

**Court,
or the Place We Go**

by Editha Rosario-Moore

Characters

Irene Ramos	Assistant Public Defender, Puerto Rican woman, mid-30s
Félix Rodríguez	Custodian, Puerto Rican man, mid-60s
Camila Arriaga	Defendant, Puerto Rican, early 20s
Julian Lance	Assistant Prosecutor, White man, mid-30s
Judge Perry	Circuit Court Judge, White man, mid-60s
Court Reporter	Black woman, mid-40s to 50s
Bailiff	White man, mid-50s to 60s

Time

April 2022.

Morning and afternoon in Chicago.

Court lobby and Court room in the Cook County jail.

Lobby of the county jail. FÉLIX sweeps the floor while holding a standing dustpan. IRENE enters and walks toward one of the doors.

FÉLIX

Oye, m'ija, the public entrance – (*pointing with his chin*) por ahí.

IRENE

Thank you.
She continues walking to the other door.

FÉLIX

M'ija. Ven acá.
IRENE approaches.
(*Whispering*): Cuidao, porque hay locos por aquí.
Go over there!

IRENE

Gracias, pero I'm a lawyer.

FÉLIX

Ah, claro que si!
He grabs and hugs her.

IRENE

She neither expects, nor likes it.
I'm Irene Ramos.

FÉLIX

Mucho gusto.
(*Bowing and smiling wide*): Félix Rodríguez.
Y Boricua?

IRENE

Sí.

FÉLIX

(Proud) ¡Una fiscal puertorriqueña!

IRENE

No no, not a prosecutor. Una defensora publica. Public defender.

FÉLIX

(Disheartened) ¿Sí?

OK, buen día.

He goes back to sweeping.

IRENE

Buen día en el trabajo.

The scene morphs into a court. JUDGE PERRY is seated center, above everyone else. The COURT REPORTER sits to his right, typing, and the BAILIFF stands to his left. The Holy Trinity of the Court.

JULIAN and IRENE sit on opposite sides of them, with CAMILA at IRENE's side. They are all tired.

IRENE

(To the court) Everyone has the potential for good.

Most people.

And this court has a mandate “to prevent arbitrary and oppressive treatment of persons adjudicated as offenders and to restore offenders to useful citizenship.” That’s our Constitution.

FÉLIX enters, listens.

Sentencing a 23-year-old to seven years for stealing a credit card that she didn’t even use—can only violate that mandate.

We cannot throw people away and expect that things will change. Our society deserves—

JULIAN

Objection.

JUDGE PERRY

Would you like to speak on that, Mr. Lance?

IRENE

Can we do this in a sidebar, your honor?

JUDGE PERRY

Counsel, please approach.

IRENE and JULIAN approach.

IRENE

What's the objection?

JULIAN

You're going off, in a prejudicial way.

IRENE

Please. Your honor, nothing I'm saying is inappropriate. It's argument and—

JULIAN

This is not the legislature where you argue for "the world." This is *only* about your client, who stole from an elderly woman she worked for—

IRENE

(Overlapping) I'm not making any obscene, grand arguments—

JULIAN

—and it's *exceedingly* inappropriate.

JUDGE PERRY

Stop.

Counsel has wide latitude in argument. I'll give it whatever weight I think appropriate. Overruled.

(To IRENE) And you, counsel. Walkin' a fine line.

IRENE

Unbelievable.

JUDGE PERRY

(To COURT REPORTER) Don't write that.

She waits for him to turn his head, and she writes it.

IRENE

(Refocusing) We don't throw people away.

Sentences are not only for deterrence and accountability.

But for rehabilitation.

JULIAN chuckles.

IRENE

Camila, Ms. Arriaga, is young. She has a *very* troubling social history—

JULIAN laughs, audibly.

Objection.

JUDGE PERRY

To your own argument?

IRENE

To the State's conduct.

JUDGE PERRY

(Sighing) Counsel, approach.

They do.

Look. I need to wrap this up, we are way over dismissal time.

Julian, come on. Can you keep it together for few minutes?

JULIAN

What did I do?

IRENE

Please. Her family is here. Her child. You laughed like a...

JULIAN

A what. *(Chuckles and rolls his eyes)* Not at her.

IRENE

Let the record reflect that the State is rolling its eyes—

JULIAN

Its?

JUDGE PERRY

To the COURT REPORTER: Don't write that.

She doesn't.

Stop it, Julian.

Irene, move on.

COURT REPORTER

Was that sustained?

JUDGE PERRY

Confused. Overruled?

IRENE

Camila is young...and has...rehabilitative potential.
And so we respectfully ask...we ask that your honor consider
sentencing Ms. Arriaga to the minimum term.
Because that, that is the only amount of time that appears to be at all
appropriate.
Thank you.

JUDGE PERRY

Miss Arriaga, you have the right to make a statement to the court, if
you want to. You're not obligated. But is there anything you'd like to
say before I impose sentence?

CAMILA stands up, then sits down.

IRENE

Your honor, may I have a moment with my client?

JUDGE PERRY

One moment.

IRENE

Quietly: What's going on, Camila? I thought you planned a statement.

CAMILA

I don't see the point in saying anything.

IRENE

OK. But. If I would have known this. I would have included more in
my argument.

CAMILA

Naw. You wouldn't.

IRENE

What can I do?

CAMILA

Nothing. Wish I had money to get a real lawyer.
Wouldn't even be here.
She's done.

IRENE

She swallows it.
I understand.
(*To the court*) Your honor, my client does not want to give a statement
in allocution.

JUDGE PERRY

Miss Arriaga, do you want to give a statement in allocution?

CAMILA

(*Standing*) No.

JUDGE PERRY

OK. Thank you, counsel. So I will take all of this into consideration
and issue a written order. Status for November 20.

*He stands and leaves. They all stand. The BAILIFF approaches to take
CAMILA back to jail.*

JULIAN

Ireeeene. Sorry about that. Did you know Anna's in town?

IRENE

Looking through files: Nope, didn't know that.

JULIAN

We're all grabbing drinks on Friday. Lemme know if you wanna join, we can all catch up. Like before.
She nods. He leaves. CAMILA snickers.

CAMILA

(Being cuffed) Tell my family I'll call them tomorrow.

IRENE

I'm so sorry.

CAMILA

Have fun at drinks with that dude.
CAMILA stares at IRENE as she is cuffed and led away. IRENE looks down.

FÉLIX

¿Buen día en el trabajo?

IRENE

No.

FÉLIX

Is he your friend? The prosecutor?

IRENE

No.
I don't know. We went to law school together. I don't like him. But then we work together in the same courtroom, everyday. So manners go a long way. In getting through all of this.

FÉLIX

Pero he's a pendejo to you.

IRENE

Grinning and bearing it. Survival.

FÉLIX

What do your parents think?

IRENE

About that guy?

FÉLIX

About your work.

IRENE

Orgullosa. I'm the first college graduate, and a lawyer in the family, thank you. Why wouldn't they be proud?

FÉLIX

Sí, pero...you make no money.

Silence.

Couldn't get another job?

IRENE

Mira, ten *un poco* de respeto por mi, just a little, por favor.

FÉLIX

You asking *me* for respect? Mira, niña—

IRENE

Que pasa *viejo*?

(Starting to leave) You don't know anything about me.

I went to Harvard!

God, that's obnoxious. Sorry.

I came home to help.

FÉLIX

Help who?

IRENE

The poor.

FÉLIX chuckles.

Now you're the pendejo.

FÉLIX

I just seen so many of you little fresas come in here to change the world and all I see is more brown and Black people than ever, shooting each other and anyone in their way.

It's not your fault.

But alla this, it's not working.

IRENE

Fresa. You've worked here for how long?

FÉLIX

2 days. Before I was at Stateville.

IRENE

Interesting.

FÉLIX

Qué?

IRENE

You like prisons and jails?

FÉLIX

Mira, some of us take whatever we can get. We don't have choices. And I had to wait, a long time. For an opening. Stateville is just...

IRENE

Pure hell.
So you know.
You know what I see.

FÉLIX

Yeah. So how can you see alla this and think you can do something about it?
That woman, that niña that just left. How did you help her?

IRENE

I treated her like a human.

FÉLIX

She needs more.

IRENE

Don't you think I know that? I'm a band-aid on an enormous wound.

FÉLIX

I never said you were bad. I just think you're wasting your time.

IRENE

So you think we should all just put the bad people away and do away with "alla this," y ya está?
How can you see this and think that the best way is to walk away?

FÉLIX

Because what can *we* do? It's the politicians. They're the ones who can do something but choose to spend money on themselves and their friends. How many years I been in Chicago, since I'm 5 years old, and it's the same corrupt shit!

IRENE

That just makes the problem belong to someone else while—

FÉLIX

Comemierda. I been working all my life, who has the time! Or the energy. You just defend them. All of them—the criminals, the politicians, the—

IRENE

No, no. I came here because I care. Some of us are trying to fix it—

FÉLIX

Then fix it!

Silence.

Some things can't be fixed.

Why don't be teacher or social worker.

Instead of helping the people who hurt people.

IRENE

Some only hurt themselves with drugs and get double the punishment.

Or hurt no one.

And Poverty. Racism. Degradation, humiliation, the good ol'

Constitution—

FÉLIX

I was poor. I'm brown. I grew up in Humboldt. And I'm not bad.

IRENE

So you know.

And I was poor too. Also brown. Also, Humboldt.

I'm not bad. But it's not a formula.

FÉLIX

So you're tryin' to save your people? Be a hero?

IRENE

No, I'm not a prosecutor, right?

Silence.

Did you know there used to be a public defender comic book?

FÉLIX

No. And I would know. I love comics.

IRENE

Well, you missed "Public Defender in Action." In the '50's. He was big, blonde, and strong. A man of the People.

Perry Mason was a criminal defense lawyer!

But that was a long time ago.

Now TV loves cops and prosecutors.

FÉLIX

Law and Order is a good show.

IRENE

What's the thing, at the beginning?

FÉLIX

"In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups: The police, who investigate crime, and the district attorneys, who prosecute the offenders."

IRENE

Word-for-fucking-word.

Now *that's* indoctrination.

And the lowly public defenders?

FÉLIX

Huh.

Not even a part of the system.

I never thought about that.

IRENE

Why would you.
“Our hearts are with the murderers...” Right?

FÉLIX

Fuck Ted Cruz. We don't all hate you.

IRENE

Yeah. But you do.
And there are some shitty public defenders, right?
And then, fresas, as you say—
Whatever, like me, do this because we really want to.
Silence.
But I grew up with these people.
Do you know how much harder it is because of that?
That coulda been me.
I mean, I'm good at it.
I don't take anyone's anger personally.
I know when to push and when to lay back.
Because if I argued with the judge today?
Camila gets a longer sentence, you know?
And she'll have an appeal.
And someone else will try.
There's a whole lot of us. Tryin' to be the anti-hero.
Right?

FÉLIX

Why don't you leave?

IRENE

Once you know what's going on, and that you can help, even a little...
What can you do with all of that? That knowledge, that pain?
I guess I'm waiting.
For an opening.
Like, funding to do the things everyone says they want to do.
I have so many cases I can't count anymore.
And then there are the victims.

I feel guilty.
There are the innocent,
And I feel guilty.
The thank you's, and the no-one-has-ever-listened-to-me-befores.
And when you do help someone who needs it.
It's too much. But we could manage it,
if some one thing could get better.

FÉLIX

Lo siento.

IRENE

(Closing her eyes) "Grounded neutral vessel."
That's what my therapist says.
Receive it, let it go through you, then let it go.
But it goes through me like a shredder.
If I leave here, where do I go where someone understands.
Silence.

FÉLIX

(Closing his eyes) I got a son in Menard for almost 20 years now.
He ain't comin' out.
Ever.
They won't let me work there.
(Pleading) Right?

IRENE shakes her head.

He was a dumb kid.
And I was a dumb kid.
But, mi vida.
Mi vida.
I don't know what else to do. I'm doing life.

IRENE

Felix...

FÉLIX

Where to put alla this?
English is my second language. I love languages!
But English. English is a bitch.
It's a language of labels.
Chair. Table. Handcuffs. Suit. Lawyer. Custodian.
Some American Indian languages, they get it right.
This room is not a room.
It's the place we meet.
Places and things are what people are *doing* with it.
You think about the people.
What are we doing here?

IRENE

Surviving. And staying close.
Because we know.

FÉLIX

We know.
Silence.
I'll see you tomorrow, counselor.
Thank you for talking to a viejito.

IRENE

I'll be here, Félix.
FÉLIX looks at her, smiles, and leaves.

END.