

APPLES AND ELEPHANTS

by Stephen Taft

A play in one-act

@2020

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CHARACTERS

DENZEL ANDERSON: An African-American man in his early to mid-thirties.

SHELBY JOHNSON: A white woman, mid-twenties.

POLICE OFFICER: White, early twenties.

TIME

End of May, 2020

SETTING

A public park in Minneapolis.

APPLES AND ELEPHANTS

AT RISE: A city park in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Two park benches are placed approximately six feet apart. It's the end of May 2020. DENZEL, an African-American man in his early to mid-thirties sits on a park bench. An empty McDonalds bag and a half-full water bottle is next to him. He's wearing jeans, a short sleeve shirt and tennis shoes. In this time of COVID-19 he's also wearing a heavy-duty clear plastic shield. He sits – silently, exhausted, scanning his cell phone.

After a few moments, SHELBY, a bubbly white woman in her early twenties enters - jogging. She's wearing trendy athletic wear and a mask. She passes DENZEL and stops just past the empty bench. She's tired. She turns and slowly approaches the empty bench, stops, looks around, and then speaks to the man.

SHELBY

Mind if I sit down here?

DENZEL

Go for it.

(Silence.)

SHELBY

(SHE sits.)

Beautiful day.

DENZEL

(Annoyed, focused on his phone.)

Yep.

SHELBY

Is it OK if I take my mask off?

DENZEL

That's fine. I think we have social distance covered.

(SHE takes off her mask. Pause.)

SHELBY

You can take your shield off if you like. *(HE doesn't.)* Oh, come on. We're socially distant.

(*HE looks at her. Cracks a small smile and then slowly takes it off.*)

SHELBY

There you go. Now I can see you.

DENZEL

See me? It's a clear shield.

SHELBY

I know. But you know, see the *real* you.

DENZEL

Hmm . . . that's the *first* time *anyone* has ever asked to see the *real* me.

SHELBY

I'm sorry.

DENZEL

What are you sorry for?

SHELBY

Well, you know, for people not seeing . . . you.

DENZEL

Oh, people see me alright. Maybe not in the light I prefer, but I'm seen. Seen when I'm driving my car. Seen when I fly on an airplane. Seen when I'm walking through a store. I'm probably being seen right now 'cause I'm sitting on a park bench talking with a white woman just six feet from me.

SHELBY

I'm sorry. Do I make you uncomfortable?

DENZEL

Why would you make *me* uncomfortable? Are *you* uncomfortable?

SHELBY

No, no. I'm fine. (*Silence.*) Can I ask you a question?

DENZEL

Look, I'm just trying to mind my own business.

SHELBY

Sorry. (*Pause. SHE'S hesitant.*) What . . . what do think about . . .? (*Pause.*)

DENZEL
(*Giving in.*)

What? What is it?

SHELBY
Well, you know . . . the protests and everything going on, I'm just unsure about a lot of things.

DENZEL
And?

SHELBY
Were you at the protest last night?

DENZEL
I was. You?

SHELBY
Yeah. Sorry I didn't see you.

DENZEL
Well, there were lots of people and a lot of chaos. Who knows, I might have been standing right next to you -- or in front of you. But, you know, I was wearing my shield.

(*SHE quietly laughs.*)

You been to a protest before?

SHELBY
No, it was my first one.

DENZEL
Why'd you go?

SHELBY
It seemed like the right thing to do. It's hard for me to believe what's going on right now. It's crazy. Just a few years ago it seems there was so much good in the world. So much hope. (*Beat.*) How about you? Have you been to protests before last night?

DENZEL
I have. Several.

(*HE takes a drink from his bottled water.*)

SHELBY

Last night got scary. I don't understand people throwing things at the cops or breaking into stores. Setting fires. What's that all about?

DENZEL

You think I know? Because I'm black?

SHELBY

No . . . it's just that --

DENZEL

(Getting irritated.)

I should know why a brother does stupid shit.

SHELBY

No, I'm sorry. That's not what I meant.

DENZEL

Well maybe you should explain it to me.

SHELBY

Look, I'm sorry. It's just that --

DENZEL

--I'm black.

SHELBY

I guess. I'm sorry.

DENZEL

You apologize a lot. Is that a white thing?

SHELBY

What?

DENZEL

I'm just teasing you. *(Beat.)* Look, what if I were to tell you that it wasn't the brothers that started some of those fires, but white guys. *(SHELBY is speechless.)* Yeah, that's right. We're being set up. Have you seen the footage of the "Umbrella Man"? That's some weird shit.

SHELBY

"Umbrella Man"?

DENZEL

Yeah, check it out. It's on the internet. A white dude dressed in black, head to toe, wearing a gas mask and carrying a black umbrella. Walks by the Auto Zone with a hammer and is smashing the windows. Friggin' weird.

SHELBY

I hadn't heard about that.

DENZEL

Everybody thinks it's the black guys causing all the destruction 'cause that's just what you see on TV. The nightly news only shows a brother throwing this and that, grabbing some Nike's or whatever. We can't deny it. People are pissed and getting caught up in the moment. What you don't see is the empty diaper and formula aisle at Target - people grabbing necessities. Folks, not far from here are living paycheck to paycheck and now they're laid off and got a family to feed. When you're desperate you do what you got to do. The looting is just looked upon as equalizing the hand we've been dealt.

SHELBY

But is that right?

DENZEL

It may not be right, but people are just trying to survive. "If you're treated a certain way you become a certain kind of person."

SHELBY

Well, that's seems a bit profound.

DENZEL

James Baldwin. Kind of says it all. Do you know who that is?

SHELBY

Of course. We read one of his plays in college. What was it? (*Thinking, thinking, thinking ... remembering.*) Ahh, *Blues for Mr. Charlie*.

DENZEL

Good. Good for you. He was also a poet and an author. Pretty cool dude. (*Beat.*) But, look, the news only shows what will get them the best ratings. Show the America *they* want to portray. But, it's all bullshit. You don't see the real story. Nobody asks *us*. And nobody does any real investigating anymore because they're all fighting to be first to present "Breaking News". All it does is give people another excuse to keep things the way they've always been.

SHELBY

But why burn a library? Why destroy their own neighborhood?

DENZEL

(Beginning to be frustrated.)

People are fed up. And don't be naïve. It wasn't "their" neighborhood. A lot of out-of-state folks came up here to stir up trouble. Wouldn't surprise me if they're being paid to do it. The real folks from the neighborhood were out cleaning up that damn mess this morning. God, it pisses me off. *(Pause.)* Sorry. It's frustrating and I get a little riled sometimes.

SHELBY

Look at that. We have something in common.

DENZEL

What?

SHELBY

You apologized.

DENZEL

Damn, I better check my ancestry. Might have a little whiteness in me.

(There's an awkward pause. Then . . . HE laughs.)

Man, you sure are gullible.

SHELBY

Apparently. *(She reaches out to shake his hand.)* I'm Shelby. Shelby Johnson.

(HE politely declines the handshake to keep his social distance.)

Sorry. I forget. It's just such a natural thing to do.

DENZEL

I get it. *(Introducing himself.)* I'm Denzel. Denzel Anderson.

SHELBY

Denzel? Like in Washington?

DENZEL

Yep, Denzel, like in Washington. My mother was a big *St. Elsewhere* fan back in the 80's. She loved Denzel Washington. Thought he was the handsomest man on the planet! Still does. She thought I was cute too.

SHELBY

Ahh, that's sweet.

DENZEL

My mother's a sweet lady.

SHELBY

You know, I've never really known a black man. I mean really. There were a few African-American students in school and we were friendly, but out in the suburbs it's pretty white.

DENZEL

So, you're from the suburbs? I get it. I've been out there. Had to wear sunglasses there were so many white people.

(THEY laugh. Beat.)

SHELBY

Where you from?

DENZEL

Atlanta. Moved here about ten years ago. My mother wanted to be closer to her brother and I wanted to stay close to her. You?

SHELBY

Oh, I've lived in Minnesota all my life.

DENZEL

So, what are you doing here in the metro area?

SHELBY

Just trying to figure things out. Out there in the suburbs it's not really reality, you know. I feel like I'm out of touch – with America. It's incredibly depressing. I'm just trying to experience or observe another part of the city and another part of life. And the city parks are so beautiful, so I've been getting out and running and after last night, well, I'm just trying to relax a bit.

DENZEL

Isn't your family going to worry that you're here?

SHELBY

No. My folks know I'm a big girl. Pretty independent.

DENZEL

Not married? No boyfriend?

SHELBY

I was married. Two years. Lost my husband in Afghanistan – 15 months ago. He was in the Army.

DENZEL

I'm sorry.

SHELBY

There you go again. *(HE smiles. Reflecting for a moment.)* I really miss him. Our lives were just getting started and before we knew it he was deployed. Sometimes at night, I just lay in bed and cry.

(SHELBY is in thought. Then she turns toward the audience. Lights cross-fade to focus on HER and she addresses them.)

And sometimes . . . I get so angry. Why him? Why me? It isn't fair. *(Beat.)* We met in college . . . my sophomore year. He played basketball. I was a cheerleader. We were both History majors. He wasn't a star, but he hustled when he did play and always in practice. Total team player. That's what he liked about ROTC and the Army. There was a camaraderie among his fellow soldiers. They were his second family. We were hoping to start a family, but . . . *(Changing subjects.)* I was so shy growing up. Soft spoken. But he gave me confidence. He encouraged me to be independent. In time, I discovered I had a voice. Not always sure he liked that. Anyway, that confidence eventually led to my job in marketing. I get to make the pitches. When this whole COVID thing is over I'm thinking about politics. Not running for office but working for someone running for office. Getting their message out. Start local and maybe move up down the line. My parents tell me I'm living through an important time in history. Terrible, obviously, but important. I want to be part of a change, a positive and permanent change.

(Lights cross-fade and SHELBY returns her attention to DENZEL.)

So, yeah, I just cry. But then, the sun comes up and it's a new day and I know I need to move on. It's what he'd want me to do. It's been an adjustment though. There are days my life sucks, but I pray to God and he reminds me there are people that have it much worse than I do.

DENZEL

But, you're doing OK?

SHELBY

Just taking life one-day-at-a-time. This morning I put on my happy face and went for a run.

DENZEL

Good for you. "Got to keep on keepin' on." Quincy Jones.

SHELBY

You like to quote people don't you.

DENZEL

I guess. When something sticks with me. Started when I was a kid.

SHELBY

That's cool. How about you? Do you have a special someone?

DENZEL

Not really. I date on occasion, but that's it. Almost tied the knot once, but life gets in the way. And now the world's turned upside down.

SHELBY

You know, I thought I had this whole race relations thing figured out. But now as I watch the news and listen to people I'm beginning to wonder. It seems everyone's a racist. That's what people are saying. It makes me angry. I was raised to treat *everyone* with respect, to not treat people any different because someone doesn't look like me or practices a different religion, are gay or whatever. My mother would say, "Shelby, you just treat people the way you want to be treated." I mean, I'm aware that you're black and I'm white, but really, I just treat people as people. I don't categorize. (*Pause.*) Am I wrong?

DENZEL

(*Sighs.*)

It's complicated. Look, it's nice that you think the way you think. But, unless you're black you have no idea what it's like. You don't have to be on 24/7. I have to watch what I say and how I say it, how I act, how I dress. If a white cop stops you I guarantee he's going to be charming. Stops a sister? Not so charming. And when a black guy gets stopped, you can bet that cop will have a hand on his gun or his gun out. You know, just in case.

SHELBY

But we live in the 21st century. We elected an African-American President – twice!

DENZEL

And look what happened? Congress did everything they could to stand in the way of all he tried to accomplish. (*Beat.*) You don't think you're racist. Right?

SHELBY

Right. I know how I treat people. I've looked up the definition of racist and it says it's someone that feels their race is superior to another. I don't believe that and never have.

DENZEL

Imagine if you went to a park, like this one, on a beautiful Saturday afternoon. Maybe you're with family or friends. You're just coming out to relax and maybe have a picnic. But, you get out of the car, walk down the path and all of a sudden you notice, the park is full of black people. They're just enjoying their day with their families, having a picnic, shootin' hoops or whatever. Do you still have your picnic or do you turn around, get in your car and leave?

SHELBY

Hmmm . . . I get your point.

DENZEL

(Getting frustrated.)

No, you don't! For me, it's like that *every* day. Outside of the metro area things get pretty lilywhite and I stand out. And in the neighboring states, like Iowa, it's even more so. There's a reason we're called minorities.

SHELBY

But I always hear that black people just want to be treated equally. But there are opportunities that exist for minorities that others may not get. Everyone wants to be treated equally, but the fact is, they aren't. That's why some white people think the way they do.

DENZEL

Treated equally?! Well, those same white people weren't enslaved, they didn't have their sons hung from a tree, they weren't hosed down in Birmingham or gunned down in a church in Charleston. White folks haven't had to fight to get an equal education or a fair shot at employment opportunities! You haven't had laws passed that *prevent* equality! You didn't have to fight just for the right to vote and damn if we're not fighting voter suppression today!

SHELBY

I know that. I'm --

DENZEL

Don't say you're sorry.

SHELBY

Everyone has had to fight some kind of prejudice. My great-grandmother was supposed to keep the household, raise kids *and* keep her mouth shut. It was a man's world and women had their place. She fought for her right to vote too. When people immigrated to the U.S. they were fighting each other and didn't hide their prejudice either. The Irish called the Italians, Dago's. The Italians called the Irish, Mick's.

DENZEL

And what are we called?

SHELBY

(Quietly.)

I know.

DENZEL

When was the last time someone didn't get a job because they were Irish? Hmmm? All too often we don't get an opportunity just because of the color of our skin. *Everything* is measured against white people. Its apples and elephants.

SHELBY

It's so depressing. You watch little kids and they don't care about the color of their playmates skin. They just want to play and have fun. It's the adults that teach children to be prejudiced and then the kids grow up and it's just a revolving circle.

DENZEL

It's a circle that keeps getting bigger if you ask me.

SHELBY

I know. (*Beat.*) The world is so screwed up. Over 100,000 people have died in the U.S. from the Coronavirus in just a little over three months and that's almost become an afterthought. COVID was dominating the news, and now . . . it's all about one person.

DENZEL

No, it's not! Jesus! He was just one example of way too many that have suffered from police brutality and systemic racism! How many brothers and sisters have to be stopped by a cop for no reason at all, unjustly arrested, or sentenced? Not to mention murdered! Every time we think we're making progress it turns out to be just a smokescreen. My grandparents and parents marched so my world could be a better place. And look where we're at now. Same place as always. Black Lives Matter damn it!

SHELBY

All lives matter.

DENZEL

So, why is the world just figuring that out now? If *all* lives did matter we wouldn't need a Black Lives Matters movement. If change should happen because of all these protests it will ultimately be for the benefit of everyone. (*Beat.*) With that said, not all cops are like the idiot that killed George Floyd.

SHELBY

(*Stunned.*)

Wow! That's not what I expected. A black man sticking up for the cops.

DENZEL

I'm as upset as anyone in regards to what happened. (*Sighs.*) I don't understand such a mentality and black people have had it! I've had it! We're tired. Tired of racial profiling, tired of being what other people think we should be. Tired of living in a white world. And finally, maybe, just maybe the world has had it! We're seeing people of all colors and all ages, from all over the world protesting. And not just for a day or two. It's amazing! Change may actually happen.

SHELBY

But will things really change? Think of the gun problem. How many people have to die . . . in a church? In a nightclub? A movie theatre? Or in an elementary school before our gutless politicians do what needs to be done?

DENZEL

(Teasing.)

Gutless politicians? Young suburbanite white woman is getting herself just a bit riled up.

SHELBY

(For a moment SHE is a little proud of herself.)

Yes, I am. *(Beat.)* Do you think these protests will do any good?

DENZEL

I hope so. But, quite honestly, I don't know. Time will tell.

SHELBY

Isn't that the problem? Time? All too often people think change will happen, but it doesn't. How soon will it be before people go back to their daily routine? Isn't that what some folks are hoping?

DENZEL

(Intrigued.)

Hmmm, you're interesting. All I can say is we need to keep on protesting if change is really gonna happen.

SHELBY

Amen to that.

DENZEL

Amen. *(Beat.)* Why'd you sit down? On that bench?

SHELBY

Why not?

DENZEL

Well . . . I'm a black man. The park is pretty empty. You didn't feel nervous?

SHELBY

I just see you as a man. Maybe someone to talk with.

DENZEL

No, you don't. You see me as a *black* man and want some questions answered. Admit it.

SHELBY

I guess.

DENZEL

There's no guessing about it. I can't tell you how many white people I know that have called to ask my viewpoint on all this stuff.

SHELBY

Well, at least they're asking.

DENZEL

If I only had a dollar . . .

(Chuckles. Looks at his watch or phone. Pick up his shield.)

Well, I better be going.

SHELBY

Where you off too?

DENZEL

National Guard duty.

SHELBY

Oh . . . *(Referring to the shield)* the shield. Now it makes sense. You working the protest tonight?

DENZEL

Nope. My unit is heading back to COVID-19 duty. Cases are expected to rise because of the protests and Memorial Day. People are too damn stupid to wear a mask and social distance. So, we're off to help out at the next hot spot.

SHELBY

Thank you for all you do. Putting your life in harm's way. You never know when you could catch the virus.

DENZEL

Yeah, it's weird. One day you're thanked or even cheered. You feel great. The next, it's like mosquitoes pissin' on cotton.

SHELBY

(Laughs.)

Still have a bit of Georgia in you, don't you?

DENZEL

Yes, I do! And always will.

SHELBY

Did you serve overseas?

DENZEL

Yep. One tour in Iraq. Makes you appreciate home . . . even as bad as things are.

SHELBY

I'm glad you came home.

DENZEL

Me too. *(Beat.)* How 'bout you? What do you do?

SHELBY

Right now, nothing. I was laid off. Now, I'm back home with my parents. They're thrilled. *(Beat.)* What's your day job?

DENZEL

I'm a . . . I'm a police officer. *(Raises his water bottle.)* A souvenir from last night.

SHELBY

You're a cop? Sorry, I mean police officer. Really?

DENZEL

Yep.

SHELBY

So . . . that's why you think not all cops are bad.

DENZEL

It's why I *know* we're not all bad. *(Beat.)*

(Lights cross-fade and focus on DENZEL. HE breaks the 4th wall and speaks.)

Why'd I say that? I don't believe it. I mean, I know we're not *all* bad, but . . . there are times my own mother even has doubts. She sees the news and she says, "Denzel, did you see that? What is going on?" I say, "I don't know mama. The news just likes to focus on the negative." She says, "Well, *you* better not do that!" And I reassure her, "No ma'am, I don't do that." Then she's at it again, "Why is it we only see the police being violent? We don't hear about State Troopers or firemen doing things like that." I say, "Well mama, the Troopers have had some incidents." And man, she is on me like a beagle on a rabbit. "Incidents? You think beating up or killing a black man is an incident?" I just take a deep breath and say, "You're right. You're right mama. You always are." And she is.

(Pause. Beat.)

I live with my mother. Help take care of her. She's got health problems. Doesn't drive anymore, so I take her to doctor appointments, the grocery store, the pharmacy, over to see my uncle on occasion. That's my life. Work, home, mama. *(Beat.)* I have three brothers and two sisters but they're all back in Georgia. Have their own families and their own problems, so it all falls on me. I don't talk about the job much . . . to anyone. No one to talk to really. I just change at the end of my shift and leave the job in my locker. It's so easy to just look the other way. And quite honestly, doing that, I know I'm just as guilty as the assholes that do shit.

(Lights cross-fade back to the benches.)

SHELBY

Do you really believe that?

DENZEL

Look, how some of these guys even get through their training or continue on the job is beyond me. You'd think something would come up in their psychological exams, background checks, or arrest records. I don't get it.

SHELBY

Why can't the police, police themselves – identify these guys, report them?

DENZEL

It's tough. Sometimes they out rank you. Sometimes it's the brotherhood mentality or the unions – which I appreciate in many ways, but there are times when we protect our own when we shouldn't. And sometimes . . . things happen so fast. Hesitate for a moment and you can be dead.

SHELBY

Eight minutes and forty-six seconds, while three other officers did nothing?

DENZEL

I know. I know. Our job is to serve and protect.

SHELBY

I appreciate that you do.

(A young POLICE OFFICER in uniform enters and stops near SHELBY'S bench.)

OFFICER

Is this man disturbing you ma'am?

DENZEL

WHAT?

OFFICER

(To DENZEL)

I wasn't talking to you.

SHELBY

No, we're talking.

DENZEL

(Rising)

That's right, we're just . . .

OFFICER

(Crossing to DENZEL. The OFFICER'S hand begins to reach for his gun.)

Sit back down!

DENZEL

(DENZEL slowly sits. To HIMSELF.)

Stupid-son-of-a --

OFFICER

(The OFFICER quickly advances on DENZEL.)

What'd you say?

DENZEL

Nothing man. Chill.

(DENZEL turns away from the OFFICER.)

OFFICER

DON'T YOU MOVE! GET ON THE GROUND!

(The OFFICER grabs DENZEL and pushes him to the ground violently. They struggle.)

DENZEL

(Face down on the ground.)

I'M A COP DAMN IT! I'M A COP!

OFFICER

STAY DOWN! DON'T MOVE!

SHELBY

(Rising and stepping towards the struggle.)

STOP IT! HE'S A COP! STOP IT!

(The OFFICER is on top of DENZEL with his knee in DENZEL'S back. There's a brief pause.)

OFFICER

Ma'am, sit back down! *(To DENZEL.)* You're a cop?

DENZEL

YES, god dammit! My I.D. is in my back pocket. Get off me!

SHELBY

He is. He's an officer. Trust me!

OFFICER

Ma'am, sit back down.

(SHELBY sits. The OFFICER slowly reaches into DENZEL's pocket who is now cuffed and pulls out his wallet. The OFFICER looks the items over.)

OFFICER

Denzel? Really? *(HE chuckles.)*

DENZEL

Yeah, really. Can I get up now?

OFFICER

Yeah.

(The OFFICER and DENZEL rise. HE immediately un-cuffs DENZEL and his I.D. is returned to him.)

DENZEL

I'm a corporal with the 4th Precinct.

OFFICER

Look, I'm . . . I'm sorry Sir. My bad. Just can't be too sure of things these days.

DENZEL

Just can't be too sure of things? WHAT THE FUCK?! We're two people sitting six feet apart from each other, in a park, having a fuckin' discussion!

OFFICER

I get it sir! I said I'm sorry. Can we just drop it?

DENZEL

DROP IT? Who the fuck do you think you are? You're damn lucky I don't report you to your supervisor! I know those people.

SHELBY

Denzel. It's OK. You're OK. Let's just drop it.

(DENZEL is visibly angry and animated.)

DENZEL

JUST DROP IT? Hasn't that been the damn problem for years? White people just want us to "drop it"! Forget the shit that's been done do to us. Well, no more!

SHELBY

DENZEL! PLEASE! (*Pleading quietly.*) Please.

(*DENZEL sits, trying to calm down.*)

OFFICER

Look, I'm sorry. With all the riots, we're all working overtime and I'm just exhausted I guess.

DENZEL

How long you been a cop?

OFFICER

This is my first year.

DENZEL

Holy shit! A friggin' rookie. (*To the OFFICER.*) That's no damn excuse. (*Beat.*) Why'd you become a cop?

OFFICER

Well . . . my Dad was a cop and my grandfather. Just runs in the family I guess. But I became one because . . . well, I'd really like to make a difference.

DENZEL

And you think this is how you do it?

OFFICER

I just wanted to make sure she was alright.

DENZEL

Jesus Christ. You *only* thought that because a *black* man was sitting *near* her. Not next to her. Not standing close to her or leaning over her, just sitting - six feet away and you wanted "to make sure she was alright." (*To HIMSELF.*) God help me. (*Beat.*) So, you been working the protests?

OFFICER

Yes sir. Normally I'm assigned to the parks, but I was called in to work nights in the Lake Street area since the trouble started.

SHELBY

We were there last night. I was protesting. He was on National Guard duty.

OFFICER

You're in the Guard too?

DENZEL

Yeah.

OFFICER

Again, my apologies. I'm really sorry. I didn't know you were a cop.

DENZEL

It shouldn't matter!

OFFICER

I know. I know. Look, I haven't slept in a couple of nights. It's been my first time working a protest and in that kind of situation. It's scary. It's like a war zone over there. I guess I'm on edge and things got out of control here.

DENZEL

I don't want to hear your excuses. You could have really fucked up. *(Sighs.)* Get out of my sight. And quit making excuses and assuming shit about people.

OFFICER

Got it. And sir, thanks for not reporting me. Stay safe.

DENZEL

(Sarcastic)

Ya think? *(Shaking his head.)* Jesus.

(The OFFICER begins to exit. Lights cross-fade and focus on the OFFICER. He stops, steps downstage and addresses the audience.)

OFFICER

He's lucky, that's all I can say. I hesitate and *(HE slams his hands together which make a loud pop.)* I'm the one who's lying on the ground. That's what we're taught. It's them or me. *(Sarcastically.)* Let me clarify, I don't mean "them" as in blacks, I mean the "bad" guys. Don't want you to get the wrong impression. *(Beat.)* Look, I like being a cop and I meant it when I said, "I want to make a difference". But, it's not easy let me tell you. It used to be people respected a cop. You walked a beat. Became part of the neighborhood. But, those days are long gone. These days a cop is just "one of those". Automatically, the bad guy. Talk about stereotyping. I don't get it. *(Beat. Changing topics.)* The uniform fits good don't it? And let me tell you, chicks dig a dude in uniform. And she *(referring to SHELBY)* is pretty hot! I really just came over because of her.

OFFICER continues

My father and grandfather were New York City cops. I had two uncles that were fireman. The greatest guys. I miss them. After 9-11 my grandfather retired and a few years later the whole family moved here. Too many memories in the city. Too many friends lost. At the dinner table, even today I hear stories. My grandpops and pops? Man, they've told some whoppers over the years. We lived in the Bronx. And let me tell you, in the Bronx, where we lived? If you're not tough, you'll be eaten up. But it was a great place. Home of the Yankees. Ruth, Gehrig, Mantle, Jeter, and now there's a whole 'nother wrecking crew. Pretty cool. I miss going to those games. The Twins? They're OK. Nice stadium. As a city Minneapolis is nothing compared to the Big Apple though. Typically, things are pretty tame up here. Although lately, it sure don't seem like it. It's just been nuts! Anyway, starting off on park duty is a pretty good gig, except in the winter. It's friggin' freezing here. But, in the summer, a lot of the ladies from the suburbs run in city parks and things get just a bit warmer. The divorcees? Whoa! Well, gotta go. Stay safe.

(The OFFICER exits. Lights cross-fade to back to SHELBY and DENZEL.)

SHELBY

Are you OK?

DENZEL

Yeah, I'm fine. *(HE'S not. Silence. Beat. Then HE releases his frustration.)* What a moron! THAT by the way is an example of white privilege!

SHELBY

What? How?

DENZEL

If I was white he would have just walked by. Simple as that. He doesn't see a man. He sees a *black* man, which in his mind equals trouble. And I guarantee he's been taught that by the people that trained him.

SHELBY

I see the TV footage, the Facebook posts, the injustices and . . . between last night and now it's just . . . I don't know what to say.

DENZEL

It's not what you say, it's what you DO! Imagine if you were black. Your whole view of the world would change – in an instant.

SHELBY

I can see that.

DENZEL

No, you can't! (*HE rises and begins pacing.*) You have no idea what's it's like. I've been on the force eight years and I've seen some crazy shit, but believe it or not, *that* was nothing! Ever since I was a kid, I've been dealing with shit. White kids ganging up on me at school. Getting stopped by cops for no reason - other than being black. Being passed over for a job because they don't think a brother has the smarts for it. Just bullshit. The only advantage we have is on the court or field. Coaches love us 'cause we can score, although we still got to know our place. People think things are worse in the south. Don't fool yourself. Down there at least a brother knows where he stands. Up here the prejudice is behind the scenes. Behind closed doors or lurking just around the corner. At least it used to be. (*HIS anger rising.*) Not anymore. Those damn white supremacists are out and they're proud. And the only reason for that is there's a loud mouth, lying son-of-a-bitch in the plantation White House these days! Damn it! (*Directly to SHELBY.*) "It's not how hard you get hit, it's how hard you get hit and keep moving forward"! (*Silence. SHE knows it's a quote from someone.*) Rocky Balboa.

(*SHE chuckles. HE smiles.*)

I just scared the crap out of you, didn't I?

SHELBY

A little.

DENZEL

Well, like I said. I can get a bit riled up sometimes.

SHELBY

Yes, you can. Maybe you need to find yourself some "good trouble".

DENZEL

Good trouble? (*HE laughs.*) Look at you. Girl is quoting Mr. John Robert Lewis! You continue to surprise me.

SHELBY

Thank you. I was a history major after all.

DENZEL

Nice to see you explored more than white history.

SHELBY

Well, some of it's been just a personal curiosity.

DENZEL

Good for you. (*Beat.*) You know, being a cop is not all it's cracked up to be. I think I might be done with this gig.

SHELBY

Really?

DENZEL

Yeah, I've been thinking about it for a while. I transferred from the 3rd to the 4th Precinct a couple of years ago, but I don't know, the job just isn't what I expected. As bad as things are out here (*Referencing the world,*), its worse on the job. The bottom line is you see something and say something, you could end up fired . . . or worse. And the truth is it's only going to get tougher to do our job.

SHELBY

Why's that?

DENZEL

You don't think cops are going to think twice about what they do?

SHELBY

Isn't that a good thing?

DENZEL

Technically, yes. But cops aren't going to take a chance on being fired, sued or going to jail. They're just going to let the bad guys run.

SHELBY

Really? You think they'll do that?

DENZEL

Trust me, it's gonna happen. And I've already heard talk of early retirements. (*Beat.*) I can tell that already makes you nervous.

SHELBY

When you say things like that, yeah, it does makes me nervous. Who's going to protect our communities if all the good officers are leaving?

DENZEL

You think it's only the "good ones"? Girl, you are so naïve. Some of the ones thinking of leaving the force are the assholes that think they won't be able to get away with shit anymore.

(*SHELBY is silent.*)

Hey, don't worry, I'm not going anywhere . . . right now. (*Reassuring SHELBY.*) I am one of the good guys you know. I got rent, car payments . . . got to eat just like everybody else. Besides, trying to switch jobs right now I'd have to be nuts. Unemployment's at an all-time high. And now people want to defund the police department? I want change too, but that's pretty radical.

SHELBY

So, what do you think you're going to do?

DENZEL

I don't know. I'm stuck whether I want to be or not. (*Teasing HER*). I was trying to sort things out this morning when this lady interrupted me.

SHELBY

(*SHE starts to apologize.*)

I'm --

DENZEL

--Ahh! Don't say it. (*Smiles. Beat. Rising.*) Well, I have to run.

SHELBY

(*Rising as well.*)

I've enjoyed this -- talking.

DENZEL

I appreciate you *listening*. It's a start.

SHELBY

Yes, it is.

DENZEL

See you.

(*HE places the shield on his head and begins to exit.*)

SHELBY

(*Calling after HIM.*)

Does that mean you'll pull me over?

(*DENZEL laughs, stops, turns.*)

DENZEL

Only if you run a stop sign. Keep protesting. Maybe I'll see you there.

SHELBY

Right in front of me?

DENZEL

Maybe . . . maybe right next to you.

SHELBY

I would like that.

DENZEL

Me too.

SHELBY

What are you going to do . . . about work?

DENZEL

I don't know. I really don't. I wanted to make a difference, just like that rookie. Came in idealistic, always wanting to do the right thing. But sometimes . . . (*Sighs.*) I love the *idea* of what I do, but it's also tearing me up inside.

SHELBY

I'm glad it is.

DENZEL

What?

SHELBY

If it wasn't, you'd be like the others. And you're not.

DENZEL

I guess. Thanks.

SHELBY

Denzel, trust your instincts.

DENZEL

You sound like my mother.

SHELBY

Ouch.

(SHE smiles.)

DENZEL

(Ponders a thought.)

Is this a one-off, coming to this park?

SHELBY

Doesn't have to be. It's a nice area to run. And I've been thinking of looking for an apartment in this area once I have a job again.

DENZEL

Well, if you need any help, just let me know. I know the neighborhoods pretty well. My mother is just down the street. You'll know where to find me. (*HE points to the bench.*) It's my bench. (*Smiles.*)

SHELBY

Sounds like a plan. Thanks.

DENZEL

If you need a running partner, I'm available.

SHELBY

Are you? I could use a little company on my jog.

DENZEL

How far do you normally run?

SHELBY

Oh, two - three miles.

DENZEL

Hmmm . . . I can handle that. *(Reassuring himself.)* Yeah, I can do that.

SHELBY

You're a good man Denzel. You'll find something.

DENZEL

Hope so.

SHELBY

Don't wait too long though.

DENZEL

I know. "Time is the enemy of change."

SHELBY

Baldwin?

DENZEL

Nope. Anderson. Denzel. *(HE smiles.)* Enjoy the rest of your day.

(HE puts down his shield. SHE smiles and pulls HER mask up. They turn and exit in opposite directions.)

(Lights fade to black.)

THE END