

an excerpt from

G o D o w n , M o s e s

By Dana Leslie Goldstein

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CHARACTERS included in this excerpt:

Albert BECKER: 40's - 50's, Dean of Students, Hoffman's oldest and dearest friend, African American
Philip HOFFMAN: 60's, Professor of Ethics, Jessica's father, Becker's oldest and dearest friend, German Jewish refugee and WWII veteran
TERRY Mitchell: 18, first year college student, privileged, less self-assured than he appears, African American

SET-UP:

The year is 1985. The setting is a small, Quaker college in rural Pennsylvania. One of the first year students has invited a controversial speaker – Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan – to give a lecture on campus. This has aroused debate and division. Dean of Students Albert Becker, who is African American, leads a peaceful protest outside the lecture hall. The participants, several of whom are Jewish, sing “Go Down, Moses” in solidarity. But the KKK make an unexpected appearance, claiming to stand with those who are protesting Farrakhan’s speech. A clash ensues, and students are hurt. Becker, a pacifist, finds himself at the center of the conflict with the KKK.

College students Terry and Jessica were together at the rally. Terry, who is African American, has been dating Jessica, who is the daughter of Terry’s Ethics professor, Philip Hoffman, who is White, Jewish and a holocaust survivor.

Terry and Jessica leave the protest unhurt. They go to a diner together off-campus. They have an argument, which attracts the attention of a police officer, who is on edge after the protest turned violent, and he is suspicious of this interracial couple. The officer’s intervention leads to Terry being assaulted by the officer and then taken into custody. Terry asks that Jessica call Dean Becker for help.

In this scene, Becker and Hoffman wait for Terry to be released. They are old friends, who marched together for civil rights, but the events of the play show them just how much they still have to learn about each other.

Act II, Scene 5. The Chester Police Station.

HOFFMAN

Thank you for calling me. Everything should be all right now.

BECKER

You're the optimist now?

HOFFMAN

I did think we were past something like this. In this day and age –

BECKER

Because it wouldn't happen to you.

HOFFMAN

That's not fair –

BECKER

You didn't see that boy's head.

HOFFMAN

You know I've seen –

BECKER

He was sitting in a diner.

HOFFMAN

I know.

BECKER

You don't.

HOFFMAN

You don't have to explain this to me. We've been through the same –

BECKER

Have we?

HOFFMAN

Goodman and Schwerner were Jews. They ended up as dead as Chaney. The Klan didn't see any difference -

BECKER

(disagreeing) They mutilated Chaney before they – [killed him]

HOFFMAN

How many times were we arrested - together?

BECKER

And put in different cells. Where they beat me again. Where were you when they were throwing me to the ground and twisting my hands behind my back?

HOFFMAN

I was in another cell. Right down the -

BECKER

With a mattress and toilet, and a phone call -

HOFFMAN

Albert -

BECKER

Where were you, when I was sure they were going to kill me? Because they told me they were going to kill me. And no one would ever know. You don't know what that was like.

HOFFMAN

I do.

BECKER

Maybe you did. But now? When you walk down the street, what do people see? What do the police see? You think they say to themselves, "Better get out my gun. Here comes a Jew. Better slam his head against a table -"

HOFFMAN

(shaken) I don't recognize you.

BECKER

I couldn't even let myself hear what Farrakhan had to say! What was I afraid of?

HOFFMAN

You weren't afraid. You were taking a stand.

BECKER

For who? For the Jewish community?

HOFFMAN

There's no such thing as the Jewish community. The Black community. There's just us.

BECKER

That's a load of crap! Nothing's changed. This is still what we live with - what that poor kid is going to live with, for the rest of his life. Thank God I don't have a son!

HOFFMAN

Albert!

BECKER

It's not something you deal with every day.

HOFFMAN

Unless they make me wear an armband.

BECKER

That would never happen here.

HOFFMAN

It could happen tomorrow! You don't think my parents sat me down and told me how to hold my head when I walked past the German officers, how to answer when -

BECKER

But not here!

HOFFMAN

When did Jews become White?

BECKER

Just now. When all you had to do was say you knew she was out with him. And they dropped everything. Did you know - that he and Jessica were -

HOFFMAN

No.

BECKER

So you lied for him. I guess I should thank you for that.

HOFFMAN

Why are you so angry at *me*?

BECKER

(beat) They want me in the provost's office in the morning. I have to give an account of the riot.

HOFFMAN

Why?

BECKER

I should've lead the students away. As soon as - I did everything the administration wanted me to do - I always do - but then they were standing there in front of me. In their goddamn hoods. I snapped. I was twenty-five years old again. It all came flooding back. The police and the dogs - And that first beating. In Mississippi. It was like I had blood in my eyes again, from a club that hit the side of my head two decades ago. I almost put my hands up over my face - automatically - the way they taught us - To take the beating and do nothing - But they were so close I could smell the bleach on those white sheets - It woke me up. (beat) Before I knew what I was - I pulled off a Klan member's hood, and I hit him in the face. I threw the first punch. The officer that signed us in - he looked just like him.

HOFFMAN

Do you think it was - [him]

(POLICE OFFICER enters with TERRY, who is handcuffed, with a makeshift bandage on his head.)

BECKER

(quieter, to Hoffman:) Don't ask me why I'm angry. Never again. I can take it from here. Go to Jessica. I'll talk to you tomorrow. After my hearing.

(HOFFMAN, speechless, puts a hand on BECKER's shoulder, then exits. The POLICE OFFICER uncuffs TERRY's hands. Silently, TERRY crosses from the OFFICER to BECKER. The OFFICER exits.)

BECKER

Good news. They're not pressing charges.

TERRY

I'm gonna press charges against him!

BECKER

Breathe. You need to take a longer view –

TERRY

I *was* taking a longer view.

BECKER

First thing, I'm driving you to the E.R. Make sure your head is –

TERRY

My head isn't the problem -

BECKER

I'm still taking you to the E.R.

TERRY

They treated me like a criminal. Like I was nothing. I was out with a friend. We weren't doing anything wrong.

BECKER

They have a list of charges that contradict that. Causing a disturbance. Harrassment. Resisting arrest –

TERRY

Was I arrested?!

BECKER

You were held. You weren't actually charged with anything. You can thank the Hoffmans for that -

TERRY

So I should feel grateful now?

BECKER

That is up to you. At least there won't be anything on your record.

TERRY

My record. I'm not supposed to have a record. I've never even had detention. Where is she?

BECKER

Her father is taking her home. The sun's coming up.

TERRY

Is she all right?

BECKER

She's upset, but she's all right. She said you asked her to call me.

TERRY

I thought you'd know what to do.

BECKER

You thought *I'd* -

TERRY

I feel like I'm gonna explode. Does that ever go away?

BECKER

(beat) No.

TERRY

Why did they have to cuff me so tight?

BECKER

They must've been afraid.

TERRY

Of me?!

BECKER

I wish I could tell you I knew how to fix this. I wish I could tell you it'll never happen again. Come on. Let's get your head looked at.

TERRY

Dean Becker. What would've happened if I - fought back? I mean, if they're gonna say I resisted arrest, maybe I should've - [resisted arrest]

BECKER

Did you learn nothing tonight?!

TERRY

I learned - exactly what they think of me. All of a sudden, everything feels - impossible.

BECKER

That's not the lesson. Look at me. Whatever you do, you cannot let *them* tell you who you are. Do you hear me?

BLACKOUT