

The Follow Up

A Fictionalized Story about the Removal of Milwaukee's Ethnic Neighborhoods

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SYNOPSIS: It is the millennium and journalists at a Milwaukee community newspaper, *The Liberal*, have decided to do a follow up story on people removed from ethnic neighborhoods nearly 40 years earlier. The ethnic neighborhoods had been razed during two decades of urban renewal and freeway building. Of the people interviewed in the 1960s, only three could be found for the follow up. The interviews are startling and end up revealing as much about the journalists conducting them as they do about the residents that lost their neighborhoods. Overt and covert ideologies abound.

CAST

Jack Handly: Jack is a cynical, burned-out reporter, who believes he's been passed up for positions at his old TV station because he's white. He was actually raised in the now extinct Tory Hill neighborhood and had known some diversity. However, he was educated during a time in which ethnicity was a byword and ethnics were expected to disappear into an Anglo-American society. While many of *The Liberal's* staff live in suburban Milwaukee, gritty Jack always remained near the inner city. (Jack will appear as a 23-year-old in the old newsreels and as a retirement-age man at the millennium.)

Jennifer Galin: Jennifer is a young reporter trying to make it in the quickly disappearing world of print journalism. While she wants to please her mentor Jack and her editor Tom, she has greater concerns about fitting the prototype of upper middle class professionals in the northern suburbs. She understands the importance of being politically correct but really does not know what diversity and cultural differences are about. In an effort to better understand at least her own background, she's conducting personal genealogy.

Tom Kowalski, the Editor: Tom grew up on the southside *Polonia* and remembers with mixed feelings how the freeway removed homes in this neighborhood. He is neither a strong advocate of, nor an opponent to, ethnicity. His concern is getting at the truth in the follow up—did the people who had their neighborhoods razed really do better or did they do worse? He also is concerned with keeping his staff in line. He knows he

needs Jack, as Jack has the old news connections and can write engaging stories. However, Tom finds his constant insubordination challenging. He needs Jennifer or a clone of her, as the paper's advertising dollars come from her connections. Her interest in the environment is very popular among the upper middle class readership.

Vic Conti: Vic appears in the newsreels as a 20-year-old and again as a 60-year-old. He emigrated from Italy as a child of about 12, so retains an accent. He has difficulties with English and is very impressionable. We never get to know much about Vic because of the heavy-handed ways his interview is conducted.

Ramona Mendez-Zenner: Ramona appears in the newsreels as a 30-year-old and later as a 70-year-old. She is an edgy, educated woman and will not accept someone else's interpretation of her life.

Gwen Oliphant-Harris: Gwen appears in the newsreels as an 18-year-old and again as a 60-year-old. She did well in life, but her family experienced multiple tragedies as the result of the move out of Bronzeville.

ACT 1: VIC

Act 1, Scene 1

[It is autumn of 1999. The setting (for all scenes) is a conference room of a small newspaper office. There is a table and six chairs. On the table are an assortment of papers and books [including The Making of Milwaukee], and a land line telephone. Behind the conference table are two windows showing a hazy view of the Milwaukee skyline from about four stories up. The scene shown is the Marquette interchange. The windows have curtains and two small window boxes with plants on them. Awards are on the wall. Between the windows is a large screen which will be used for viewing the old newsreels. As the scene opens, TOM is seated at the table with a notebook and pen.]

Wardrobe note: The newspaper staff will change outfits slightly with the scenes, but their clothing will always maintain the following pattern. Tom, the boss, will dress in a suit and tie (he can change ties from scene to scene). Jack is an aging hippy who will always dress in jeans. At times he may wear an informal sports jacket with the jeans and at other times he may wear a sweater or shirt. He won't wear ties. Jennifer will dress for her career. She will always wear a suit (with alternate jackets and scarves and tasteful jewelry/scarves for the scenes) and will always dress in very high heels.

TOM

[PICKING UP THE LAND LINE PHONE] Christine, is Jennifer in her office? [HESITATION] Good. Can you ask her to come to the conference room? [PAUSE] Thanks. Tell her Jack will also be joining us.

JACK

[WALKS INTO THE ROOM, CARRYING A CLIP BOARD AND NOTE BOOK]

TOM

Speak of the devil.

JACK

[SITS DOWN AND OPENS HIS NOTE BOOK TO TAKE NOTES] Your clichés never fail to impress, Tom. Do I take it that this is about the millennium issue?

TOM

It is. Have you given any more thought to stories?

JACK

Well, only what we'd discussed before—that *The Liberal* should focus on something unique. I think we figured that the *Journal Sentinel* and *Milwaukee Magazine* will be covering all the usual topics for the 1900s. [SHRUGS SHOULDERS] My guess: Milwaukee during the wars, the Great Depression, reigns of the mayors, maybe the beginning of Summerfest—that kind of stuff.

TOM

O-k-a-y. . .

JACK

We've always called ourselves a community newspaper, so I guess we need something liberal, but also more grassroots . . . ? [RAISES HIS ARMS]

TOM

Like focus more on what went on in the neighborhoods?

JACK

That's one idea.

JENNIFER

[ENTERS ROOM WITH NOTEBOOK AND LEATHER FOLDER] I'm sorry. Tom, you asked me to join you?

TOM

Yes. We're talking about the December 1999 issue.

JENNIFER

The millennium issue?

TOM

[NODS] Do sit down.

JENNIFER

[SITS]

TOM

Jack, I have an idea and I feel that it would be something that you and Jennifer might work on together.

JACK

[MAKES A GESTURE TO SHOW HE IS NOT DELIGHTED TO WORK WITH JENNIFER]

JENNIFER

[SIMULTANEOUS WITH JACK'S GESTURE] I would be delighted to work with Jack.

JACK

What's this idea?

TOM

Do you remember *The Liberal's* award dinner last September?

JACK

At the Italian Community Center?

JENNIFER

Who could forget that broiled orange roughly and the . . .

TOM

That's the point. After the dinner I went in the back to praise the chef. I met a man . . . not sure if he was the actual chef or an assistant . . . an older fellow named Vic Conti. We got to talking and it turns out you'd interviewed him, Jack, when he was a very young man.

JACK

[SHRUGS HIS SHOULDERS]

TOM

In that WTRI series you were doing? Those interviews with people getting displaced because of freeway building?

JACK

Seriously, Tom? I was barely out of college then. And that series went on for a year. You can't expect me to remember one name.

TOM

Well he was with one of the families that were evicted from the Italian Third Ward.

JACK

I get that, Jack . . . Conti . . .?

JENNIFER

I don't understand . . . getting kicked out of the Third Ward?

JACK

[SIGHS IN FRUSTRATION, AND PICKS UP THE GURDA BOOK] I gave you the Gurda book a month ago. You need to know these things, Jennifer.

JENNIFER

Well, I've skimmed it. But I was hired to cover the environmental issues and I didn't see anything about ecology in the book.

TOM

It's okay, Jennifer. The removals weren't widely reported by anyone. Jennifer, between roughly 1955 and 1970 there were two programs that resulted in the razing of a number of Milwaukee neighborhoods—Urban renewal and the Federal-Aid Highway Act, or the freeway building act. More than a few of these neighborhoods that were disrupted—or in some cases completely razed--were ethnic neighborhoods.

JENNIFER

[NODS]

JACK

Okay, so you met a man I'd interviewed maybe 40 years ago. What is your idea?

TOM

I've already talked to someone in legal at WTRI about accessing those old interview segments. I thought maybe a follow-up.

JENNIFER

What an idea!

JACK

[FRUSTRATED] Tom, I interviewed maybe 50 people back then. How in the hell will I be able to find them?

TOM

Well, we can begin with Vic, Jack. And you've never been a slouch at research.

JACK

But what's the point? What are we looking for? *The Liberal* has never written a story with political undercurrents without taking a position.

JENNIFER

But as liberals, we support cultural diversity. So it was ethnic neighborhoods being razed. Liberals must have had a field day with that.

TOM

I wouldn't say that . . .

JACK

[GESTICULATING HIS FRUSTRATION] It was the liberals more or less that razed the neighborhoods. Most of it was during the Zeidler administration.

JENNIFER

The Zeidler administration?

JACK

[ALMOST LOSING HIS TEMPER, SPEAKING WITH A BITTEN TONGUE] Yes, Jennifer-from-Fox-Point. Frank Zeidler was a long-time Socialist mayor in . . .

TOM

Jack, I'm sure Jennifer knows who Frank Zeidler is.

JENNIFER

Of course I do. How could I not? He gave us PBS and doubled the size of Milwaukee. I was just questioning why the Zeidler administration would have razed ethnic neighborhoods.

TOM

It wasn't specifically him—just during his administration. Some of these neighborhoods were considered blighted and I guess that . . .

JACK

And everyone wanted the freeways and better looking neighborhoods. Which brings me back to my point. Let's say that by some miracle we're able to locate some of these people from 40 or so years ago. What are we going to be re-interviewing them about?

JENNIFER

I would assume that we want to know how their lives turned out? Were they better off in the ethnic neighborhoods or . . .

TOM

What you need to understand, Jennifer, is how things were back then. At the time that Jack and I were in school, it was frowned

upon to be considered “ethnic.” Everyone was expected to disappear into the melting pot. It didn’t help me having a name like Kowalski, I’ll tell you . . .

JENNIFER

Kowalski?

TOM

Yes, it’s Polish. It wasn’t looked on favorably to be different then. Today we say it’s okay to be different—more like ingredients in a salad bowl than a melting pot.

JACK

[STATED SARCASTICALLY] Yeah, a salad bowl.

JENNIFER

Well, maybe it’s not a good metaphor . . . ?

JACK

[IGORNING JENNIFER’S REMARK] It’s getting ridiculous. Difference is supposed to be oh-so-wonderful, but no one can tell me what that even means. What is the difference we are forever championing? Does anyone know? Why is it so wonderful?

JENNIFER

You sound bitter, Jack.

JACK

Bitter? I’m hardly bitter. I’m trying to point out the irony in all this, but it seems to have been lost on you.

TOM

Let’s let up on these personal attacks, Jack.

JACK

Fine. [HE CLOSSES HIS NOTEBOOK AND GETS UP FROM THE TABLE] If you will excuse me, I have to see a man about a horse. [GLANCING AT JENNIFER] Hope that’s not too politically incorrect for the north shore liberals. [HE EXITS THE ROOM, BUT LEAVES THE NOTEBOOK BEHIND]

JENNIFER

[TURNS TO TOM] Wow.

TOM

He’s a challenge.

JENNIFER

Is he a racist as well as an asshole?

TOM

[APPEARS SHOCKED] By no means. Jack? He has some pretty strong opinions about some things, but he still lives in the hood, by choice. Jack probably knows more about every neighborhood in the city than any living human. In fact he lived in one of the neighborhoods that was razed—Tory Hill.

JENNIFER

Tory Hill? I'm not familiar with . . .

TOM

[HUSHES JENNIFER WITH HAND GESTURE. HE STANDS AND MOTIONS JENNIFER TO STAND AND FOLLOW HIM TO THE WINDOW] Jennifer is not familiar with the Tory Hill neighborhood.

JENNIFER

[FOLLOWING HIM TO THE WINDOW] No, I guess I'm not.

TOM

[POINTING AT THE WINDOWS] I give you the Tory Hill neighborhood.

JENNIFER

[APPEARING SHOCKED] What!! The Marquette interchange was Tory Hill?

TOM

Yup, that and part of today's Marquette campus.

JENNIFER

No wonder Tom's a little bitter.

TOM

I'm not sure he's all that bitter about Tory Hill.

JENNIFER

So what is he? What were the people of Tory Hill?

TOM

They were mainly Irish and German. But I think he'll just tell you he's an American. You have to remember what I said about the prevailing ideology when we were in school. We had to melt into

the pot. [PAUSE] I think too that Jack had some difficulties when he was working at WTRI. There was a push there to diversify the staff—just like there is everywhere today. Jack thinks that’s why they eventually eased him out.

JENNIFER

And not just because he was insubordinate and a general all around jerk?

TOM

[LAUGHS AND LAUGHS] I’m not going to comment on that, Jennifer. But I am relying on your good will and tact to soften his impact . . . for these interviews.

JENNIFER

[SHAKES HER HEAD, SITTING BACK DOWN] Well . . . I’ll do what I can. But you have to realize that my credentials are in biological diversity, not human diversity. But I take it you do want this story?

TOM

If Jack didn’t want to do the story he would have refused by now. I would bet he’s as interested in the follow up as I am. [HE CLOSES HIS NOTEBOOK] I think I’m going to go ahead and order those newsreels from WTRI. [HE LEAVES THE SET. ONLY JENNIFER REMAINS IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM, WRITING SOMETHING IN HER NOTEBOOK.]

[Scene change, lights dim, music plays, new scene set up]

Act 1, Scene 2

[The set is the same. It is about 10 days later. Jack is seated in the conference room, typing into his laptop. When Jennifer enters the room, he rarely looks up. During their conversation he continues typing into his laptop. By not looking at her he is showing his contempt for her. Both Jennifer and Jack have a wardrobe change.]

JENNIFER

[ENTERING THE CONFERENCE ROOM] When will he be here?

JACK

Twenty minutes.

JENNIFER

Is it Vic or Victor?

JACK

Vic.

JENNIFER

[SITTING DOWN] Have you had any luck locating the African American woman?

JACK

Some.

JENNIFER

Was it that unusual surname? Oliphant, was it?

JACK

Hmm. Hmm.

JENNIFER

[LAUGHS] Sounds like Elephant. Hope for her sake she's not rotund.

JACK

Why?

JENNIFER

[APPEARING EMBARRASED] Well . . . you know . . . elephant . . . ?

JACK

[INTERRUPTING AND SNIPPY] Have you found any of your people yet?

JENNIFER

Uh, well, the older Italian woman apparently died, as did the black shop keeper. I am still working on three that . . .

JACK

So that's a no.

JENNIFER

[HESITATES] It is not a no. I have found one of the Puerto Rican women.

JACK

[LOOKS UP FROM HIS LAPTOP, APPEARING INCREDULOUS]
Seriously?

JENNIFER

Seriously. The former Mrs. Ramona Mendez is now a Mrs. Ramona Zenner. She's living in Elm Grove.

JACK

And you've actually spoken to her?

JENNIFER

I have and she is surely the woman you interviewed.

JACK

[STILL LOOKING UP] How the hell did you find her?

JENNIFER

On Ancestry.com.

JACK

The genealogy website? I thought that was just about dead people.

JENNIFER

Not always. They have fairly current records on marriages. She married a Lester Zenner in 1995. After that, it was just the phone book.

JACK

[STILL LOOKING UP] What made you think about Ancestry?

JENNIFER

I'm a subscriber. I've been doing my genealogy.

JACK

[RETURNS TO TYPING IN HIS LAPTOP] Why?

JENNIFER

To learn what I am all about.

JACK

[SNIDELY] Why doesn't that surprise me?

JENNIFER

I'm supposed to be part Cherokee.

JACK

[LOOKS UP AS IF HE WAS ABOUT TO SAY SOMETHING, THEN SIGHS AND RETURNS TO HIS LAPTOP]

JENNIFER

I'm trying to find her—my Cherokee ancestor.

JACK

Uh huh. And when would that be?

JENNIFER

About 1800. In Illinois.

JACK

[SARCASTICALLY] Ah, a Cherokee in Illinois. And in 1800.

JENNIFER

Well, you know. The Trail of Tears.

JACK

[JUST KEEPS SHAKING HIS HEAD IN DISBELIEF; EVENTUALLY HE SPEAKS] Do you have questions prepared for Mr. Conti?

JENNIFER

Well, some, but I thought we'd look at the segment one more time before he gets here.

JACK

[GETS UP TO ADJUST THE PROJECTOR AND RETURNS TO HIS LAPTOP, LOOKING FOR THE FILE] Then we'll do it.

[The black and white "newsreel" appears on the screen and shows a very

young Jack Handly (about 23) with a microphone, about to interview a 20-year old Vic Conti. They are standing at a nondescript place in the Third Ward in about 1962. Vic has an Italian accent.]

JACK

This is Jack Handly at WTRI on Chicago Street in the Third Ward. Much of this mainly Italian community will be soon displaced by the new highway, I-794. I am here with a young resident named Vic Conti. Vic, How long have you been in America?

VIC

I come when I was twelve. I now am twenty. I come with my father, my mother, and six brothers, and one sister. We come here to the Third Ward because my grandfather has a cousin here, who is dead.

JACK

And what does your family do in the Third Ward?

VIC

My father sells food at the Row. I work making pizza. My mother cleans the church.

JACK

Would that be the Blessed Virgin of Pompeii church?

VIC

Yes, the pink church.

JACK

And how do you and your family feel about having to leave the Third Ward?

VIC

Some say we will have to leave and some say no.

JACK

How do you feel?

VIC

Some say that we will stay and some say we get opportunities if we leave.

JACK

And how does your family feel about any opportunities . . .

[THERE IS A KNOCK AT THE DOOR]

JENNIFER
Ooh.

JACK
That might be him. [HE SHUTS DOWN THE NEWSREEL]
[LOUDLY] Come in, please.

VIC
[APPEARING 40 YEARS OLDER. HE ENTERS] I'm sorry. I didn't
know if . . .

JACK
No. No, this is fine. You're Vic?

VIC
Yes.

JACK
Please sit down. This is Jennifer Galin and I'm the one that called
you, Jack Handy.

VIC
[SITS NERVOUSLY] I read your newspaper sometimes, *The Liberal*.
I saw your name and thought a long time that you were that
reporter at the TV station . . .

JACK
Yes, well, I'm glad you made it. As I mentioned on the phone, we
are doing a follow-up story on some of the residents we interviewed
in the early 1960s who were being displaced due to freeway
building and urban renewal. We wanted to know what you are
doing now.

VIC
I work at the ICC.

JENNIFER
Italian Community Center?

VIC
Yes. They built it in the same place about where we used to live.
Close.

JACK

And what do you do there?

VIC

I do some cooking and manage some waiters.

JENNIFER

So you came from Italy when you were only twelve?

VIC

Yes, from Sicily. From Bagheria, Sicily where . . .

JENNIFER

Sicily? Really? That must have been unusual for . . .

JACK

[VERY QUICKLY INTERRUPTS] What Jennifer really means is that *this is not unusual*, as just about everyone from the Third Ward had come from Sicily, right Vic? [HE GLARES AT JENNIFER]

VIC

Yes, of course.

JACK

Continue on. What happened when you had to move?

VIC

Later when they made us move we moved to the east side, then Bay View, and then the Town of Lake. There were people from Italy there. And other people too.

JACK

Really? These are quite nice areas. Do you live in the Town of Lake now?

VIC

Yes. With my wife and one son still living with us with three grandchildren.

JACK

So your family apparently did well after leaving the Ward?

VIC

Maybe. I don't know really. Perhaps.

JENNIFER

What were the things you missed most about the Third Ward?

VIC

Our neighbors. The food stands. The pink church--Our Lady of Pompeii.

JENNIFER

Was the church relocated?

VIC

Well, if you mean that little sign next to the freeway corridor . . .

JENNIFER

How terrible. What religion was that church?

JACK

[TOSSES HIS HEAD IN HIS HANDS] Vic, can you please excuse us for a second? I need to have a word with my associate.

VIC

[SEEMS CONFUSED] What do you want me to do?

JACK

[GETS UP AND ESCORTS HIM TO THE DOOR] Just wait outside the door and I'll call you back in. . . . In just a second. [HE RETURNS TO THE TABLE, GLARING AT JENNIFER]

JENNIFER

Did I say something inappropriate?

JACK

[SPEAKING AS IF BITING HIS LIP, VERY SLOWLY AND VERY ANGRILY] Sicilians are Catholics. The Third Ward community was Sicilian. You never read the materials I gave you. You never read the Gurda book. I don't even want to mention this Illinois Cherokee. I am only going to say this once. Until you understand something about the subject of this story—until you've learned about the city you are writing about—until you learn about ethnics—I do not want you to open your mouth one more time during this or another interview. Is that understood?

JENNIFER

[LONG HESITATION, AS IF WEIGHING HER OPTIONS. LIKE A MOUSE] W-e-l-l, you've given me no choice.

JACK

[CONTINUES LOOKING AT JENNIFER FOR ABOUT 5 SECONDS AS IF TRYING TO READ HER, THEN CALLS OUT] Vic, please come back in.

VIC

[RETURNS TO ROOM AND SITS DOWN, APPEARING ILL AT EASE]

JACK

So, Vic, tell us exactly what happened to your family after you left the Third Ward.

VIC

Well, we didn't leave exactly. My father still sold vegetables on Commission Row—maybe twenty, nineteen years. We had a flat near Brady and I and my brother went to work for Glorioso's on Brady—the deli . .

JACK

Yes, of course. I buy food there all the time.

VIC

My mother works for a lady in Bay View and she helped us get a house there. We rent. We looked for a church. My mother doesn't like the right church. I get married to a Polish girl in Bay View and my mother was not happy. My father is okay about not marrying an Italian girl. She—my wife—works as a hairdresser. We have six kids—Tony, Fran, Joe, Roman, Gina, Frank. We have grandchildren Christina, Tony, Joe, John, Imelda, Victor, and another Christina that we call Crissie. We got a house in the Town of Lake and have our kids. Frank and his wife Lisa, and Imelda, Victor, and Crissie live with us now.

JACK

So you did well enough in life to purchase a house in the Town of Lake?

VIC

A very old house, but big enough, if you count the attic.

JACK

Did your mother eventually accept your Polish wife?

VIC

Ehhhhh [GESTICULATES AS IF TO SAY, "NOT REALLY"]

JACK

That's a shame. Is there anything else you'd like to add—about your time in the Third Ward or your later life?

VIC

We always missed the Ward, the church, and our neighbors. We didn't understand why . .

JACK

People often miss the neighborhood they grew up in.

VIC

I suppose.

JACK

But would you have done this well if you had stayed on that run-down block?

VIC

Maybe not as good of a house?

JACK

[RISES TO SHAKE VIC'S HAND] Well, Vic, thank you so much for coming in today and sharing your story with us.

VIC

[SLIGHTLY CONFUSED, IS WALKED TO THE DOOR BY JACK]

JACK

[WITH A SMUG LOOK ON HIS FACE, RETURNS TO HIS LAP TOP AND SHUTS IT DOWN]

JENNIFER

[AFTER A LONG HESITATION OF STARING AT JACK, WITHOUT MOVING] You. You son of a bitch.

JACK

What? Where is this coming from?

JENNIFER

You know what you just did. You . . .

TOM

[WALKS IN THE DOOR] Hey, I just saw Vic leave, looking a little bewildered. What's going on here?

JENNIFER

Your so-called reporter just got done compromising an interview the likes of which I have never seen!!!

JACK

Don't talk to me about compromising an interview when you ask him if it isn't unusual for a Sicilian to live in the Third Ward and ask what religion Our Lady of Pompeii was.

TOM

Ouch!

JENNIFER

I will admit to being ignorant of a few facts, but this man would not let poor Vic get a word in about what he lost by being forced out of his community.

JACK

[SIGHS] And what am I supposed to do? You tell me, Tom? What is our point of view on this story?

TOM

I was looking more for an objective report. Just a follow up.

JACK

Objective report? Since when has *The Liberal* ever printed an objective story? [WAIT FOR LAUGH]

TOM

I understand your concerns here . . .

JACK

What if it comes out that the decision to raze these ethnic neighborhoods was the worst choice this city ever made? And it was the decision during a Socialist administration. What happens to all those liberal north shore merchants that dear Jennifer has courted to advertise in this paper? There will be questions, Tom.

TOM

First, Jack, you are seriously overreacting. I doubt we will lose our advertisers over this. I think this project has just plain hit a nerve with you.

JACK

How?

TOM

[IGNORING THE QUESTION] But second—and believe me when I tell you this. I’ve had my share of concerns. In fact, I’ve sat up many a night over the last 40 years wondering what happened to the displaced people.

JACK

Apparently you have.

TOM

And no one ever seems to address this.

JACK

Who will? The liberals won’t. Mayor Zeidler is a sacred cow . . . as will most of us argue, he should be. The conservatives were, and are, all for highway development and revitalization of anything near downtown.

TOM

I’m aware of this. And all the papers backed the development back then—or at least never spoke against it. How can they criticize it now? They wanted those freeways and urban renewal too.

JACK

And you still want to go ahead?

TOM

Can we just agree to continue with the interviews and take them wherever they go?

JACK AND JENNIFER

[LOOK AT EACH OTHER, SHRUGGING SHOULDERS]

TOM

And can we agree to research this topic, Jennifer, and probe for the most earnest responses, Jack?

JENNIFER

[HESITATES] I’ll agree if Jack does.

JACK

[PAUSES, BUT EVENTUALLY NODS]

[Scene changes, lights dim, music plays].

ACT 2: RAMONA

Act 2, Scene 1

[It is a week later. Wardrobe change. The scene is still the conference room. Jack and Tom are seated across from one another, going over their notes and writing in their notebooks. When Jennifer enters, she remains standing for a long time.]

TOM

So you don't think we have a story here.

JACK

I don't. We have the Vic interview and Gwen, that perky Oliphant girl, will be coming in next week.

JENNIFER

[ENTERS ROOM, with HER NOTEBOOK] I just left another message with Ramona, but I just don't see this happening.

TOM

I'm sure you offered to go to her place.

JENNIFER

Of course. She said she's 72 and doesn't drive anymore—not sure what's the deal with the husband. So I told her there would be no problem coming to her place. But she really hedged—said she was so busy.

TOM

So busy, but she's retired?

JENNIFER

I assume so. I mean, this woman just will not talk to us.

TOM

I could give it a try. Can't promise anything.

JENNIFER

Oh, would you? I think it might help if someone older asked her.

JACK

If we don't get her, I don't see that we have a story. I mean, three interviews is almost too few for the follow-up at that, but without some representation from Little Puerto Rico, I don't see this story happening.

JENNIFER

Did they really call it “Little Puerto Rico”?

JACK

I thought you said you’d read the material I gave you.

JENNIFER

I did. But it seems so . . . I mean, “Little Puerto Rico?”

JACK

Well, they called the Third Ward “Little Italy.”

TOM

I think it was called that more from the outside than from the inside, wouldn’t you say, Jack?

JACK

You might be right. It probably wouldn’t be PC today. Don’t ask me why.

TOM

Consider this, though. Given the times, those terms might have made it easier to raze the neighborhoods. Anything ethnic was considered derogatory. Over on Lincoln, we were called Little Poland (which BTW, Jennifer, was really one of the nicer names we were called). [HESITATE FOR LAUGHS]

JACK

[SARCASTICALLY] For sure.

TOM

And no one had much of a problem splitting our neighborhood in two and taking out hundreds of homes.

JENNIFER

I still don’t see how it could have happened. Why didn’t anyone fight?

JACK

You’re not paying attention to the newsreels. The people in the neighborhoods were unclear about what was happening. Or they were in denial.

JENNIFER

But someone knew. The people involved in planning knew. People outside those neighborhoods knew. Didn't they see something inherently w-r-o-n-g here?

TOM

I keep coming back to this, Jennifer. It was the prevailing ideology of the times. Progress. The melting pot. The quicker you broke up the ethnic neighborhoods the faster they assimilated and you ended the difference.

JACK

Let me present you, Jennifer, with a scenario on how ideology can alter the playing field. Will you play along with this?

JENNIFER

[SUSPICIOUSLY] O-k-a-y.

JACK

[SPEAKS IN A METHODICAL TONE] Let me first establish that you, with many of your north shore friends, are strong advocates for the environment . . .

JENNIFER

[HESITATING, NOT SURE HOW SHE SHOULD RESPOND]. And you're not a strong advocate for the environment?

JACK

To a point. But I think you'd agree that you are a bit stronger . . . ?

JENNIFER

O-k-a-y.

JACK

Being pro-environment is an ideology. In that, I mean it guides the way you make decisions.

JENNIFER

W-e-l-l, yes, in many cases.

JACK

Here's the scenario. Let us say that our rivers had to be widened for some reason—we'll say for now that there were flooding concerns. Let us say that groups came up with two ways of widening the rivers and both would cost the city a few neighborhoods.

JENNIFER

O-k-a-y.

TOM

I know where you're going here Jack.

JACK

Hear me out. One way of widening would result in steep, fenced in river banks, and this would limit the number of properties that would have to be razed. But the other way would be a graded, gradually sloping river bank—a block or two of sloping surface on each side. The proponents of the graded riverbank argue that parkland and prairies could be created on the banks. You could bring back native vegetation and trees and grasses . . .

JENNIFER

Well the addition of trees and more vegetation would certainly help prevent future floods.

JACK

And that would be another argument these advocates would use. But now this plan is going to remove full neighborhoods—some of them ethnic. Would you trade in these residents for the graded banks, with all those nice native plants?

JENNIFER

But perhaps the residents would want to leave because of the flooding.

JACK

Aha! Some of them do want to leave. Most don't. Now what do you say?

JENNIFER

Well, there's probably arguments either way, but graded banks are always preferred to their alternative in that . . .

JACK

Case in point, Jennifer.

TOM

I think what Jack is trying to say is that there will always be competing interests. Just as important, there were ways of thinking back then that played into the decision, just like in your hypothetical case with the rivers.

JACK

Ideology works on you.

TOM

[IN JEST] Well, let's hope that ideology really does work on people, or *The Liberal* would be out of business.

[JACK AND JENNIFER LAUGH]

JACK

[STILL LAUGHING] I'm sure not going to contradict that statement, Tom. But I'll bet you'd agree that our ideology and its opposite at least provoke debate. I mean, what's talk radio about? Not all ideologies do that. Some, like the melting pot ideology, I'd argue, did not. Some ideologies just lay there under the caps and scarves like they're natural ways of thinking.

TOM

Well put.

JACK

Like it or not, I've had the feeling that we're going to have to address a lot of these hidden ideologies in this story.

TOM

[PAUSE] If there even is a story. We'll have to pick up at least one more interview. I'll try my best to get in touch with Mrs. Zenner today.

[Scene change, lights dim, music starts]

Act 2, Scene 2

[Same set, a week later. Jack is seated at the table with his laptop. Jennifer comes in.]

JACK

[LOOKING UP] You're early.

JENNIFER

I was hoping we could review the segment on Ramona once more before she gets here . . . and I had some questions.

JACK

Shoot.

JENNIFER

I've read the materials you gave me. I'm over half way through the Gurda book and read everything he said about the lost neighborhoods . . .

JACK

Okay.

JENNIFER

Then I went to the downtown library and started looking through the Zeidler files. There's a book about a County commission.

JACK

[TILTS HIS HEAD, SEEMING A BIT PLEASED] Hmm.

JENNIFER

But you know—there's hardly anything written at all about these neighborhood clearances, or how the decisions were made. Just arguments for freeways in general. A little about the north side—couldn't find any reference to them calling it Bronzeville.

JACK

No, it was more of an insider name.

JENNIFER

But it was such a big deal. I mean, you can't even find out how many properties they took.

JACK

I know. Pity, isn't it?

JENNIFER

But what about Tory Hill? [POINTS TO WINDOW] Wasn't that your neighborhood?

JACK

What about it?

JENNIFER

Like . . . what happened there?

JACK

It was razed.

JENNIFER

[SHOWING FRUSTRATION] I hate when you do the terse thing. Like, how many homes did they take?

JACK

Don't know.

JENNIFER

That's what I mean. What is it with you? You say . . . Tom says . . . that you really do care about diversity and all, but . . .

JACK

But what?

JENNIFER

But you lived in one of the ethnic neighborhoods that was torn down. And you won't say diddly about it.

JACK

Maybe if you knew how to ask the right questions . . .

JENNIFER

[INDIGNANTLY] Huh! I'm going to tell you what I think. I think you're bitter over WTRI.

JACK

The bitter thing again.

JENNIFER

Tom said you lost your job to people of color.

JACK

People of color? Hmm. Well if you're talking about Sally Gomez—that might be up for interpretation.

JENNIFER

What are you talking about?

JACK

Sally Gomez, AKA Sally Wiley, married a man named Gomez. Curiously, that's when she worked for cable in Phoenix, as a blonde, pale-skinned Anglo American!

JENNIFER

Seriously? So she bought herself some Lady Clairol?

JACK

And a can of spray tan.

JENNIFER

That's incredible. But that black reporter, he isn't some kind of opportunist?

JACK

If you mean James, he's the real deal. Loved James. Really understood the hood dynamic. But Howard's a different story. His skin is black, but if you're talking being an enculturated African American, you might want to know that he was adopted at birth by a white family, went to all white schools, and today lives on an estate near Grafton that's five miles from another human being.

JENNIFER

But he's the one doing the inner city stories.

JACK

Isn't he, though?

JENNIFER

So this is what you object to about diversity?

JACK

It's one thing.

JENNIFER

What's the other?

JACK

It's everyone saying they love or celebrate diversity. But what does that mean?

JENNIFER

I don't understand.

JACK

If you say you like diversity in your diet, you can argue that you like different ethnic dishes, various vegetables, carbs, fruit. We get it. But if you say you love cultural or ethnic diversity, it means nothing. Hardly anyone knows what they're celebrating. [STANDS AND SPEAKS FASTER AS HE PROCEEDS] For example, do you know why Blacks rhyme more than whites? Or why Puerto Ricans prefer baseball when Mexicans choose soccer? Or which ethnic groups are likely to honor their elders, their ancestors? Which are more child-centered? How did the Scots Irish change American settlement patterns? Who are the Normans? What's the largest Indian group in Milwaukee? What's the difference between Sephardis and Ashkenazis? Who practices Candomble . . . or Santeria? Which ethnic groups in America refused to accept slavery? Why does . . .

JENNIFER

[HAND UP] You can stop.

JACK

Point taken?

JENNIFER

Of course you already figured out I didn't know the answer to any of those questions.

JACK

But you still say that as a liberal you support or celebrate cultural diversity.

JENNIFER

[SHAKES HER HEAD, NOT KNOWING HOW TO ANSWER]

JACK

Never mind. You're no different than anyone else. It's not your fault.

JENNIFER

Because . . . ?

JACK

Because the content of diversity isn't part of our popular culture.

JENNIFER

Explain?

JACK

[FRUSTRATED] Well, just look at what makes it into the feature columns in newspapers. Look at the TV shows, the comics, whatever. When you talk about diversity in stuff like music or literature, you aren't going to find a person that can't tell you how a mystery novel is different from a Harlequin novel or what features you look for in R&B. But ask a person to tell you something about Basque culture and you'll get, "the wha-a-a-a?" Hell, even German culture.

JACK & JENNIFER

[LOOK AT EACH OTHER FOR SEVERAL SECONDS, SHAKING THEIR HEADS IN AGREEMENT]

JACK

[GETS UP TO TURN ON THE PROJECTOR] But we need to see this before she gets here. [HE RETURNS TO THE LAPTOP AND CLICKS ON THE NEWSREEL] If you recall this was a bit of a telling interview.

[The black and white "newsreel," shown on the screen, is shot in front of St. Mary's Church. A young Jack is holding a microphone and is about to interview Ramona Mendez, a Puerto Rican woman of about thirty.]

JACK

This is Jack Handy at WTRI on Broadway near St. Mary's Church. Many families from this mainly Puerto Rican community will be soon displaced by urban renewal and a new highway. I am here with a resident named Ramona Mendez. Ramona, I understand that you were born here?

RAMONA

Well, I was actually born in Chicago, but I moved to this neighborhood when I was 16.

JACK

And how has your life been in this downtown Milwaukee area?

RAMONA

I would say quite good. I have my family and friends. I met my husband here. We have two children. He teaches at the high school.

JACK

Tell us a little about this neighborhood.

RAMONA

Well, the Puerto Rican community settled here right after the War. This church, St. Mary's [POINTS] is our central gathering place. Most of the families live around Juneau, Ogden, Lyon—here downtown. We have our own grocery stores. We have a club called *Congreso Puerto-riqueno de Ayuda Mutua*. A lot of dances.

JACK

And you are aware that most of these families will have to move to make way for urban renewal?

RAMONA

I heard there was a letter going out, but we'll believe it when we see it. No one has talked to anyone in my family.

JACK

If you do hear, will this be difficult for you?

RAMONA

[LOOKING INCREDULOUSLY AT JACK] Difficult? It will be a tragedy.

JACK

[APPEARING UNCOMFORTABLE] Well, we certainly wish you and your neighbors the best, Mrs. Mendes. [LOOKING AHEAD INTO THE CAMERA] Back to you Don at WTRI.

JENNIFER

Well I can't imagine she's going to have much good to say about all this.

JACK

Don't be so sure. You said she lives in Elm Grove . . . Why don't you see if she's waiting?

JENNIFER

[LEAVES THE CONFERENCE ROOM]

JACK

[SHUTS OFF HIS LAP TOP AND PACKS IT UP]

JENNIFER

[COMES IN WITH RAMONA, WHO IS ABOUT 40 YEARS OLDER]

Mrs. Zenner, this is Jack Handly, the other reporter.

RAMONA

Ramona would be fine.

JACK

[GETS UP AND SHAKES HER HAND] You haven't changed.

RAMONA

[SMIRKS AND MAKES A NOISE SHOWING SHE KNOWS WHAT A SILLY LIE THAT WAS.]

JACK

[SITS BACK DOWN] As you know, Ramona, we've called you in to ask you to tell us about your family's move from Little Puerto Rico. I'm sorry, is "Little Puerto Rico" the name that you used back then?

RAMONA

I think that was more what outsiders called it.

JACK

What did insiders call it?

RAMONA

Home.

JACK

[VERY UNCOMFORTABLY] Ah yes, I walked into that one.

RAMONA

Well, you were right about one thing. We did get that notice to evacuate our homes—as you said we would when you did that TV interview. We really had no choice.

JACK

And what then did your family do?

RAMONA

There was supposed to be some kind of a grant given out to help us with moving expenses. But I don't know what happened there. I think we all just moved before that was decided.

JENNIFER

Where did you go?

RAMONA

Well, my husband found an upper flat in Riverwest. We moved there and brought my mom with us.

JENNIFER

Did your other relatives and friends also move to Riverwest?

RAMONA

Well, no! There were a limited number of places available there. I mean, it took over a decade to get us all united downtown. My grandparents couldn't even move there. My aunt and her old neighbors went back to Puerto Rico. So many of us came from the same village back home, you know. My sister and her husband went back to Chicago. Half of my cousins ended up on the south side.

JACK

What about your church?

RAMONA

I think some Puerto Ricans who were already in Riverwest were going to a Catholic church just west of Riverwest—right now the name escapes me. Some developed store front churches—mainly the Pentecostals. Our family continued to go to St. Mary's for, oh, some years.

JENNIFER

Did you ever buy a home in Riverwest?

RAMONA

Yes. We bought one just off of Holton and Locust. One of our old neighbors had purchased a house on that block. But they went back to Chicago after about a year.

JACK

How did you end up moving to Elm Grove?

RAMONA

[HER VOICE BECOMES MORE SUBDUED, FLATTER, AS SHE REALIZES THEY HAVE THEIR OWN AGENDA IN THE QUESTIONS] My husband got a teaching job at the technical college in Waukesha. We moved to Waukesha for awhile with the kids.

JENNIFER

With your mother?

RAMONA

My mom had passed by then.

JENNIFER

And then?

RAMONA

When all our kids were married I went back to teaching and got a job at Brookfield High. Elm Grove was close. It just happened to be where we could find a home the right size for my daughter and her kids, after she and her boyfriend split.

JENNIFER

That was quite a choice. Those home values are really increasing. My husband and I wanted to move there, but couldn't afford it.

JACK

So both you and your husband were teachers? Were you a teacher when I interviewed you back in the 60s?

RAMONA

Yes. My husband and I went to college together. He was from the neighborhood.

JENNIFER

And Mr. Zenner . . . ?

RAMONA

He was our neighbor in Elm Grove.

JACK

And?

RAMONA

He was really the only friend we had there. My husband died 10 years ago. Lester was a widow. We got married and I moved into

his place, which was large enough for my daughter and her three children.

JACK

You seem to have done very well for yourself.

RAMONA

How so?

JACK

Good careers, family, large home in a wealthy suburb.

RAMONA

[COLDLY] Oh.

JENNIFER

Is there anything else you can add—about the effects of the move?

RAMONA

I think I've told you everything. How you interpret this is up to you.

JACK

Then I thank you for coming in. [HE GETS UP TO SHAKE HER HAND]

RAMONA

[PRETENDS NOT TO NOTICE HIS EXTENDED HAND AND LEAVES]

JACK AND JENNIFER

[SILENT WHILE THEY LOOK AT EACH OTHER]

JENNIFER

Did that go okay, Jack?

JACK

You know, I'm not sure. Hmm. Hmm. The only thing I'm getting is that she also seemed to do quite well for herself after getting forced out of her home. Not that this played any role in her success, I suppose.

JENNIFER

But I just get the impression . . . call it woman's instinct . . . that something was not right with her.

[LOUD KNOCK AT THE DOOR]

JACK

[LOOKING MYSTIFIED] Come in?

RAMONA

[LOOKING DISHEVELED/UPSET, SHE RE-ENTERS THE CONFERENCE ROOM] I'm sorry, but I couldn't leave letting you interpret my story the way you did.

JACK

Interpret?

RAMONA

[ANGRILY] Yes, interpret. You basically told me that my life after leaving what you call "Little Puerto Rico" was so wonderful with our high powered careers and a house with an off-the-charts assessment.

JENNIFER

But . . . you did do very well . . .

RAMONA

Well by whose standards? Yours? Well for me? I told you that my family and friends came over from one village in Puerto Rico and stayed together in Chicago and Milwaukee, only to get dispersed all over the country by that forced move. That was doing well? Wherever we went we didn't have our family, our friends. There was no one to talk to about our history, about our community. There was no one for us to take care of; no one to take care of us when we had problems. Oh, and we had problems. We were alone. In Elm Grove after my husband died, I just wanted to die too—die rather than to be alone. How is that for doing well? [SHE STARES AT THEM FOR AWHILE. NEAR TEARS, SHE SEARCHES FOR MORE WORDS, GESTURING IN FRUSTRATION, THEN JUST LEAVES]

JENNIFER AND JACK

[MOUTHS OPEN THEY JUST STARE AT EACH OTHER, SPEECHLESS.]

[Scene changes, lights dim, music plays]

ACT 3 GWEN

Act 3 Scene 1

[The next day. Wardrobe change. The set does not change. Jennifer is sitting in the conference room. When Jack walks in, he is less patronizing to Jennifer and looks at her when they speak.]

JACK

[ENTERS THE ROOM WITH HIS LAPTOP. HE TURNS IT ON AS HE SPEAKS.] Well, I guess we blew it.

JENNIFER

We did. How angry is Tom?

JACK

He's surprisingly understanding. He'll be here in a minute.

JENNIFER

But he wants to sit through this interview with us.

JACK

W-e-l-l. Wouldn't you? After the brow beating we took?

JENNIFER

Yes, I suppose so.

[THERE IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE FOR SEVERAL SECONDS, WITH SOME UNCOMFORTABLE GESTURES MADE.]

JACK

So how is the genealogy going?

JENNIFER

It's coming.

JACK

Didn't find your Cherokee?

JENNIFER

[SMIRKS] No.

JACK

No Latinos, blacks, Asians?

JENNIFER

Why would you think I'd find these?

JACK

I figured you'd at least be looking.

JENNIFER

[PAUSES AND SQUINTS] Oh, I get it. You thought I was trying to turn myself into a person of color. What? To become one of those people you were describing at WTRI? To stay nice and employable?

JACK

Well, were there any other backgrounds you were pursuing?

JENNIFER

As a matter of fact, yes. I've got a whole family tree developed. I've got a line of Germans . . . a line of Hungarians . . .

JACK

Hungarians. Interesting.

JENNIFER

Yes, Magyars [SHE MISPRONOUNCES IT, USING A HARD G.]

JACK

CORRECTING HER PRONUNCIATION] MA jars.

JENNIFER

Sorry, Jack. I'm just not quite as well-informed about ethnicity as you are. Not yet. But I will learn. I am learning. And you need to treat me with a lot more respect.

JACK

I guess I do.

JENNIFER

And you need to open up too. I just don't understand. Why won't you talk about your background?

JACK

What's there to talk about?

TOM

[ENTERING THE ROOM] I hope you two are not fighting again.

JENNIFER

Actually, we're not. And we're sorry for blowing this story, Tom. Really.

TOM

[GESTURES AS IF HE'S BLOWING OFF THE IDEA] I might have done the same thing. We all are just seeing the world through what's important to us. I think what we need to do is ask questions that are much more general—to pick up what's important to the people we're interviewing. Especially when they have their own cultural world views.

JACK

Yeah, I think we've realized that.

TOM

And these world views, if that is even the right term, shift. What was important, even to us, when we were younger is not what's important to us now. You see what I'm saying?

JACK

Yup.

TOM

Let's look at the segment, and if we have time, we can discuss how we are going to handle the Gwen interview.

JACK

[TURNS ON THE PROJECTOR AND RETURNS TO HIS COMPUTER TO CLICK ON THE FILE] Here it is.

[A young Jack is standing before the camera with a microphone. Next to him is a lovely African American woman who is about 18.]

JACK

I am on the north side near Walnut Street, an area that will be razed in the next few years because of urban renewal and the building of I-94. I'm standing here with Gwen Oliphant, a young resident of the area. Welcome Gwen. How long have you lived here?

GWEN

I was born here. My family lives in a house over on North 10th.

JACK

Were your parents also born here?

GWEN

No, they came up from Mississippi right after the War. My dad had gotten a job at a packing house. Today he has a barber shop with my two brothers.

JACK

Are you aware that this area will be razed in the near future?

GWEN

We talked about it in school, but I don't think my parents believe it, because they own their home.

JACK

Have you or your parents heard of the law of eminent domain?

GWEN

I don't think so.

JACK

Gwen, tell me a little bit about the neighborhood where you currently live.

GWEN

It's nice. My best friends are there.

JACK

Are you aware that the city considers this area blighted? A slum?

GWEN

It was a slum when we moved here. But we've fixed up our house. You should take a camera to my house and see how nice it is.

JACK

What would your family do if they had to leave, move somewhere else?

GWEN

Move where? No one will have Negroes in their neighborhoods.

JACK

Can you talk a little about . . .

[THERE IS A GENTLE RAP AT THE DOOR]

JACK

Oh crap. I really wanted to finish this. [TURNS OFF THE COMPUTER LINK]

[TOM GOES OFF SET, AS IF HE'S GOING TO THE DOOR. IN ABOUT TWO SECONDS HE WALKS BACK WITH GWEN, WHO IS NOW IN HER LATE 50'S. JACK AND JENNIFER STAND AND GO OVER TO SHAKE HANDS]

JACK

Mrs. Harris, I presume?

GWEN

[SHE SPEAKS IN A VERY PLEASANT TONE] Yes, I think it was Miss Oliphant back then, but you may call me Gwen if you like.

JACK

Can anyone get you a cup of coffee, a soda?

GWEN

I don't think so. I just came from lunch.

TOM

Well you know what this interview is about Mrs. . . . uh, Gwen. We want to pretty much leave the floor to you. We are interested in learning about what life was like back in the Bronzeville area and what happened later. What was positive; what was negative.

[GWEN SITS DOWN]

JACK

Please, begin wherever you wish. Let the discussion move to whatever seems natural to you.

GWEN

Well . . . well . . . I hardly know where to start. Positives and negatives. Hmm. Well, maybe it's best to start with what actually happened and then talk about the goods and the bads of it all.

JENNIFER

Good, please do.

GWEN

Well . . . well, at first we didn't think it would happen—that we'd get kicked out of the only area really where they let us live. It just seemed too extreme. But then we started to hear that even whites

were getting kicked out of their neighborhoods, so it started to sink in. We were on the northern tip of the area that was going to be razed. I was in my second year of college then, and my youngest brother was in his first year. When we got the notice from the city, we thought it was only a few houses that would be going down. We thought that if we just managed to stay close that we would still have our friends and relatives nearby. They bought out our house and the price was okay—not quite what we paid for it, but it was okay. The problem was that most of us with houses had bought them on land contracts where we made payments directly to the owners. Back then the banks would almost never give loans to blacks—Negroes as we were called then. We’d bought ours from a German family and paid the full amount. See, daddy’s barber shop really did well. But our neighbors—they didn’t have their houses fully purchased. So the city gave the money to the legal owners, not to our neighbors. A lot of them lost all the money they’d put into the houses. It was really terrible for them.

So we thought we’d just rent a flat near North Avenue until we could buy another nearby house and that way daddy and my brothers could keep the barber shop going. Ooey, was that flat a mess. Mice everywhere. Filth. We were so miserable. Mama and daddy just wanted to make sure that my younger brother and I stayed in college. There was money for that. But then daddy got the notice that his barber shop building was also going to be taken. That’s when it sunk in, that the whole of Bronzeville would be gone. Our entire community. Everything we’d known.

Little by little all our friends and relatives lost their homes. Do you know how many homes were actually taken?

JENNIFER

Eight thousand?

GWEN

[LOOKS SURPRISED] Why, yes, that’s right. And all those businesses on Walnut Street and near Walnut. All my daddy’s friends over the years lost everything.

For about a year we lived on what we had from the sale of the house. Daddy and my brothers scouted out locations for a lease for a new barber shop. But all the buildings were either in restricted neighborhoods or were too expensive. When nearly all our money was gone, a nice Jewish man up near Burleigh offered a partnership to daddy, even though it wouldn’t include my brothers. The man wanted a Negro barber because there were a few Negro families in the area and he wanted their business. So the Jewish man—Lenny—taught my daddy how to cut white people’s hair and we thought we were set. We could finally move out of the bad flat

and daddy would be able to support us again. [SHE HESITATED, TRYING TO KEEP FROM CHOKING UP IN TEARS.]

TOM

They didn't go to him, did they? The white folks.

GWEN

[SHAKING HER HEAD, TRYING TO RECOMPOSE HERSELF] No. No, they didn't.

JENNIFER

Please, please, take whatever time you need.

GWEN

[COMPOSING HERSELF] It was so humiliating.

GWEN

[COMPOSING HERSELF] After a year the partnership failed and we applied to get into Westlawn.

JACK

The housing project.

GWEN

Yes. On the surface it looked good, but underneath it was terrible. It was where the poorest of poor went. It was in a white area on Silver Spring and all our neighbors resented us being there. One of my older brothers got involved in drugs there. My younger brother got in with a bad crowd—a gang—and he dropped out of college. My daddy got sicker and a week before I graduated from college . . . [SHE BEGINS TO CRY AGAIN]

TOM

[GRASPING HER HAND] Do you want to stop?

GWEN

No, no. I do not want to stop. Daddy died. Heart attack. Right after that my oldest brother went crazy—got really bad with the drugs. Robbed a store. Went to prison. Mama told the three of us that were left to join up with Groppi, as there were fair housing marches going on. My youngest brother was too involved with the gang. But my brother Rogell and I joined the marches. It was the only happy time then.

JACK

Did you march to Kosciuszko Park?

GWEN

We did. It felt like for the first time we weren't powerless. Everything, since the Bronzeville days had been life without power. Mama then begged me to stay in school—become a lawyer—help others without power.

JENNIFER

Did you?

GWEN

I did.

JENNIFER

Did you get the degree?

[GWEN NODS]

JENNIFER

Did you pass the bar?

TOM

[RAISES HIS HANDS AS IF TO STOP JENNIFER] Let her tell the story. Gwen, please continue.

GWEN

After the marches were over and they passed the fair housing law, then we were able to get a better place. Rogell got a job with a social service agency. Mama did babysitting. Mama just wanted us to get out of Westlawn while there was still a chance for Devon—that's my youngest brother. Rogell moved in with a woman on the northwest side. Before I passed the bar, we took an apartment in Brown Deer. There were some blacks there, but mostly whites. I made friends, but mama never fit in. She wanted to talk to folks about the old days in Mississippi. But no one there was old enough or had come from there, I guess. She was miserable. And nothing was helping Devon.

I guess the rest is pretty predictable. Devon eventually got into trouble and went to prison. Mama got sick. When I got married to James, she came in with us, but she was failing. She passed before her first grandchild was born.

JACK

Where were you then?

GWEN

Still in Brown Deer.

JACK

And James . . . ?

GWEN

My husband. James Harris. I met him at the law firm, where I went to work.

GWEN

[HESITATES] I guess I should tell the positives and the negatives now.

JENNIFER

Do.

GWEN

I think I had some personal positives in that I ended up with a fine husband, two healthy children, one grandchild, and a nice career. Most of the family positives were back in Bronzeville. There we were with people with whom we shared a history. Most of us had come up from Mississippi originally. The older folks could talk about farming. They could share their southern recipes. We had our own culture—our own home remedies for everything, our own stories, our songs, choirs, our own special language, our picnics, and southern black celebrations. We just knew everyone there. You had people at the top of the community—the business people, the professionals, those that ran the social clubs. You had people in the middle. Those at the bottom. But those at the bottom always had their eye on something. They had examples of people that could make it, people who would help them, train them, give them money. And if you had kids that got in trouble, you had the village—you had all your neighbors to help keep them in line. Not everyone made it, but I will assure you that most people were pretty happy. It's about having people around that you trust, that you share things with, that you have things in common with, that you can go to in times of trouble.

When you lose that village, it all breaks down. When we were in the housing project there were no role models. They were all people who had failed in some ways or had become victims of something. Everyone was poor. You had to adjust to their standards of conduct and a lot of informal economies that led to trouble. That's part of the negative. Then if you go to the suburbs, like we did, there just isn't the village mentality. Most people move there because they want to be far away from other people. So you have houses with big yards, and people just don't know their

neighbors. It's gotten a little better for African Americans in Brown Deer lately because there are more people they can associate with. To me, families don't survive without the village. That's why I think there used to be all these ethnic neighborhoods—people with histories and practices in common—with things to talk about. Maybe some people really are happy being isolated, being alone. But it was not that way for us. We really needed each other. We needed the village—the full village. Is what I'm saying making sense?

TOM

Oh it is.

GWEN

Then I guess these are the positives and the negatives.

JACK

If you could go back, would you?

GWEN

In a flash. I had to raise my kids without the village, and I want to tell you, it was very, very hard. I'd go back in a flash.

TOM

Any other questions for Gwen?

[JACK AND JENNIFER, LOOKING VERY SERIOUS, SLOWLY SHAKE THEIR HEADS]

TOM

[GETS UP] Then we surely want to thank you for coming in, Gwen.

GWEN

[GETS UP] I hope it did some good for your story. [SHE WALKS OFF THE SET]

[Actors freeze. Lights dim, the music stops, the scene changes]

Act 3, Scene 2

[The actors are frozen. The scene reopens a few seconds after Gwen has left. Jennifer, Jack, and Tom are all seated silently in the same positions they were for the previous scene. As the lights go on, nearly ten seconds pass before dialogue resumes.]

TOM

[SLOWLY] You predicted it, Jack.

JACK

What?

TOM

You said we were probably going to have to address a lot of hidden ideologies in this story.

JACK

I did say that. I just didn't think they'd be hidden from us.

TOM & JENNIFER

[GRUNTS]

TOM

But it's no wonder. All those books written about who was assimilating and who was not—back in the 60s and 70s—they all took the position that an ethnic was only doing well if he or she had a great job, loads of education, and moved into an upscale neighborhood. It was our American way of judging people.

JACK

Still is. And the liberals do it too.

TOM

Those social scientists kept saying the Poles were backward because they weren't losing their ethnic ways fast enough. They were staying too Polish.

JENNIFER

All the while that Gwen was talking I kept thinking that I grew up in one of those suburban communities where no one knew their neighbors. Even if we knew them we had no common links—nothing really to say to them.

JACK

Maybe that's why you're doing your genealogy today.

JENNIFER

You might be right. I do feel a bit of a sense of belonging when I do it—to history, to communities in the past.

TOM

This is one of the reasons I wanted to do the follow-up. It's been over 35 years since I left the old south side. We moved when I got married, as the freeway building had left us with a housing shortage. Every now and then I ask myself—am I really happier now? Now I've got a huge place in Franklin, a career, enough money to travel anywhere in the world. But . . . [VOICE TRAILS OFF]

JENNIFER

What was life like in your Polish neighborhood?

TOM

Cozy. It was cozy. The houses were so small you tripped over your siblings. Tiny lots. Packed-in neighborhoods. But you knew everyone. The question was usually when they'd come from Poland, not if. [TOM GETS UP AND PUSHES IN HIS CHAIR] There were certain foods you looked forward to in the right season, at the right holiday. [PAUSES] The churches . . . you did everything at the churches. Have you ever been to the Basilica of St. Josaphat, Jennifer?

JENNIFER

I have. My husband and I went to see it right after the re-do. It is absolutely gorgeous.

TOM

That was our church. And when I say it was “our” church, I mean that in a special way. My grandparents joined their neighbors up on the scaffolding two days a week to build that place. They took out a mortgage on their house to help finance it.

JENNIFER

That seems almost unbelievable.

TOM

Oh, it happened. The churches were the center of our activities. Lots of things for kids. Much less delinquency. Kids then had people watching them on every block. A lot of controls, but a lot of security too.

JENNIFER

And now?

TOM

For me? Some things are better now. Clearly better. More money, bigger house. More i-n-d-e-p-e-n-d-e-n-c-e.

JENNIFER

And the negatives?

TOM

It's hard to say. Once there wasn't that hour by hour interaction with people I knew, well, I guess I pretty much through myself into my work, my career. Is that negative? Some would say not.

JENNIFER

What was it like for you, Jack? In Tory Hill [POINTS TO WINDOW].

JACK

I keep telling you that there's not much for me to say there.

TOM

I think she means—what was it like in general?

JACK

Well . . . for some, like in Tom's neighborhood, life was pretty secure. The kids had a lot to do. The Irish went to a lot of activities at Jesu Church. That survived because of the university. The Germans did the same thing at St. Joseph's.

JENNIFER

And where were you in all this?

JACK

[SMIRKS] Nowhere, really. We weren't Irish and as far as we knew, we weren't German.

JENNIFER

Did you even know?

JACK

Nope. My parents didn't know either. Or if they did, they never shared.

TOM

That's pitiful.

JACK

I remember one year when the one friend I had moved away. I'd disappear right at lunch time—would hide out and not eat so people wouldn't see me sitting alone.

JENNIFER

That's sad. But I've had times like that too, Jack.

TOM

[SPOKEN IN A MELANCHOLY TONE] And yet we celebrate the loner. The cowboy. The open plains.

JACK

We do.

TOM

[SIGHS] So what do we have for a story?

JACK

Three interviews and an alternative way of living in the world.

JENNIFER

Alternative?

JACK

Good point, Jennifer. Maybe a more human way of living in the world. It's up for debate.

TOM

We've got all that. But maybe the rest of the story is us. Maybe it's the way our own hidden assumptions got blown apart.

JACK

Hmm. Are you suggesting we do a little soul searching in this article?

JENNIFER

I'm willing to do it.

TOM

Jack?

JACK

This isn't anything that comes easy for me. I wouldn't even know how to write it.

TOM

You just tell the story of what happened here.

JACK

[MEDITATES] I guess I can try.

TOM

Okay, I'm going to meet with Ellen. You two can outline the story. I think we'll have our lead story for the millennium edition. And I like that phrase "another way of living in the world." Stick with that. [HE LEAVES]

JACK

[PAUSE, SIGHS] I'm not wild about starting it now.

JENNIFER

I think we should.

JACK

[SLIDES THE LAPTOP OVER TO JENNIFER] Then go ahead. I'm going back to my office.

JENNIFER

[TYPES SOMETHING INTO THE LAPTOP] Not quite yet. I think I know exactly how to begin.

JACK

And that would be?

JENNIFER

What was your mother's maiden name?

JACK

Huh? Ersoy. But the laptop's not password protected.

JENNIFER

I know. Now, how many generations of your family lived in Milwaukee?

JACK

Why would that be important?

JENNIFER

Just answer, Jack.

JACK

[GRUNTS] They came from Virginia—not sure when.

JENNIFER

[TYPES SOMETHING INTO THE COMPUTER AND LOOKS AT THE SCREEN WITH SATISFACTION] Would that be Fairfax County, Virginia?

JACK

What are you doing?

JENNIFER

I'm doing your genealogy, Jack Handly.

JACK

What does that have to do with this story?

JENNIFER

Oh, but it is going to have everything to do with this story. Now, was your maternal grandfather's first name Haris, with one r?

JACK

I don't have any idea what his name was. . .

JENNIFER

Think, Jack.

JACK

[SIGHS] It might have been Haris with the one r, now that you mention it.

JENNIFER

Aha!

JACK

What?

JENNIFER

I think you are going to have a past.

JACK

[SIGHS AGAIN]

JENNIFER

And a most interesting ethnic background.

JACK

[GETS UP AND LOOKS AT HER COMPUTER SCREEN, STANDING BEHIND HER]

JENNIFER

Would you like to know where your grandfather's father emigrated from? [STAGE LIGHTS BEGIN TO DIM]

JACK

[MOUTH WIDE OPEN. SILENCE] [THE LIGHTS DIM TO BLACK]

JENNIFER

[IN THE DARK] Get ready for a whole new outlook on life, Jack.

JACK

You have to be kidding.

Curtain call, lights go on. Tom, Gwen, Vic, and Ramona come out. Then Jennifer and Jack, the stars, follow.