes back to his notes. Beat.)*

ARLEN. You... You don't remember me do you?

IRA. From what?

ARLEN. I knew it was you the moment you... You've straightened your hair, but it's still you.

IRA. We've used your services before?

ARLEN. No. I grew up on Douglas Boulevard, we called it Judenstrasse then. You knew it as Lawndale. You're Iranola. Only they called you... Zipper. Some called you Ira the terrible. You were part of S.P.O. Secret Private Organization. No one was supposed to know what the initials meant but we all did. *(A moment as IRA takes this in.)*

IRA. And who in hell am I talkin' to?

ARLEN. Obviously you don't remember the name Weinberg--.

IRA. Common name.

ARLEN. In that neighborhood, at that time, it was. But we went to school together. Had Mrs. Burns. My father was--.

IRA. Oh my God in heaven.

ARLEN. It's coming back.

IRA. The landlord.

ARLEN. ...Well yeah, my father was your landlord for a while, but what I was going to say was, he was vice-principal. All the... people of color used to call him Mr. Bowtie. *(Beat)* What? Shouldn't have said anything?

IRA. You're... Weinberg's kid?

ARLEN. Hard to believe, huh?

IRA. Weasel-face Weinberg! *(An uneasy pause, which ARLEN takes it upon himself to end.)*

ARLEN. You became a lawyer. Congrats, man. Amazing isn't it?

IRA. What's so amazin' about it?

ARLEN. What I mean is... it's amazing that any one from that neighborhood became anything at all. *(IRA studies the photos.)*

IRA. *(Under his breath)* Amazin'.

ARLEN. I've the most vivid memories of you. You were the only Black at Herzal elementary, and there were a lot by then, who was actually from Africa. All the African-American students would huddle around you in detention and you'd tell the most prodigious stories about the Dark Continent.

IRA. How would you know? Can't imagine you in detention.

ARLEN. I was a monitor. Young Americans League? Used to wear those silly little badge things and tell you to shut up. That was me. (*IRA is silent.*) You're not upset because I told you who I was? Just because my father was your landlord is no reason that we--.

IRA. You got it all wrong, Weinberg. I grew up around Jews. All of our landlords were Jewish. Jewish grocers. Jewish butchers. Jewish pawnshops. That's not it. I just wonderin' if you're right for the case. You're weak. Your eyes don't seem to focus on anything and you blink too much.

ARLEN. I blink too much?

IRA. Juries don't trust witnesses with a rapid-fire blink. If I put you under those damn neons, you squirmin' and blinkin' like a fool, you'd look like the devil himself.

ARLEN. I'll control my blinking.

IRA. It's also hard to trust someone who doesn't look you in the eye. Ever notice that about yourself? You tend to look down. Your focus is somewhere around my nose. What do you think I'll ask you don't want to answer?

ARLEN. Or maybe it's because you beat me up three times.

IRA. Never laid a hand on you--.

ARLEN. Fifth grade. They knew I was in bad shape when spinal fluid came out my nose.

IRA. And what did you do to deserve this *alleged* beatin'?

ARLEN. Mrs. Burns asked you a question. Apparently you didn't know the answer so my hand shot up. (*He demonstrates*) Oh, oh, oh!

IRA. Omigod, that's right, you were the "oh oh oh" kid.

ARLEN. What did you expect? I was taught to answer questions. Be a good boy, be smart, become a doctor and marry a nice Jewish girl. Only I got it all turned around. Married a Shiksa, divorced, took care of my parents until they died and became interested in bones. (*Beat*) You caught up to me after school and kicked the hell out of me cause I

answered a question. Made a fool out of you. *(Beat)* Just want you to know that I, well, I harbor no feelings. I understand.

IRA. Understand?

ARLEN. Why you beat me up.

IRA. And whatever happened to the "oh oh oh" kid. Don't remember you in junior high.

ARLEN. At the end of fifth grade, they split us up by I.Q. I was taken into the 'A-1' division. You must have been... *(ARLEN catches himself)* Moved. We moved. North Shore.

IRA. You got me confused with someone else, Weinberg. Never laid a hand on anyone. *(An uncomfortable pause.)*

ARLEN. Listen... perhaps I could get half up front?

IRA. What?

ARLEN. The fee, perhaps half... now?

IRA. You can have *all* of it right now.

ARLEN. Really?

IRA. I'm a lawyer, if you don't do your job, I know how to get it back. *(IRA takes a check from a law book and hands it to ARLEN.)*

IRA. Somethin' wrong?

ARLEN. It's made out to me.

IRA. What, you want it made out to your girlfriend?

ARLEN. How'd you know I'd take it?

IRA. If there is anythin' a Jew likes, it's loot... What?

ARLEN. ...Nothing.

IRA. Oh, I called you a Jew. I meant, Semitic-American. Please understand, I'm new at Konigsberg, fuck-me and Weiss. First black lawyer in the firm's history.

ARLEN. *(Warily)* Quite an honor.

IRA. Before that, I had my own practice. Beat the pants off old Konigsberg so he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Junior partner. Found myself assigned to defend the very laws and practices I once attacked. When I bitched about it, they gave me this case. Was supposed to be an easy one. Weren't supposed to have probable cause.

ARLEN. What about his wife?

IRA. Wife?

ARLEN. Mrs. McDill?

IRA. We're lucky. Cancer, three years ago.

ARLEN. Sounds like there's insufficient evidence and our lieutenant is safe.

IRA. Tend to agree, but the trial has taken some rather serious turns. A responsible witness to Mrs. McDill's affair has come forward with some sort of repressed memories shit, four members of the jury have admitted they are smelt aficionados, and this mornin' we had the revelation that my client, who claims to be an understandin' *liberal*, is really a racist son-of-a-bitch.

ARLEN. How can they prove that?

IRA. McDill's divorce decree, which was missin' since the beginnin' of the trial, has somehow magically turned up in the hands of the prosecution. It states that our lieutenant, twenty years ago, divorced Mrs. McDill for fear of "black baby syndrome."

ARLEN. Don't know that one.

IRA. Some of you European-Americans think that if one of your women goes to bed with a black man, even once, she may produce a black baby any time after that, even years or decades later.

ARLEN. That was twenty-one years ago. People change. What's the truth today--?

IRA. They simply questioned the truth! Hinted. They asked the question.

ARLEN. You should've said something.

IRA. Thank you for tellin' me how to do my job--.

ARLEN. Demanded proof.

IRA. We adjourned before I could do so--.

ARLEN. You can't blame someone today for how they acted two decades ago... You should've objected.

IRA. I couldn't! I'm afraid the prosecution has exactly what I have. Proof! (*IRA digs out a divorce decree and shows it to ARLEN.*)

IRA. Stole it from the county records when the trial began. Was bein' a good little lawyer-man, coverin' my clients ass. I'm good at that.

ARLEN. Can't be much of a racist if he's willing to work with you.

IRA. Just standard operatin' procedure. If you kill someone and race is involved, be sure to hire a lawyer of the same *human variation*. Counts the same with gender variation. Kill or rape a woman, hire a woman to defend you. Choke a black man, hire a black lawyer. Kill a Bagel, hire a Bagel. Although that last one isn't that hard to do, now is it.

ARLEN. Here, now. I'm getting a little tired of you--. (*There is hard knock at the door.*)

IRA. Lunch! Pizza?

ARLEN. Thank you, no. I had a bite at the Denny's around the corner. (*IRA exits.*)

IRA. (*Offstage, in thick Black English*) Say hey my man, how it be? ...Absofuckingluey! ...You love this shit. You eat this shit. Shit you don't! (*While IRA is out, ARLEN. stretches his neck to look inside IRA's open briefcase. He pulls back just as IRA returns with a pizza.*)

IRA. Clear that shit will ya? (*ARLEN moves the photos. IRA opens the box, digs out a slice and presents it to ARLEN.*)

IRA. Slice? (*ARLEN doesn't like the way IRA manhandles the slice.*)

ARLEN. I shouldn't.

IRA. Chicago's finest.

ARLEN. It's not Kosher.

IRA. You're more Hebrew National than I thought.

ARLEN. I'm reformed, but I'm dating a girl who's conservative.

IRA. Parents must be proud.

ARLEN. They're dead. Don't complain much anymore.

IRA. More for me then. (*IRA scarf's down a slice.*)

ARLEN. Iranola--.

IRA. Please, it's Zipper. (*IRA laughs at his joke. ARLEN tries to laugh too.*)

ARLEN. I didn't mean anything by the "proof" line. I presume you're a good lawyer.

IRA. How do you know? I might be shit. Some sort of affirmative action junky.

ARLEN. What I mean is that I don't think you're... Like this picture. (*ARLEN points at the picture in IRA's briefcase.*)

IRA. What?

ARLEN. The white ...woman. (*IRA closes the briefcase.*)

IRA. What about her?

ARLEN. You've obviously got white friends. You're a lawyer. How can I say it... you're trying to assimilate.

IRA. What the hell you talkin' about?

ARLEN. Don't take this the wrong way. Everyone wants to take it the wrong way nowadays. Look, I'm trying to say that we came from a

rough neighborhood. But you're different. *We're* different. We understand what the American dream is all about--.

IRA. Didn't know this about myself.

ARLEN. What I'm trying to say is--.

IRA. I was over in the commons, just now. A crappy room across the street they provide for counsel. Was alone, studyin' notes when a janitor asked me what I was doin'. Demanded to see a photo I.D. Not because I was in the wrong place, not because I was actin' suspicious, but because I'm black.

ARLEN. Think so?

IRA. When was the last time you were carded?

ARLEN. Thirty minutes ago.

IRA. A brief overreaction. I was in a mood. Got a little *uppity*, didn't I, Weinberg? (*IRA laughs.*)

ARLEN. Why do you blacks think we Jews have it easy? We fail. We're passed over for promotion. We're carded, get arrested and beaten by cops, we suffer--.

IRA. You don't believe that I've been pigeon-holed into a "black job" at Koningsberg and Weiss? Don't get the big cases. I get the cases where race is involved.

ARLEN. Got a hell of a case now.

IRA. Because race is involved!

ARLEN. You said it yourself, you beat the pants off old Konigsberg.

IRA. They neutralized me! Stuck me in a shitty office by the elevator and forgot that I exist. Yes siree, I've oriented myself to the brightness of the whiteness! Sometimes I gotta squint it's so God damn thick.

ARLEN. I don't know how to tell you this but they're treating you like a Jew. That's not that bad--.

IRA. It's a bland existence, it's sameness, it's unemotional--.

ARLEN. It's life--.

IRA. Hell. For a pay check I do what I gotta do. (*In Black English*) If they is a black jury, suddenly I'm a brother, man. (*In White English*) If they are white, I am a perfect showcase nigger.

ARLEN. Please, that word offends me.

IRA. What offends you?

ARLEN. That word... I think it's inappropriate and--.

IRA. What, "nigger"? (*laughs*) I let 'Bagel' roll off and you say nothin'. Call *myself* nigger and *you're* offended!?

ARLEN. I let the 'Bagel' comment go. I think you deserve a little leeway. I believe they were just innocent thoughts. But I also know that your use of the 'N' word points up the problem. I mean, sometimes I think you forget that things have changed.

IRA. How can I forget things that never happened?

ARLEN. Example. We hired a new secretary. The Dean stopped me in the hall and let me know that I was to hire a black woman. No paper trail. No record of it. Just a hushed conversation in the hall. All the white applicants were pitched--.

IRA. And so if the Dean wasn't forcin' you--.

ARLEN. Wouldn't take color into account. Simply wouldn't enter my thinking.

IRA. Oh, Oh, Oh! Suddenly it's all clear, it's my lack of self respect that causes the security guards to follow me around up in White-folks Mall. I get incredible service. The clerks never take their eyes off me. Always there to help me find a tie or shirt. They let the white customers fend for themselves, but they help me. They're there to make sure I don't lift anythin', you know it and I know it and little Buffy the sales clerk knows it!

ARLEN. I'm just trying to say--..

IRA. Christ, Weinberg! I don't typify the American Dream! I've succeeded because I got nothin' to lose. That and a generous grant from the United Negro College fund and the G.I bill is my reason for prosperity, not some cryptic desire to have an American dream. A dream that's available only to those who are willin' to trample anyone who gets in your way. So yes, I've assimilated. I know how *not* to get trampled. And as for the picture in my briefcase, you shouldn't been lookin' at, that's my wife.

ARLEN. No, I meant the white... (*ARLEN catches himself. Beat.*)

IRA. Disappointed?

ARLEN. (*Apprehensive*) Not at all. So is mine. I mean my wife. She's white. I mean ex-wife. I'm divorced.

IRA. The Shiksa.

ARLEN. But the girl I'm dating... Is white. (*IRA stares at ARLEN. Not letting him off the hook.*)

ARLEN. I'm making an ass out of myself, aren't I?

IRA. Think so?

ARLEN. Look, I'm just trying... so few people try... what I'm saying is that I think it's good of you, defending a white man. Is that wrong?

IRA. Good *of* me, or good *for* me?

ARLEN. It's very mature of your race! There, found the words. Sorry, sometimes my English runs out. You seem to be a little angry but I don't think you're a... a racist.

IRA. (*Condescending*) Thank you, thank you very much.

ARLEN. Do you think...?

IRA. ...That you're a racist? Got black friends?

ARLEN. Matter of fact some of my friends are even lawyers.

IRA. Friends like George Jefferson.

ARLEN. I don't understand what I'm doing wrong. I've told you that I respect you. You're not afraid to assimilate and I admire that. I admire you! Why can't I say that? What the hell's wrong with that?

IRA. You haven't touched your pizza.

ARLEN. And what's wrong with being a liberal? What happened to being allowed an opinion?

IRA. Please, we're here to examine bones.

ARLEN. No. What's wrong with being--?

IRA. Don't have time for your political or personal insecurities. (*Beat.*)

ARLEN. Hypothetical. It's night. I'm walking down the street when I see several black youths coming in the other direction. They're talking, fooling around. I cross to the other side and continue on my way. Am I a racist?

IRA. Hypothetically, yes.

ARLEN. Am I to deny the reality of my own experience?

IRA. You judge before you know. That's the definition of a racist.

ARLEN. But I *do* know. Most of the crime in this city, in this country, is caused by blacks.

IRA. Lemme see your facts!

ARLEN. Fifty-five percent of all murderers are black--. I'm sorry I said that, but it's true.

IRA. Did you know that it's a *fact* that almost all serial killers are white!

ARLEN. So?

IRA. I'm talkin' to you in a private room and most serial killers are white. You could be a serial killer. You want facts? Fine! At the very least, black people don't sit around at night wonderin' if their next door neighbors finger's are crunchy!

ARLEN. Don't get me wrong, your proud black brothers are wonderful people but...

IRA. Cut the horseshit!

ARLEN. ...they are more likely to abandon their families, more likely to quit school and do drugs and so I play the odds and cross the street.

IRA. Your father, Mr. Landlord--.

ARLEN. My father has nothing to do with this! I come in here, attempt to reach out and what do I get? I make an ass out of myself. Do you enjoy watching me stumble all over myself?

IRA. Yes. *Quite* amusin'.

ARLEN. I bet you do. All of you do. When I teach my class, if it's an all white class I'm fine, but let there be one black and I change. Start a little tape recorder in my head, double check everything I say. Was there an insult in that line? Could that be taken the wrong way? I'm under a microscope. Constantly wondering what new phrase, what innocuous action, you blacks will decide is this week's insult.

IRA. Is it that hard to figure out?

ARLEN. Yes! I slipped at the end of last semester and used the phrase "cave man." Got a memo from the Dean saying that the African-American Student Association--.

IRA. Don't know that one.

ARLEN. I don't know, they change their name all the time.

IRA. The Black Student Alliance?

ARLEN. They took exception to the phrase because there are no caves in Africa. What the hell does that mean?! I have to attend a hearing and I'm blank. Don't even know how to defend myself! Don't even remember saying it!

IRA. So what? Go to the hearin', learn somethin'.

ARLEN. So what? The question has been asked! A hearing will be held. Do you know how that's going to look to my dissertation committee? They fired the Dean of Education for three words concerning Blacks and the Bell Curve. Gone. He apologized seventeen times and it still wasn't good enough.

IRA. So that's why you hired the black secretary. What're you goin' to do? Make her come to the hearin', sit beside you and take notes? Think that'll tell the Black Student Alliance you really care?

ARLEN. That's totally unrelated.

IRA. Sure it is.

ARLEN. God, I can't even hire a black secretary without being guilty of something!

IRA. And what's this quick trip to Africa all about? What are you hopin' to prove?

ARLEN. I can't win. I walk to class now with stones in my pockets, held down by guilt for something I don't remember doing. So you'll forgive me if I come in here a little circumspect. *(Beat)* I want to believe that you're a good lawyer. That you don't have an agendum.

IRA. And what would that agenda be? What? Do I want to save my client's ass? Isn't that my agenda?

ARLEN. *Agendum.*

IRA. We all got agendas, Artey. Is it your agenda to, for once in your life, to have a black man say you're not a racist? Would that set you free? If it came from an authority would it allow you to finally stop having to make a big show of your liberal views, allow you to take a breath, relax and say, "I'm not one of the guilty." *(Beat.)*

ARLEN. *(Trying to change the subject)* Maybe I'll have a candy bar.

IRA. Oh sure, I think Almond Joys are Kosher.

ARLEN. *(Caught)* ...Perhaps a slice then. Couldn't hurt. No sausage, right?

IRA. Pick'em off. *(ARLEN starts for the pizza but IRA picks up a slice and offers it to him. He slowly takes it but doesn't eat. Beat.)*

IRA. Eat, Artey, it's good.

ARLEN. I don't eat food that other people have touched.

IRA. Or is it the color of the hand that touched it?

ARLEN. I never meant anything. I don't mean to insult you and if I did I am sorry.

IRA. Practicin' your speech for the hearing?

ARLEN. No. I mean it. *(Beat)* ...Your daughter. She wouldn't happen to be a member of the Black Student Alliance would she?

IRA. Think so?

ARLEN. I have to know what I'm dealing with.

INNOCENT THOUGHTS

IRA. What does she have to do with this case?

ARLEN. That's what I'd like to know.

IRA. Just do your job Arty, and everythin' will be fine. *(Beat.)*

ARLEN. Fine. ...It's my opinion, my expert opinion, that these are not the bones of one Proxy Green. I've said it. Isn't that what you want me to say?

IRA. Sure.

ARLEN. Then I'm doing... okay?

IRA. I guess so.

ARLEN. Okay. *(Beat.)*

IRA. Hey Weinberg. Did you know that when Illinois suspended the death sentence they found fourteen men on death row who were totally and completely innocent. Fourteen! Know how many of them were white? Take a wild guess. *(An uneasy pause. With ARLEN and IRA staring at each other the lights fade.)*

END OF ACT ONE

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