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Johnnie Cochran Meets Dr. Hip

Tragedy and absurdity were two sides of the same coin: On one side, O.J. Simpson's "suicide" note with a smiley face in the O of his signature; on the other side, the woman who pinched Simpson lawyer Robert Shapiro's ass because "I wanted to be part of history." And somewhere along the ridge of that coin was Simpson himself, walking into the courtroom humming the melody of "Touch Me" from the Broadway hit Cats and explaining to reporters that he was thinking about his children.

That was at Simpson's criminal trial. Shortly before his civil trial began in 1997, I met his lead attorney, Johnnie Cochran. He was the guest of honor and luncheon speaker at a national convention of criminal defense attorneys held in a huge banquet hall at a hotel in Santa Monica. No media people were allowed entry.

One of the attendees was Dr. Eugene Schoenfeld, also known as Dr. Hip from his days as a syndicated columnist for the underground press. He now testifies occasionally as an expert witness, and was at this event for that reason. My wife Nancy and I were his guests.

Cochran's speech reassured the enthusiastic audience: "In the Simpson matter, we just did what you do every day"—that is, defend their clients by any means necessary and chalk up a bunch of billable hours in the process—and he got a standing ovation.

In the afterglow of his speech, colleagues came up to Cochran to shake his hand and get in a little banter. One well-wisher shared this joke: "If [prosecutor] Chris Darden spent as much time trying to nail O.J. Simpson as he did trying to nail [prosecutor] Marcia Clark, he might've won the case." The other defense attorneys within hearing distance all had a good laugh at that one.

Dr. Schoenfeld joined the line of lawyers waiting to have photos taken of themselves standing alongside Cochran. When it was Schoenfeld's turn, Nancy focused her camera. For this particular occasion, Schoenfeld had stashed a hand-printed card underneath the standard, plastic-encased ID lapel card. As in the previous poses, Cochran and Schoenfeld put their arms around each other, although they were looking, not at each other, but straight ahead and smiling at the camera.

Thus, Cochran didn't notice how, just before Nancy snapped their picture, Schoenfeld subtly managed to pull away the ID card and reveal the hand-printed card, which declared, in large printed letters, "O.J. DID IT!" I published that photo on the front cover of The Realist that spring. It was the result of a good old-fashioned guerrilla action.

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