

# The Skin I'm In



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHARON FLAKE

Sharon G. Flake was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in December 24, 1955 and is the fifth of six siblings. She attended the University of Pittsburgh and graduated in 1978 with a BA in English. In the year after college, Flake worked as a house parent at a youth shelter outside of Pittsburgh. Over the next eight years, she was a counselor for teens at a foster placement agency and wrote for local publications in her spare time. Flake then got a job at the University of Pittsburgh in the PR department and worked there for 18 years while continuing her writing career. She had a daughter, Brittney, in 1991 and wrote her first full-length young adult novel, *The Skin I'm In*, in 1998. Flake has written nine novels, several short stories, plays, and a picture book. She is the recipient of numerous awards, such as the Coretta Scott King Honor and the YWCA Racial Justice Award. Flake currently lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Skin I'm In* takes place in an unnamed city in the late 1990s, and Flake makes a few references to McClenton being an “inner-city” school. McClenton Middle School, which protagonist Maleeka attends, reflects the state of many urban school districts across the country, which results from decades-long demographic shifts and government policies. While American schools became officially desegregated in 1954, this resulted in many wealthy white Americans leaving cities for the suburbs or opting to send their children to private schools, while poorer urban districts primarily made up of minority students had few resources. Due to these conditions, many schools in the late 1990s (like McClenton in the novel) continued to be racially and socioeconomically homogenous. Additionally, teachers’ salaries were more competitive in wealthier schools, so many of the best teachers left for wealthier districts. This is why Flake illustrates the positive impact that high-quality teachers like Miss Saunders can have on lower-income and minority students, highlighting the benefit of providing all children with the same opportunities.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Flake has written many other books that speak to the experience of Black young adults, including *Money Hungry* (2001), *Begging for Change* (2003), *Bang!* (2004), *The Broken Bike Boy and the Queen of 33rd Street* (2007), *Pinned* (2012), and *Unstoppable Octobia May* (2014). Other contemporary books about Black teenagers include Angie Thomas’s [The Hate U Give](#),

Ibi Zoboi’s *American Street*, Brendan Kiely and Jason Reynolds’s [All American Boys](#), and Renée Watson’s [Piecing Me Together](#). *The Skin I'm In* also references Shakespeare’s [Romeo and Juliet](#), which protagonist Maleeka reads in her English class. Outside of class, Miss Saunders gives Maleeka a book called *Life of a Slave Girl* to help with a writing assignment, which is likely a reference to [Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl](#)—Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 autobiography about her time as a slave. Contemporary fiction books that follow young slave women include Marlon James’s *The Book of Night Women*, Yaa Gyasi’s [Homegoing](#), and Colson Whitehead’s [The Underground Railroad](#).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Skin I'm In
- **When Written:** 1995–1998
- **Where Written:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- **When Published:** 1998
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel
- **Setting:** McClenton Middle School; an unnamed city in the late 1990s
- **Climax:** Maleeka admits Charlese forced her to vandalize Miss Saunders’s room
- **Antagonist:** Charlese Jones
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Dedication and Inspiration.** Flake credits her daughter, Brittney, with beginning her writing career: she dedicates *The Skin I'm In* to Brittney and says that she was the inspiration for writing the book.

**A New Point of View.** Flake is currently writing *The Life I'm In*, a companion novel to *The Skin I'm In*, written from the perspective of Charlese, the antagonist of *The Skin I'm In*.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Maleeka Madison is a seventh grader at McClenton Middle School. She is constantly made fun of for her Black skin; her tall, thin body; and the ill-fitting **clothes** that her mom makes for her. When Miss Saunders, Maleeka’s new English teacher, arrives at the school, she has a white streak across her face—likely due to a skin condition called vitiligo. A girl named Charlese makes fun of her, but Miss Saunders doesn’t let this bother her. In class, Miss Saunders explains that she’s grown to

love her face.

Last year, Maleeka stayed out of trouble until Caleb Assam, a cute, popular boy in school, told her he liked her, and they started going out. When other students—including Charlese—saw the pair together, they made fun of Maleeka relentlessly. One day on the school bus, a boy named John-John led other students in a song about Maleeka being so Black that people couldn't see her. Caleb left Maleeka and went to sit with his friends—and after this betrayal, people made fun of Maleeka even more. Finally, she decided to offer to do Charlese's homework if Charlese would let Maleeka hang out with her. Charlese agreed and started bringing in new clothes for Maleeka to wear.

One day, Miss Saunders gives the students an assignment to write a journal from the perspective of a teenager in the 17th century. Maleeka writes about a girl named Akeelma, who is on a slave ship headed for America and whose situations frequently mirror Maleeka's own. Miss Saunders praises Maleeka's writing and lets her continue the assignment for extra credit. A few days later, Maleeka gets into a fight at school when a girl attacks Maleeka for something Charlese did, and Maleeka takes the fall for it. Miss Saunders and Maleeka's mom devise a plan for Maleeka to work in the school office so that she stays out of trouble.

That weekend, Maleeka decides to get a haircut with her friend Sweets, and the women in the salon show Maleeka how to wear her hair with confidence. At school, however, the students make fun of her hair, and Maleeka cries in the bathroom. Then, Maleeka remembers that her dad, who died three years ago, said she had to see herself with her own eyes. She looks at herself in the hand **mirror** that her dad gave her, cleans herself up, and walks confidently out of the bathroom.

One weekend, Maleeka goes over to Charlese's house. Charlese's parents died two years ago, and her 25-year-old sister JuJu takes care of her. JuJu constantly throws parties, and the house is dirty and full of strangers. Maleeka feels bad for Charlese and slips out of the house. On her way home, two boys attack her and try and kiss her. Maleeka bites and scratches them, and when they let her free, she runs all the way home and doesn't tell her mom what happened. Instead, she writes in Akeelma's diary about the incident, and she realizes that it's hard to know where Akeelma's thoughts begin and hers end. When she shows her writing to Miss Saunders, she says that writing is Maleeka's gift.

Later, Maleeka skips out on her office job to hang out with Charlese, Raise, and Raina, who make fun of her as if she isn't there. They also smoke and write all over the bathroom stalls. Miss Saunders comes into the bathroom and breaks up their party, giving them all detention. At detention, Caleb is there too. He explains to Maleeka he left her on the bus last year because he thought that kids would stop teasing her if they weren't together. Now, he sees that kids tease her anyway, and

he confesses that he still likes her. Maleeka, however, is wary of trusting him again.

The next day, Maleeka submits her writing to a local library competition. When she does, her mother tells her that her dad used to write as well, and she shows Maleeka a poem he wrote for Maleeka calling her "brown," "beautiful," and "brilliant." That same day, JuJu comes into the office and yells at Miss Saunders for giving Charlese bad grades—but Miss Saunders stands firm. After this incident, Charlese wants to get back at Miss Saunders by trashing her classroom. Maleeka is hesitant about this, but Charlese threatens to beat her up, and so Maleeka is forced to go along with the plan.

One morning, Charlese, Maleeka, Raise, and Raina sneak into Miss Saunders's room and start to vandalize it. Charlese forces Maleeka to burn a pile of foreign money on Miss Saunders's desk, and soon after the curtains catch fire. The four of them run away, but the janitor catches sight of Maleeka as she goes. Maleeka is suspended and will be forced to pay \$2,000 in fines. Charlese warns Maleeka not to rat them out and says that she'll help pay back the money. Maleeka is nervous about what to do: she doesn't want Charlese to attack her, but she knows it's unfair for her to get in trouble for something she didn't want to do.

While Maleeka is still suspended, she runs into John-John on the street, and he continues to make fun of her. Soon after, a group of boys attacks John-John, and Maleeka defends him and wards off the boys until a group of adults and Caleb show up to help them.

When Maleeka gets home, she receives a letter from the library announcing that she won the contest. She is overwhelmed with emotion, and her mom is proud. Maleeka decides to call Charlese and tell her that she's going to tell the truth about what happened, but Charlese tells her that they slipped Miss Saunders's watch into Maleeka's locker, so now the school really thinks that she committed the crime. She repeats that if Maleeka tells on her, she'll beat her up. That evening, when Miss Saunders shows up at Maleeka's home asking to know the truth about what happened, Maleeka tells her that she acted alone.

The next day, Maleeka returns to school, and Miss Saunders meets with Charlese and Maleeka together. Charlese calls Maleeka an "ugly, stupid, black thing," and Maleeka thinks of what Akeelma would say. She yells back at Charlese, explaining that she's not ugly or stupid. Then, Maleeka confesses that Charlese, Raise, and Raina forced her to mess up Miss Saunders's room. Miss Saunders hugs Maleeka, glad that she finally told the truth.

In the aftermath of Maleeka's revelation, JuJu sends Charlese to live with her grandparents in Alabama. Caleb writes a poem for Maleeka, calling her "my sweet dark chocolate candy girl." Maleeka thinks it's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for

her. When she arrives in Miss Saunders's class that day, Miss Saunders greets her warmly, and John-John says, "welcome back."



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Maleeka Madison** – Maleeka is the 13-year-old protagonist and narrator of *The Skin I'm In*. During her time at McClenton Middle School, other students like John-John and Charlese frequently bully Maleeka over her dark skin and the ill-fitting **clothes** that her mom makes for her. This makes her insecure about these qualities, particularly after a boy named Caleb stops dating her because she's picked on so frequently. As a result, Maleeka approaches Charlese and proposes to do her homework (Maleeka is incredibly smart) in exchange for Charlese's agreement to hang out with her. Charlese also starts bringing in nice clothes for Maleeka to wear. However, hanging out with Charlese only leads Maleeka to trouble, and Charlese continues to manipulate and bully Maleeka even while they are supposedly friends. Maleeka's life begins to turn around with the arrival of Miss Saunders, a new English teacher who recognizes Charlese's bad influence and tries to separate Maleeka and Charlese as much as possible. She also sets a good example for Maleeka in how she handles Charlese, refusing to be bullied or manipulated. Miss Saunders also encourages Maleeka's writing talent, which helps Maleeka feel more confident in her ability. Meanwhile, Maleeka tries to maintain more positive friendships in her life, like with Sweets and Caleb, who reveals that he only stopped hanging out with her because he thought it would help stop the bullying. Additionally, Maleeka frequently recalls the words of her dad (who died three years prior to the novel's events), who told her to see herself with her own eyes. All of these people gradually foster Maleeka's confidence in herself, as she recognizes that she's the only one whose approval she needs. Still, even toward the end of the novel, Maleeka still fears Charlese, who threatens her with violence if she doesn't help vandalize Miss Saunders room. After Maleeka accidentally sets the room on fire, she eventually works up the courage to confess that Charlese was the one who forced her to do it. Maleeka's journey illustrates the value of positive role models, supportive friendships, and most importantly, one's own self-esteem.

**Miss Saunders** – Miss Saunders is the new English teacher at McClenton Middle School. Previously, she worked at a successful ad agency, until it set up a program whereby employees could take a leave of absence to teach for a year. She has a skin condition (likely vitiligo), which Maleeka describes as "a white stain spread halfway across her face." For this reason, Miss Saunders is at first ridiculed by many of the students, including Charlese and even Maleeka. However, Miss Saunders doesn't let their words get to her, explaining that she learned to

accept and love her face when she was growing up. In this way, Miss Saunders models good behavior for Maleeka, who often has difficulty accepting and loving her own skin. Miss Saunders also works her students hard, encouraging them to live up to their full potential. Miss Saunders gives the students a writing assignment in which they write from the perspective of a teenager in the 17th century. When she recognizes Maleeka's writing talent, she encourages Maleeka to continue the assignment and tells Maleeka that she has a gift. This encouragement is vital to Maleeka, who finds writing empowering and even goes on to win a library writing competition. Miss Saunders also helps Maleeka overcome Charlese's bullying, often trying to separate them and setting Maleeka up with a job in the principal's office so that she can stay out of trouble. At the end of the novel, when Maleeka is discovered vandalizing Miss Saunders's classroom, Miss Saunders knows that Charlese likely instigated it and brings them together to talk. Feeling both protected and encouraged by Miss Saunders, Maleeka stands up to Charlese and reveals that Charlese coerced her to trash the room. Miss Saunders's influence in helping Maleeka feel more confident demonstrates the importance of good role models.

**Charlese Jones** – Charlese is a classmate of Maleeka's at McClenton. Charlese is the toughest girl in school, and the year prior to the novel's events, Charlese was one of Maleeka's primary bullies—particularly when Maleeka started hanging out with Caleb. Maleeka then made a proposition: if Charlese agreed to hang out with her, Maleeka would do Charlese's homework, which Charlese accepted. Charlese then started bringing Maleeka more fashionable **clothes** to wear so that she would be teased less. Still, even though Charlese and Maleeka are supposedly friends, Charlese continues to bully and insult Maleeka, often calling her names or insulting her appearance. Charlese's bullying seems to stem from two sources: her own insecurity, and the way her older sister JuJu treats her. Charlese's insecurity is exposed when Caleb pays Maleeka more attention than Charlese, or when Maleeka is able to buy clothes on her own and appears confident. When this happens, Charlese becomes jealous and tries to insult Maleeka, suggesting she isn't as happy or confident as Maleeka is in these moments. Charlese's also takes the lead from her 25-year-old sister JuJu, as their parents died two years prior to the novel's events and JuJu is her sole caretaker. JuJu is often violent and insulting toward her sister and others, which sets an example for Charlese to act the same way. When JuJu threatens Miss Saunders over giving Charlese bad grades, which would force her to repeat the seventh grade for a third time, Charlese is spurred to violence herself. She coerces Maleeka to help her and her two friends, Raise and Raina, vandalize Miss Saunders room. But ultimately, Charlese's actions come to haunt her: when Maleeka tells Miss Saunders that Charlese forced her to vandalize the room, JuJu sends Charlese to live with their grandparents in Alabama.

**Caleb Assam** – Caleb is a classmate of Maleeka’s at McClenton. A year prior to the novel’s events, Caleb told Maleeka she was pretty, and they started dating. However, when people started making fun of them, Caleb chose to stop hanging out with Maleeka, which hurt her deeply. Later, he reveals that he only broke up with Maleeka because he thought people would stop making fun of her if he did. When he realizes that kids are continuing to bully her even without him around, he explains that he still likes her. Still, Maleeka has a difficult time trusting him at first. She often explores her feelings for him in her writing, using the character of Kinjari as a stand-in for Caleb. Additionally, Charlese often tries to belittle Maleeka in front of Caleb because she’s jealous of the attention he gives Maleeka. Caleb warns Maleeka several times that Charlese is a bad influence, demonstrating his desire to support her. At the end of the novel, Caleb writes a poem for Maleeka asking her to be his “Almond Joy” and comparing her to other candies, which she calls “the nicest thing anybody ever did for [her].” Maleeka vows to frame the poem on her wall, underscoring how valuable Caleb’s support is to her and how it boosts her self-esteem.

**John-John McIntyre** – John-John McIntyre is one of Maleeka’s classmates at McClenton and one of the kids who bullies her most frequently. A year prior to the novel’s events, John-John made up a song about Maleeka being so dark-skinned that he couldn’t see her, and many kids sang along with him. However, Maleeka also hints at the fact that John-John likely does this because of his own insecurities: she notes that John-John is very small for a seventh grader and that his skin is as dark as hers. When Maleeka finally gains the courage to ask him why he picks on her, he reveals that in second grade, Maleeka didn’t want to sit next to him and opted to sit up front next to Caleb Assam, who has lighter skin, instead (though Maleeka tells John-John that she only did this because she couldn’t see the blackboard). This anecdote reveals John-John’s low self-worth and his insecurity about his race, which seem to be what motivate John-John’s bullying. Toward the end of the book, however, Maleeka rescues John-John from a group of boys who are beating him up. Grateful for Maleeka’s support John-John is kind to her the next time he sees her at school.

**Maleeka’s Mom** – Maleeka’s mom is Maleeka’s sole caretaker, as Maleeka’s dad died three years prior to the novel’s events. While Maleeka’s mom loves and supports her, she doesn’t always model good behavior. Maleeka reveals that, following her dad’s death, her mother fell apart; Maleeka had to brush her mom’s teeth and feed her. Eventually, Maleeka’s mom was able to pick herself up when she discovered sewing. She makes all of Maleeka’s **clothes** despite the fact that they aren’t sewn very well, and Maleeka is teased relentlessly for them. Maleeka explains that she worries what might happen if her mother were to stop sewing—if she fell back into her grief—indicating that Maleeka continues to take on a parental role in her household. Maleeka’s mom also saves money to play the stock

market or to buy lottery tickets, but they are still “dirt poor,” as Maleeka explains. However, Maleeka knows her mother loves her very much and tries to support her—for instance, by trying to get her into a better school.

**Akeelma** – Akeelma is a fictional character in Maleeka’s writing assignment for English class. Akeelma (whose name is close to Maleeka’s name backwards) is a 13-year-old girl on a slave ship headed for the United States. She lives in filth, and she believes she’s ugly. Maleeka’s writing about Akeelma often parallels her own life: for example, after Maleeka is harassed by two teenage boys who try to kiss her on the street, she writes about Akeelma experiencing the same thing on the ship. Additionally, Akeelma’s relationship with Kinjari, a boy on the boat, mirrors Maleeka’s relationship with Caleb, a boy at her school. Gradually, Maleeka becomes more conscious of the connections between her own life and the stories she’s writing—and thinking about the injustice that Akeelma faces on the ship helps propel Maleeka to stand up to the bullies at school. In this way, the character of Akeelma, and the stories that Maleeka writes about her, help to empower Maleeka and boost her self-esteem.

**JuJu** – JuJu is Charlese’s 25-year-old sister. JuJu and Charlese’s parents died two years prior to the events of the novel, and JuJu has been taking care of Charlese since then. JuJu sells designer **clothes** at a steep discount. She constantly has parties in her house, and she pays Charlese to stay up during them to clean and serve drinks. JuJu is often violent, threatening to beat Charlese if she doesn’t complete seventh grade. When Miss Saunders starts to give Charlese poor grades, JuJu also storms into the principal’s office and threatens Miss Saunders. JuJu’s bad behavior becomes a model for Charlese, who also acts out and chooses to vandalize Miss Saunders’s room as revenge for her bad grades. By the end of the novel, JuJu has proven so incapable of taking care of her sister that she sends Charlese to their grandparents’ home in Alabama.

**Kinjari** – Kinjari is a fictional character in Maleeka’s writing assignment for English class. Like Akeelma, Kinjari is traveling to the U.S. on a slave ship in the 17th century. Just as Akeelma parallels Maleeka’s life, Kinjari represents Caleb. Kinjari often stares at Akeelma, prompting her to wonder if she’s beautiful. Later, Kinjari disappears, and Akeelma worries that he’s dead until she reunites with him on the ship later. Likewise, Caleb thinks Maleeka is beautiful despite the fact that she often believes she’s ugly—and even though he chooses not to hang out with her at the beginning of the book, he later reveals that he still likes her. In another story, Kinjari assures Akeelma that he would rather be a slave with her than be free by himself. And in the end, in another parallel, Caleb tells Maleeka that he still likes her—even though he knows that when they hang out together, other students will tease him.

**Maleeka’s Dad** – Maleeka’s dad died in a car accident three

years prior to the novel's events, but he still has a profound impact on Maleeka. Growing up, Maleeka's dad encouraged her love of reading. He also left her a plastic hand **mirror** and told her that she had to see herself through her own eyes to know who she truly was. Throughout the book, Maleeka looks at her reflection and remembers this empowering message, recognizing that the only person whose approval she truly needs is her own. Maleeka later finds an old poem of her dad's in which he called her "brown," "beautiful," and "brilliant"; she frames this poem on her wall. Maleeka's dad's words thus take on enormous value for her as they help foster and affirm her self-esteem.

**Sweets** – Sweets is Maleeka's best friend. The girls did everything together until the year prior to the novel's events, when Sweets started attending a better school across town. Maleeka also had the grades to go to the other school, but she froze during her interview because she didn't feel that she belonged with the other girls, who were primarily white. Sweets now spends much of her time studying, leaving Maleeka to hang out with Charlese. Sweets also helps Maleeka get a haircut from her cousin Ronnie to boost her confidence.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Raise** – Raise is Raina's twin sister. Raina and Raise hang out with Charlese and follow whatever she says, frequently bullying Maleeka alongside Charlese. They help Charlese destroy Miss Saunders's room at the end of the book, and they're suspended when Maleeka reveals what they did.

**Raina** – Raina is Raise's twin sister. Raina and Raise hang out with Charlese and follow whatever she says, frequently bullying Maleeka alongside Charlese. They help Charlese destroy Miss Saunders's room at the end of the book, and they're suspended when Maleeka reveals what they did.

**Desda** – Desda is a classmate of Maleeka's at McClenton. Maleeka describes Desda as short and fat. Though Desda has won several cooking awards, Maleeka admits that she's not very smart. Still, Desda tries to support Maleeka and tells her not to let bullies like Charlese get to her.

**Daphne** – Daphne is a classmate of Maleeka's who's dating Worm. Daphne hears a rumor that Maleeka was making out with Worm in the hallway, when in reality it was Charlese. She confronts and attacks Maleeka, who takes the fall for Charlese and gets beaten up by Daphne.

**Tai** – Tai is Maleeka's math teacher. She is also an old friend of Miss Saunders's from college who suggested that Miss Saunders teach at McClenton. Like Miss Saunders, Tai tries to take initiative with Maleeka and encourages her to keep her grades up.

**Worm** – Worm is a classmate of Maleeka's who is dating Daphne—but early in the novel, he makes out with Charlese. Daphne believes that Maleeka was the one who kissed Worm,

and she attacks Maleeka for it.

**Ronnie** – Ronnie is Sweets's cousin who owns a hair salon and gives Maleeka a cropped hairstyle. She and the other women in the salon then show Maleeka how to strut with her new haircut.

**Mr. Pajolli** – Mr. Pajolli is the principal at Maleeka's school. Many students, teachers, and parents—including JuJu—complain about Miss Saunders to Mr. Pajolli.

**Miss Carol** – Miss Carol is the secretary in the school office who supervises Maleeka at her office job.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### BULLYING AND INSECURITY

*The Skin I'm In* follows protagonist Maleeka Madison, a Black seventh grader at McClenton Middle School. Over Maleeka's school year, other students bully her for her very dark skin; her tall, thin body; and her unflattering clothes. Yet while the bullies at school victimize Maleeka because of her insecurities, their behavior is motivated by their own anxieties. Students who are cruel to Maleeka, like Charlese Jones and John-John McIntyre, are often insecure about the very things for which they tease Maleeka. This suggests that bullies prey on their victims' insecurities precisely because the bullies themselves are insecure.

As bullies Charles and John-John do with all their victims, they specifically attack Maleeka for her differences, thereby making her feel even more insecure and vulnerable. Maleeka reveals some of her insecurities in the first chapter of the book. She thinks, "It's bad enough that I'm the darkest, worst-dressed thing in school. I'm also the tallest, skinniest thing you ever seen. And people like John-John remind me of it every chance they get." Bullies like John-John—who makes up a mean song about how dark-skinned Maleeka is—understand Maleeka's insecurities and make fun of those aspects in particular to make her feel helpless. Tired of being picked on, Maleeka resolves to befriend Charlese—the toughest girl in school—knowing that her power and influence could help get the other kids to stop being so mean. So, Maleeka makes a proposition: if Charlese agrees to hang out with her, Maleeka will do Charlese's homework. Charlese agrees, but she continues to bully Maleeka despite now being "friends" with her. For instance, Maleeka usually wears ill-fitting **clothes** that her mom sews for her—one of the reasons she gets picked on at school—so

Charlese supplies Maleeka with different clothes. But there's a catch: if Maleeka doesn't act the way Charlese wants, Charlese refuses to bring the clothes, thus preying on Maleeka's insecurity as a way of tormenting and controlling her.

However, it becomes clear that the bullies in the book narrow in on their victims' insecurities because the bullies themselves are insecure. For Charlese and John-John, making Maleeka feel bad is a way to make themselves feel better. While John-John makes fun of Maleeka's dark skin and height, Maleeka notes that John-John is so small that most fifth graders can see over his head, despite his being in seventh grade. She also explains, "He's my color, but since second grade *he's* been teasing *me* about being too black." Later, when Maleeka confronts John-John about why he teases her, he explains that on her first day at school in second grade, she didn't want to sit next to him and opted to sit next to a popular boy with lighter skin named Caleb. In this way, Flake reveals that John-John's taunting stems from his own insecurities over his worth and his Blackness—he ridicules Maleeka to avoid being made fun of himself. Charlese's bullying also stems from her insecurities. One day, when Maleeka's mom is able to buy her some new clothing and Maleeka comes to school very confident and excited, Charlese comments, "So your momma finally broke down and bought you some clothes." Charlese's comments suggest that she is jealous of Maleeka's happiness and confidence on that day, which consequently implies that Charlese isn't happy and confident herself. Charlese also worries about Maleeka getting positive attention from boys at school. When Caleb notices Maleeka and tries to go out with her, Charlese attempts several times to redirect his attention to herself instead, denigrating Maleeka in front of him. The fact that Charlese hates when Maleeka gets more attention than she does exposes her desperate need to be well-liked and in control of those around her, and Flake implies that this motivates Charlese's bullying.

Because insecurity lies at the heart of bullying—it's what bullies prey on and what motivates their behavior—overcoming one's insecurities is the best way to prevent bullying. Miss Saunders, a new English teacher, provides a clear example of this. Miss Saunders has a white streak across her face "like somebody tossed acid on it"—most likely due to a skin condition called vitiligo. When Miss Saunders arrives for her first day and tells Charlese to get to class when she's lingering in the hallway, Charlese insults Miss Saunders and says, "I sure ain't looking at that face forty-five minutes every day." But Miss Saunders stands her ground, refusing to be bullied, and finally gets Charlese to go to class. Later, Miss Saunders explains that she learned to love her face when she was young. Because she isn't insecure about it, she can't be bullied for that insecurity. By the end of the book, aided by Miss Saunders and other friends, Maleeka gains a new sense of confidence in herself and refuses to remain friends with Charlese because of all the abuse she's

taken. When Charlese calls her an "ugly, stupid black thing," Maleeka says, "I am not ugly. I am not stupid. I am Maleeka Madison, and, yeah, I'm black, real black." Maleeka's ability to love her dark skin and overcome her insecurities empowers her to stop accepting Charlese's bullying. Maleeka also tells John-John that she didn't avoid him in second grade because she wanted to sit next to Caleb, but rather because she had trouble seeing the board. Later, Maleeka helps save John-John from some boys who are beating him up, and he stops making fun of her as a result. Because Maleeka no longer makes John-John feel insecure about himself and instead tries to lift him up, he doesn't feel the need to bully her anymore. This suggests that, when bullies overcome their insecurities, they no longer feel the need to denigrate others.



### SELF-ESTEEM, SUPPORT, AND FRIENDSHIP

Seventh-grader Maleeka Madison struggles to find friends at her new school, and people often make fun of her for her dark skin and clothes. Even when she does find girls like Charlese to hang out with, they often belittle her. But as the year progresses, Maleeka begins to recognize the people in her life who genuinely want to support her, like her peers Caleb and Sweets or her English teacher, Miss Saunders. At the same time, Maleeka finds value in supporting herself. Maleeka's progression from uncertain to self-assured over the course of the novel illustrates two key ideas: that it's important to surround oneself with supportive friends, but also that true self-esteem can only come from within.

Maleeka gains confidence from her peers and from the adults in her life, illustrating the value of uplifting friendships and caring guardians. As soon as Miss Saunders, the new English teacher, meets Maleeka and notices John-John picking on her, she compliments Maleeka on her skin, "like a blue-black sky after it's rained and rained." Even without fully understanding that Maleeka is insecure about her dark Black skin, Miss Saunders sets out to boost her confidence and counter the bullies in her life. Maleeka's friend Sweets, who goes to a different school, helps Maleeka get a haircut from her cousin Ronnie. At the salon, the women show Maleeka how to strut and wear her hair in a way that gives her confidence, to the point that she feels "like [she's] on a runway." Rather than tearing Maleeka down like the kids at school do, the women at the salon try to empower Maleeka and help her get in touch with her own self-worth. Maleeka finds that the same is true for Caleb, a popular boy in school who likes Maleeka. He writes her a poem that calls her "My sweet dark chocolate candy girl," and says that he likes her eyes and skin. Caleb also warns Maleeka that Charlese is the kind of friend that will get Maleeka "locked up or shot up" and suggests that she should steer clear of Charlese. Thus, Caleb not only supports Maleeka but also encourages her to rid herself of the toxic friendships in her life.

Even Maleeka's dad, who passed away three years prior to the beginning of the novel, bolsters her self-esteem. Maleeka finds an old poem he wrote for her, in which he called her "brown," "beautiful," and "brilliant." She hangs it on her wall alongside Caleb's poem, demonstrating how these uplifting messages are so valuable to Maleeka's confidence that she makes sure she can see them every day in her room.

As valuable as her friendships and mentors are, though, Maleeka ultimately recognizes that she is responsible for her own self-esteem. After Maleeka gets her hair cut, kids make fun of her even though Sweets and the other women in the salon told her how good she looks. After Maleeka puts on a baseball cap and cries in the bathroom, she says aloud, "You know, Maleeka, [...] you can glue on some hair, paint yourself white, come to school wearing a leather coat down to your toes and somebody will still say something mean to hurt your feelings." She recognizes that she can't rely on others to affirm her, because kids can always find something negative to say. She takes off the baseball cap, a symbolic gesture demonstrating that if she simply has confidence in herself, no one can make her feel less attractive. Maleeka also pulls out an old plastic **mirror** that her father gave her. She recalls his words: "You got to see yourself with your own eyes. That's the only way you gonna know who you really are." The mirror reinforces that the only approval she truly needs is her own. Maleeka uses this newfound confidence to combat the bullies in her life. When John-John calls her "midnight" as an insult to her dark skin, Maleeka thinks of a poem she read in the library: "At midnight, if you have eyes to see / There's beauty and there's majesty." Even though John-John intended the word negatively, Maleeka's ability to look at it in a positive light helps her to be more confident, not less.

When Maleeka ends her friendship with Charlese, who abuses and bullies her, she reinforces the importance of having both positive, affirming friendships and self-confidence. Charlese frequently insults Maleeka, saying nasty things about her body and the clothing her mom sews for her. Maleeka worries that Charlese will torment her if they don't remain friends, but that's the irony in their relationship: Charlese *already* bullies Maleeka and even forces her to do terrible things like trash Miss Saunders's room. Ultimately, Maleeka's newfound self-esteem enables her to see that she doesn't need Charlese and shouldn't continue to remain friends with her. At the end of the novel, Maleeka tells Charlese, "if you don't like me, too bad 'cause black is the skin I'm in!" Ultimately, Maleeka is able to be confident in herself and acknowledge that friendships should be supportive rather than exploitative.

Maleeka is supposed to write from the perspective of a girl living in the 17th century. Knowing that she would have likely been a slave back then because she's Black, Maleeka writes the diary from the perspective of a slave girl named Akeelma. As she sees the world through Akeelma's eyes, Maleeka starts to draw connections between the events she's writing about in Akeelma's life and the events happening in her own life—which spurs her to confront much of the abuse that she faces at the hands of other students. In this way, writing isn't just a means of creative expression: it can help a person understand themselves and their circumstances and empower them to shape their own story.

At first, Miss Saunders's creative writing assignment helps Maleeka fully confront and understand experiences at school, as Maleeka draws parallels between her own situation and the fictional story she's writing. Miss Saunders assigns her class to write a diary from the perspective of people living in the 17th century as an exercise in empathy. Maleeka writes as a 13-year-old slave girl named Akeelma, which she explains is close to "Maleeka" spelled backwards. Even in the character's name, Maleeka ties herself to Akeelma, foreshadowing how she will draw on much of her own experience when writing about Akeelma's experiences. In the first story that Maleeka writes, Akeelma is on a slave ship headed for America. She feels ugly, skinny, and wretchedly dirty. But she notices that, as bad as she feels, a boy named Kinjari likes to stare at her. One day, however, a girl who steals Akeelma's food says that Kinjari has been tossed over the side of the boat, though Akeelma assumes the girl is lying. This mirrors Maleeka's own situation, as she feels insecure about her looks but notices that a boy named Caleb likes her anyway. Meanwhile, Maleeka's toxic friend Charlese, like the girl on the boat, tries to undermine Maleeka's relationship with Caleb. In another story, Akeelma laments how the girl on the boat continues to steal food from her. The girl is "a lion who cares for no one but herself." The connections between the girl and Charlese are strengthened because the day she writes this story, Charlese purposefully doesn't bring any **clothes** for Maleeka to wear, and Maleeka is forced to wear the ill-fitting clothes her mom made for her instead. In her writing, Maleeka implicitly understands that Charlese cares only for herself, even if Maleeka writes about it only subconsciously. As the school year goes on and Maleeka continues to write, she thinks, "Lately it's hard to know where Akeelma's thoughts begin and mine end [...] Akeelma [says] she's scared that maybe people will always think she's ugly. But I'm really talking about myself. I'm scared people will always think I'm ugly." Maleeka directly connects her experiences to Akeelma's and becomes conscious of how her writing is a way for her to work through her own feelings and experiences.

Over time, as Maleeka becomes more aware of the parallels between Akeelma's story and her own, her writing actually empowers her to stand up to the school bullies. The day that



## WRITING AND SELF-EXPRESSION

While Maleeka Madison learns to become more confident at school, her new English teacher, Miss Saunders, assigns a writing project in which

Charlese refuses to give Maleeka clothes, another of Maleeka's bullies, John-John, makes fun of her for her clothing. Having just written one of Akeelma's letters, Maleeka decides to confront him. She reflects that "I guess thinking about Akeelma makes me wonder why people treat others like they're nothing." In this way, Maleeka's writing helps her recognize the unfairness of John-John's bullying and empowers her to try to change it. At the end of the novel, when Charlese bullies Maleeka into taking the fall for vandalism that she and Charlese perpetrated together, Charlese calls Maleeka an "ugly, stupid, black thing." In her head, Maleeka hears Akeelma say, "Call me by my name!" and Maleeka can't help but shout the same thing at Charlese. Maleeka finally stands up to Charlese and tells Miss Saunders that Charlese was also involved in the vandalism. That Akeelma's thoughts inspire Maleeka to tell the truth illustrates the power of her writing. It enables her not only to understand herself through the lens of a fictional character, but also to draw on the strength of the character she's created and seek out power over and satisfaction in her own life.

Author Sharon Flake has stated in interviews that when her daughter Brittney was born, she began making up stories about tenacious girls with dark skin like she had. Years later, she published her first novel, *The Skin I'm In*, to help counter societal messages that belittled Black girls. Just as Akeelma helps illuminate Maleeka's experiences and empower her, Flake wanted her writing to help young Black girls see themselves in a character—Maleeka—and feel empowered by her.



### THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLE MODELS

As Maleeka and her peers progress through the seventh grade, several adults—particularly Miss Saunders, the new English teacher; Maleeka's mom; and Charlese's older sister, JuJu—guide them. While all three of these women want to see the children in their lives succeed, they sometimes fail to be good role models. Miss Saunders's character highlights how kids need positive role models in their lives who will model good behavior and encourage kids to live up to their full potential. But through Maleeka's mother and especially Charlese's sister, Flake emphasizes that poor role models will lead children to be less successful or confident in themselves, and sometimes engage in harmful behavior.

Miss Saunders, the new English teacher, becomes an impactful mentor for the students—and particularly Maleeka—by setting a good example and pushing them to work hard. When Miss Saunders identifies Maleeka's talent for writing and gives her extra credit to continue a journaling assignment, Maleeka starts to grow more and more proud of her work. She thinks, "It feels good doing something not everybody can do." This gives Maleeka the confidence to submit her work to a local library competition—and she wins \$100. Only through Miss

Saunders's mentorship is Maleeka able to affirm and display her talent. Then, after Maleeka gets in a fight with another girl because of Charlese, Miss Saunders gets Maleeka a job in the principal's office filing papers, explaining that she feels Maleeka is wasting her potential and can get into less trouble when she's under the principal's eye. She also frequently separates Maleeka and Charlese when they hang out in the girls' bathroom during class, knowing that their relationship is bad for Maleeka because Charlese bullies her. Miss Saunders's involvement in Maleeka's life sets her on a better path to take advantage of her intelligence and removes her from bad influences. Miss Saunders also models good behavior for Maleeka. Despite having a skin condition, implied to be vitiligo, on her face, Miss Saunders refuses to let students like Charlese bully her. When Charlese insults Miss Saunders's face, Miss Saunders lets Charlese know that "there's nothing Charlese can say about her face that she ain't heard in at least four different languages." Seeing Miss Saunders's confidence shows Maleeka that she doesn't have to take Charlese's abuse, either. At the end of the novel, when Maleeka finally tells Miss Saunders about the vandalism that Charlese influenced Maleeka to commit at the school, Miss Saunders hugs Maleeka, and Maleeka feels "safe inside." Miss Saunders's support, as well as her modeled behavior, enable Maleeka to escape the abuse she's been suffering from Charlese.

Maleeka's mom also encourages her daughter to live up to her potential, but the novel doesn't always frame her as a positive role model, because Maleeka acknowledges that her mother doesn't always model good behavior. Maleeka's mother wants Maleeka to succeed: she makes sure that Maleeka goes to school every day and even tries to get her into a better school so that she can have a more promising future. She also punishes Maleeka when she gets into trouble, restricting her from hanging out with Charlese and other friends. And she encourages Maleeka to recognize her own value, telling her that she could be a professional writer. She knows that Maleeka is smart and tries to make sure that Maleeka will take advantage of her intelligence. However, Maleeka recognizes that her mother isn't the best role model. She often looks for get-rich-quick schemes like the lottery or playing the stock market, which leaves them "dirt poor." Maleeka also recalls that when her dad died three years prior, her mother fell apart: Maleeka fed her mother and brushed her teeth for a long time until her mother picked up sewing. Even though Maleeka loves her mother deeply, Maleeka worries that if her mother stopped sewing clothing, she would be consumed by sadness once more. This is why Maleeka never tells her mom how much Maleeka gets picked on for the **clothes** her mom makes. While both Miss Saunders and Maleeka's mom want what's best for Maleeka, her mother fails to set a good example for Maleeka and make her feel fully supported.

Charlese's sister JuJu, on the other hand, neither looks out for



her sister Charlese's future nor models good behavior, and this choice contributes to Charlese's failure to complete seventh grade. JuJu and Charlese's parents died two years prior to the novel's events, and so 25-year-old JuJu takes care of Charlese. On the surface, JuJu appears to genuinely care about her sister. When Miss Saunders gives Charlese bad grades, JuJu goes to the principal's office to address the issue so that Charlese can move up to eighth grade (this is her third time in seventh). However, JuJu yells at Miss Saunders and blames her for Charlese's poor performance, saying that Miss Saunders doesn't know what she's doing and threatening her. This conduct trickles down to Charlese, who not only abuses her peers but also plans to get revenge on Miss Saunders for giving her bad grades. By showing the way Charlese imitates JuJu's bad behavior, Flake highlights how negative role models can instigate bad behavior in children who look up to them. At the end of the novel, after Maleeka reveals that Charlese was the one who forced her to mess up Miss Saunders's classroom (Charlese's plan for revenge against Miss Saunders), JuJu sends Charlese to live with their grandparents in Alabama. Her poor modeling has not only led Charlese not to finish seventh grade at the school, but it also shows that JuJu is completely unfit to take care of her younger sister. Through these three women, Flake suggests that guardians should both inspire children to behave and also model good conduct: failing to do so leaves children vulnerable and puts them at risk of bad behavior.

smoking in the bathroom or taking the fall for kissing another girl's boyfriend. The clothes thus represent how Maleeka's desire to be accepted overrides even her morality or other desires in her life.

Maleeka's insecurity over her clothes and desire to be accepted only cause problems for her. Pressured by Charlese, Raise, and Raina, Maleeka accidentally sets Miss Saunders's classroom on fire, and the four of them run away. However, Maleeka grabs a bag of clothes that Charlese brought for her and it rips. Trying to pick up the clothes delays her escape, and she is the only one caught for starting the fire. This suggests that the clothes Charlese offers Maleeka—and, by extension, Maleeka's desperate desire to be accepted—only cause trouble for her.



### MALEEKA'S MIRROR

Maleeka's plastic hand mirror symbolizes her self-acceptance. Maleeka's dad gave her the mirror prior to his death three years before the events of the novel. One day, after Maleeka has gotten a haircut, she's disheartened by other students making fun of her—even though she knows that she looks good. She goes to cry in the bathroom, and as she looks at herself in the bathroom mirror, she feels that she's lost the confidence she had in the hair salon. In this way, the school bathroom mirror represents how the other students see Maleeka, and how they project their own insecurities so that she, in turn, becomes insecure.

Then, Maleeka pulls out her hand mirror and recalls her father's words: "You got to see yourself with your own eyes. That's the only way you gonna know who you really are." The hand mirror thus represents how Maleeka's father saw her—that is, how much he loved her and how beautiful he thought she was—and how she should see herself in turn. By looking at herself not in the bathroom mirror but instead in the hand mirror, Maleeka understands that the only approval she truly needs is her own. Maleeka walks confidently out of the bathroom after this, which underscores how seeing herself for who she is, rather than how others see her, fosters self-acceptance.



### SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### CLOTHES

Clothes represent Maleeka's desire to be accepted by her peers. Clothes are an avenue of self-expression, and they're also tied to socioeconomic status. Maleeka's mom usually sews Maleeka's clothes because she wants to save money—despite the fact that she isn't very good at sewing. Maleeka is often teased at school for this ill-fitting clothing, and, consequently, clothes are a source of insecurity for Maleeka and something that makes her feel excluded from other students. When Maleeka starts hanging out with Charlese, and Charlese gives her nice clothes to alleviate the bullying she experiences, the other students begin to accept Maleeka more, and the teasing subsides. However, Charlese often uses this agreement to manipulate Maleeka, withholding the clothes when Maleeka doesn't act the way Charlese wants. Maleeka is so desperate for acceptance—and hence, the clothing—that she often allows Charlese to insult her and coerce her into doing things she doesn't want to do, like



### QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown and Company edition of *The Skin I'm In* published in 2018.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

“The first time I seen her, I got a bad feeling inside. Not like I was in danger or nothing. Just like she was somebody I should stay clear of. To tell the truth, she was a freak like me. The kind of person folks can’t help but tease. That’s bad if you’re a kid like me. It’s worse for a new teacher like her.”

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Miss Saunders

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 1


### Explanation and Analysis

In the opening passage of *The Skin I’m In*, Maleeka gives her first impression of Miss Saunders, the new English teacher at Maleeka’s school. Even before revealing exactly what is different about Miss Saunders, or about herself, Maleeka foreshadows the fact that she and Miss Saunders have many experiences in common, and that their journeys at the school will be connected. Maleeka’s assessment of Miss Saunders as “a freak like me” illustrates two things: first, Maleeka is hyperaware of any difference in other people. She knows just from looking at Miss Saunders that kids will make fun of her. Second, Maleeka’s is deeply insecure about herself. Soon after this, Maleeka reveals that she and Miss Saunders are actually very different: Miss Saunders has a skin condition implied to be vitiligo (which causes light on a person’s skin), while Maleeka has very dark skin. Yet, in equating their situations, Maleeka suggests that any difference is immediately targeted by her classmates.

Maleeka also reveals her desperation to fit in and to avoid being bullied—so much so that she resolves to “stay clear of” someone like Miss Saunders. This is because she doesn’t even want to be *associated* with someone who is designated a “freak” by other people. Over time, however, Maleeka will change her perception of Miss Saunders. This is particularly evident when, near the end of the novel, Maleeka says that Miss Saunders makes her feel “safe inside,” while here she implies that Miss Saunders is someone to avoid. Not only does Maleeka grow closer to Miss Saunders throughout the novel, but she recognizes that the best strategy to deal with bullies is not to avoid being different. Rather, she has to embrace her own uniqueness and overcome her insecurities.

“Thank you,” she says, walking off. Then she stops stone still, like some bright idea has just come to her, turns around, and heads back my way. My skin starts to crawl before she even opens her mouth. “Maleeka, your skin is pretty. Like a blue-black sky after it’s rained and rained,” she says. Then she smiles and explains how that line comes from a favorite poem of hers. Next thing I know, she’s heading down the hall again like nothing much happened.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison, Miss Saunders (speaker), John-John McIntyre

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 3


### Explanation and Analysis

When Maleeka meets Miss Saunders for the first time, Miss Saunders notices John-John McIntyre making fun of Maleeka, and so Miss Saunders compliments Maleeka on her skin. In this way, Miss Saunders immediately establishes herself as Maleeka’s ally, even though Maleeka feels like she has to avoid Miss Saunders and the potential ridicule that could come from associating with her. Even though Maleeka’s “skin starts to crawl,” indicating that she’s embarrassed by what Miss Saunders says, Miss Saunders’s words are an important counter to John-John’s teasing. Miss Saunders isn’t yet aware of how much he makes fun of Maleeka’s skin, yet she intuits Maleeka’s insecurity. With this, Flake immediately sets up a dichotomy between the people in Maleeka’s life: bullies who prey on her insecurities, and friends who try to boost her self-esteem.

Miss Saunders’s poem is also notable here, since writing will gradually become a means of self-expression and self-understanding for Maleeka. This connects to a poem that Maleeka references later, when John-John calls her “midnight” as an insult, but she thinks of a poem that describes the beauty of midnight. The difference in these two exchanges is important: here, Miss Saunders uses literature to try and support Maleeka. Later, Maleeka’s interest in literature and self-esteem develops to the point that she is able to call upon the poem to make herself feel more confident.

●● John-John McIntyre is the smallest seventh grader in the world. Even fifth graders can see over his head. Sometimes I have a hard time believing he and me are both thirteen. He's my color, but since second grade *he's* been teasing *me* about being too black. Last year, when I thought things couldn't get no worse, he came up with this here song. Now, here this woman comes talking that black stuff. Stirring him up again.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Miss Saunders, John-John McIntyre

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 3-4

### Explanation and Analysis

After Maleeka and John-John meet Miss Saunders for the first time, John-John sings a song he made up about Maleeka being so Black that he can't see her. John-John's song targets the very thing that Maleeka is most insecure about: her dark skin. Because Maleeka isn't confident in herself, she dwells on her insecurities. Even when someone like Miss Saunders tries to support her, Maleeka focuses on how someone like Miss Saunders would only cause others to tease her more, rather than allowing herself to believe and be empowered by Miss Saunders's words. This is why, just before this, she felt uncomfortable when Miss Saunders's complimented her skin: even trying to tell Maleeka how pretty she looks is an invitation to others like John-John to mock her. And Maleeka implies here that John-John's teasing has only gotten worse over time—he's constantly thinking up new ways to torment her.


Maleeka also notices an important point about John-John's bullying: that his skin is as dark as hers, and that he is very small for a seventh grader. With this description, Flake implies that John-John's bullying is motivated by his own insecurities about his worth and his Blackness—he bullies Maleeka to avoid being made fun of himself.

●● It's bad enough that I'm the darkest, worst-dressed thing in school. I'm also the tallest, skinniest thing you ever seen. And people like John-John remind me of it every chance they get. They don't say nothing about the fact that I'm a math whiz, and can outdo ninth graders when it comes to figuring numbers. Or that I got a good memory and never forget one single, solitary thing I read. They only see what they see, and they don't seem to like what they see much.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Miss Saunders, Maleeka's Mom, Charlese Jones, John-John

McIntyre

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 2-3

### Explanation and Analysis

After Maleeka meets Miss Saunders and endures John-John's continued ridicule, she gives the reader some background about why she is constantly taunted. The fact that she calls herself "the darkest, worst-dressed thing in school" and the "tallest, skinniest thing" illustrates how much she's internalized the hurtful language that other people hurl at her. It implies that insecurity and bullying work in a cycle: the more people insult Maleeka, the more insecure she is about her looks and her clothing, and the more people pick up on that insecurity and bully her.



Flake also subtly introduces the symbol of Maleeka's clothes here, which represent her desire to be accepted by her peers. When Maleeka's mother sews her clothing, which she views as ugly and poorly made, Maleeka is teased mercilessly. But when Maleeka borrows clothing from a classmate named Charlese, her classmates accept and compliment her. Thus, the source of Maleeka's clothing correlates to how much the other students accept her.

However, the second part of Maleeka's quote indicates her burgeoning self-confidence. She knows that she has a good memory and is good at math. But the fact that people don't recognize these qualities in her, and indeed usually evaluate her on a surface level, makes them almost superfluous for Maleeka. This is why she so often fails to do her homework even though it's easy for her, indicating the toll that bullying can take on talented and intelligent young people. Yet it is exactly these qualities that Miss Saunders and the other teachers will affirm in Maleeka, helping her to appreciate her own intellect and build up her self-esteem.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

●● Charlese, she's crazylike. Next thing I know, she's telling Miss Saunders to mind her own business. She says something about her face. Worm's telling Char to cool it. He's dragging her down the hall with his hand covering her big mouth. The new teacher don't know when to quit. She tells Worm to hold on a minute. Then she says her piece. She's letting Charlese know that she's traveled all over the world, and there's nothing Charlese can say about her face that she ain't heard in at least four different languages.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Worm, Miss Saunders, Charlese Jones

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 7-8

### Explanation and Analysis



When Charlese meets Miss Saunders for the first time, as Miss Saunders tries to break up Charlese and Worm kissing in the hallway, Charlese insults Miss Saunders's face. Miss Saunders has skin condition (there's a white streak running across her face), and Charlese picks this difference out as the feature that Miss Saunders is most likely insecure about. This reinforces the idea that bullies often try to pick on people for their differences and make them feel vulnerable as a result.


Yet Miss Saunders's response to Charlese highlights how overcoming one's insecurities is the best way to prevent bullying. Miss Saunders is clear that nothing Charlese can say will make her feel any less confident. Because she isn't insecure about her face, she can't be bullied for that insecurity. Miss Saunders even turns the tables on Charlese: by explaining that she's traveled all over the world, she highlights her own wisdom and experience to counter Charlese's childishness and unnecessary cruelty. Even though Maleeka worries that Miss Saunders is going after Charlese too harshly, Miss Saunders is modeling how to stand up to bullies for students like Maleeka.

### Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ Char says the dress would look perfect if I had some hips and boobs to go with it. Char blows a fat ring of stinking gray smoke in my face. I laugh, like everybody else. You got to go along with Char if you want to get along with her. You can't be all sensitive. That's what Char says.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Maleeka's Mom, Raina, Raise, Charlese Jones

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 12

### Explanation and Analysis

Every morning, Maleeka, Charlese, Raise, and Raina meet in the girls' bathroom before school, and Charlese gives Maleeka nice clothing to wear in place of the clothing

Maleeka's mom sews her. While this might indicate friendship between the two girls, this becomes one of the more fraught aspects of their relationship. In theory, Charlese's help is meant to stop their classmates from bullying Maleeka, since Maleeka's clothes are one of the things other students target the most. In fact, getting the clothes from Charlese symbolizes Maleeka's acceptance among her peers. Yet, to make sure that Maleeka isn't overconfident in her new clothing, Charlese also criticizes Maleeka's body. The fact that Charlese feels the need to insult Maleeka exposes Charlese's own insecurity about how she looks: she bullies others in order to make herself feel better.

Maleeka recognizes Charlese's problematic behavior, yet she still takes this abuse because she is afraid of being bullied even more if she were to stop being friends with Charlese. Her assessment that she can't be sensitive because Charlese says so indicates Charlese's desperation to control those around her, to the point that she even gets Maleeka to accept terrible treatment. While Maleeka thinks that this is what friendship is about, over time she discovers that true friendship is really about support. She gradually realizes the irony that's evident in this passage: that Charlese is meant to protect her from bullies, yet Charlese is the biggest bully of them all.

### Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ "Liking myself didn't come overnight," she says. "I took a lot of wrong turns to find out who I really was. You will, too." Everybody starts talking at once, asking her questions. Miss Saunders answers 'em all. Some kids even go up to her face and stare and point. She lets them do it too, like she's proud of her face or something.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison, Miss Saunders (speaker), Charlese Jones

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

After Miss Saunders asks her English class to write a response to the prompt "What does your face say to the world?" Maleeka says that she thinks Miss Saunders's face marks her as a freak, because Miss Saunders has a skin condition that's left a white streak on her face. This mean comment shows that even Maleeka can be a bully if given the opportunity, because she's insecure about her own looks. Knowing that she is made fun of for her own

differences, Maleeka also sees other people's differences as targets. Maleeka clearly believes that Miss Saunders shouldn't be proud of her face, as her tone suggests when she thinks, "like she's proud of her face or something." This criticism demonstrates how much Maleeka has been influenced by the bullies around her and picked up on that behavior.

However, Miss Saunders refuses to take this bullying and is actually proud of her face. This incident mirrors her exchange with Charlese in Chapter 2: even as Charlese tried to make Miss Saunders feel bad about her face, Miss Saunders held her ground. Here, she reinforces that, because she learned to love and accept herself, she can no longer be bullied—she can't be made fun of for her insecurity, because she already overcame it. Miss Saunders explains that the kids will ultimately recognize and accept themselves too, foreshadowing how Miss Saunders's encouragement and self-esteem makes her a good role model for Maleeka. Like Miss Saunders, Maleeka eventually learns to accept herself and be confident.

realizes that she doesn't need others' approval—and that the most important opinion on her looks is her own.

The fact that Maleeka's clothes make such a difference to her experience at school also sheds light on the dynamic between Maleeka and her mother, which are explored more fully later. Maleeka is so afraid to tell her mother that she doesn't like the clothing she sews, that Maleeka simply accepts the bullying from her peers. This demonstrates how Maleeka often takes on a parental role in her household, meaning that her mother doesn't always act as a good role model.


This quote also sheds more light on Charlese's motivations. Charlese's comment suggests that she's jealous of Maleeka's happiness and confidence on this day, which consequently implies that Charlese isn't happy and confident herself. It also reinforces how controlling she is: Maleeka was able to achieve this confidence without Charlese's help, implying that Maleeka may not need Charlese in order to be accepted at school. This reinforces the idea that Charlese's bullying stems from her own insecurities and her need to feel superior to other people.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☛☛ At school, everybody's staring at me. Even John-John's doing a double-take. When I walk into class, all eyes is on me. Char's the only one that's got something negative to say. "So your momma finally broke down and bought you some clothes. About time," she says, as soon as we get to Miss Saunders's class.

**Related Characters:** Charlese Jones, Maleeka Madison (speaker), Maleeka's Mom, Miss Saunders, John-John McIntyre

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 22

### Explanation and Analysis

One day, when Maleeka's mom gets a bonus at work, she buys Maleeka some new clothing, and Maleeka is thrilled to show off the clothes at school the next day. That Maleeka is so confident in her new clothes, and that most of her classmates don't have anything negative to say, suggests that clothes play an important role in Maleeka's acceptance at school—and thus in her self-esteem. This contrasts with Maleeka's experience later, when she gets a haircut and she

☛☛ Day in and day out Kinjari eyes me, staring like he sees the sun rising in my eyes. I want to ask him why he looks at me that way. Am I something so beautiful he can't help but stare? I keep quiet. Beauty is where one finds it, my father used to say. [...]

I was sick, bad, for a long while. When I woke up, Kinjari was gone. Dead. "He had the mark. The pocks," the girl chained to me said, sucking her front teeth like they was soup bones. "The slavers tossed him over the side," she said.

But this one, she steals my food. Can I trust her with the truth? I don't know.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison, Akeelma (speaker), Miss Saunders, Charlese Jones, Caleb Assam, Maleeka's Dad, Kinjari

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

When Miss Saunders gives her class an assignment to write from the perspective of a teenager in the 17th century, Maleeka writes about a girl who's on a slave ship bound for the U.S. Maleeka signs the letter "Akeelma," explaining that it's close to her own name backwards—but even before this signature, there are many parallels between Maleeka and

Akeelma. In this way, Akeelma's letters are a way for Maleeka to understand herself better.

First, Akeelma and Kinjari's relationship echoes Maleeka and Caleb's. Despite Maleeka's insecurities, Caleb tells Maleeka that she's pretty and that he likes her. And in the letter, Kinjari stares at Akeelma, seemingly because he has a crush on her. Yet, at this point, Akeelma keeps quiet about this. Likewise, Maleeka doesn't have the confidence to pursue a relationship because of her fears of being bullied, and because Caleb once rejected her to sit with his friends on the school bus.

Additionally, Akeelma's father's comments about beauty foreshadow the impact that Maleeka's dad's words will have on her. He once wrote a poem calling Maleeka "brown" and "beautiful," and he told her that she has to see herself with her own eyes to know who she is. Both of these sentiments make Maleeka feel more confident about herself. This parallels the impact that Akeelma's father has on her self-confidence, even though he isn't there with her on the ship.

Lastly, the other girl referenced in Akeelma's letter is directly connected to Charlese. The descriptions of her particularly lend themselves to the dynamic between Charlese and Maleeka: the fact that Akeelma is "chained" to the girl reflects Maleeka's feeling that she can't escape Charlese. And the girl's theft of Akeelma's food indicates the same kind of desperation and vindictiveness that Charlese has. The girl also lies about Kinjari, just as Charlese tries to undermine Maleeka's relationship with Caleb out of jealousy. All of these different connections to Maleeka's life illustrate how she uses the writing to understand her own life and relationships—something that she will continue to do as she writes more.

## Chapter 8 Quotes



☝☝ I didn't plan it that way. I just froze, I guess. The school is so big. So clean. So fancy. And them girls...they looked like they come out of a magazine. Long, straight hair. Skin the color of potato chips and cashews and Mary Jane candies. No Almond Joy-colored girls like me. No gum-smacking, wisecracking girls from my side of town.

That didn't bother Sweets none. She says she deserves to be in that school as much as anyone.

"You got the right color skin," I said, poking her fat tan face.

"It's not about color," she said. "It's how you feel about who you are that counts."

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Caleb Assam, Charlese Jones, Sweets

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 39-40

## Explanation and Analysis

When Maleeka is hanging out with her friend Sweets, she recalls failing an interview to attend the school for high-achieving students that Sweets attends. This episode illustrates the severe toll that racism and bullying have on Maleeka. Because she is constantly mocked for her dark skin, poverty, and homemade clothing, she feels immediately out of place at a school made up of mostly wealthy white students; thus, she freezes during her interview. By contrast, Sweets, who has lighter skin and didn't face the same discrimination from her peers, has more confidence, and she's consequently able to get into the school.

In this way, Flake demonstrates that being bullied can have a massive effect on a young person's life. While Sweets is able to get a better education and now studies most of the time, Maleeka remains at McClenton, rarely does her homework, and continually gets into trouble because of Charlese. Maleeka's classmates' bullying undermines her self-confidence, which has huge ripple effects on other aspects of Maleeka's life.

Maleeka's comparison of her skin to an Almond Joy also foreshadows Caleb's poem at the end of the book, in which he asks Maleeka to be his "Almond Joy." Here, Maleeka views her skin color as a negative—something out of place in a school filled with girls who are the color of "Mary Jane" (a beige candy). But later, Caleb helps Maleeka to see the beauty in her dark skin and to take pride in who she is and what she looks like.


## Chapter 9 Quotes


☝☝ I jump off the sink and lean close to the mirror on the wall, and think of Daddy. "Maleeka," he used to say, "you got to see yourself with your own eyes. That's the only way you gonna know who you really are."

I reach down into my bag and pull out the little hand mirror Daddy gave me and look at myself real good. My nose is running. I blow it and throw the tissue away. I splash some water on my face and pat it dry. I reach deep down into my pocketbook and pull out the little jar of Vaseline and shine up my lips. Then I ball up my cap, stuff it in my backpack, and walk right on out of there.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka's Dad, Maleeka Madison

(speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 47-48

### Explanation and Analysis

When Maleeka shows up to school with a new haircut, her classmates bully her to the point that she puts on a baseball cap and goes to cry in the bathroom. Yet, as she looks at herself in the mirror, her thoughts mark a turning point in her confidence and her understanding of herself. First, it demonstrates the value that Maleeka finds in supportive adults like her father, who passed away three years prior to the events of the book. The hand mirror he gave her represents the difference between how Maleeka's classmates see her (as symbolized by the school bathroom mirror) and how she sees herself. The hand mirror symbolizes the idea that the only person whose approval Maleeka truly needs is her own—it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks, as long as she's happy with what she sees in the mirror. This idea is reinforced by father's reminder to "see [her]self with [her] own eyes," underscoring how self-esteem can only come from within.

The impact that these words have on Maleeka is clear: in putting on the lip gloss and throwing away the baseball cap, she is making symbolic gestures to regain the confidence she had in the hair salon, when she knew her hairstyle looked good. Furthermore, walking "right on out of there" implies that Maleeka has gained a kind of no-nonsense, self-assured attitude. Maleeka is setting aside the sadness she experienced in the bathroom and picking herself up, demonstrating that if she simply has confidence in herself, no one can make her feel less beautiful or less worthy.

## Chapter 12 Quotes



☝☝ "New clothes, huh?" he says, trying to be smart.


I stop walking and turn to him and ask real smart like, "Why you always picking on me?" I ain't sure what's come over me. I guess thinking about Akeelma makes me wonder why people treat others like they're nothing.

"Chill, Maleeka," John-John says, strutting down the hall alongside me. He gets quiet, and I hear his big sneakers squeaking every time they hit the floor.

**Related Characters:** Charlese Jones, Maleeka Madison,

John-John McIntyre (speaker), Akeelma, Maleeka's Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 61

### Explanation and Analysis

One day, when Charlese refuses to bring Maleeka nice clothes, and Maleeka is instead forced to wear the clothes her mother sewed, John-John picks on her for them. John-John's teasing is nothing out of the ordinary, and it reinforces the connection between Maleeka's clothes and her acceptance at the school. Yet Maleeka's reaction to John-John's bullying is unusual, and it represents another turning point in her confidence and her journey. Here, Maleeka recognizes the clear source of this newfound self-assuredness: the stories that she's writing about Akeelma. Not only do the stories enable Maleeka to better understand her life, but they are now actively empowering her to *change* her life, and to be more confident about doing so.

Maleeka's newfound confidence actually proves effective in shutting down John-John's bullying, which suggests that overcoming one's insecurities is the best way to prevent bullying. John-John "gets quiet" when Maleeka confronts him, unsure of what to do now that she has the confidence to stand up to him. Whereas previously, Maleeka might have simply accepted his comments, now she's standing up to him and finding that she has the power to stop him from being nasty to her.

☝☝ He says something stupid-crazy. Says it was back in second grade when I first moved to the Heights. I walked into class that first day with my new pink polka-dotted dress on and black patent leather shoes. The teacher told me to sit in the desk next to his. I said I didn't want to. I wanted to sit in the one up front, next to Caleb.

"That half-white punk," John-John says, knowing full well Caleb ain't mixed.

Now my mouth's hanging open. "I didn't even know Caleb back then," I say. "I wanted to sit up front, 'cause I couldn't see the board," I explain. [...]

"No matter," he says. "You given me plenty of reasons not to like you since then. Thinking you super-smart. Acting like you too good for me."

**Related Characters:** Caleb Assam, Maleeka Madison, John-

John McIntyre (speaker), Charlese Jones

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 62

### Explanation and Analysis

When Maleeka confronts John-John about why he constantly picks on her, John-John explains that Maleeka always acted like she was better than him, citing an episode from her first day of school in second grade. John-John often targets Maleeka for the things she is insecure about, but this passage reveals that John-John's bullying stems from his own insecurity. As Maleeka has noticed previously, John-John often taunts her about her very dark skin; however, his skin is just as dark as hers. Here, John-John reveals his vulnerability and perhaps even his jealousy, believing that Caleb might have been more attractive to Maleeka because of his lighter skin.

As such, John-John's bullying is motivated by these worries about his worth and his Blackness; Maleeka made him feel undesirable, and John-John still wants to get retribution for that. In addition, his comments suggest that his bullying comes from trying to ruin Maleeka's confidence, because he feels that she is too cocky about her intelligence. John-John's attempts reveal that he, much like Charlese is trying to shake Maleeka's confidence and happiness because he isn't confident or happy himself.



## Chapter 13 Quotes


☝☝ The class gets so quiet, it's scary. "I was ten years old and brushing her teeth, feeding her oatmeal like a baby. She cried all the time. Last year, she finally came to. Got up one day, went and bought a sewing machine, and started making clothes. Ain't never sewed nothing before. Just started, day and night, sewing."

Some kids at the back of the room start to snicker and make smart remarks. Shut up, I'm thinking. Just shut up.

"The more she sewed them clothes, the better she got. She started picking up after herself. Got a job and all. No, ain't nothing good come from loving somebody so much you can't live without 'em," I say. "No good at all."

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Maleeka's Dad, Maleeka's Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 70

### Explanation and Analysis



During an English class discussion of *Romeo and Juliet*, Maleeka shares her opinion that she doesn't think it's good to love someone to the point that you can't live without them. As she recalls her mother's reaction to her father's death, she illustrates some of her mother's shortcomings as a role model. Her description of having to feed her mother and brush her teeth for her demonstrates how their dynamic completely flipped in the wake of Maleeka's dad's death. With Maleeka performing the role of a parent, her mother clearly couldn't be a proper a role model for her. Maleeka understands how her mother's behavior was problematic, noting that "no good at all" came from how her mother handled her grief.

While Maleeka primarily thinks about this issue in the past, she also hints at how her mother's actions continue to affect Maleeka in the present. Maleeka still takes on a maternal role with her mother. Previously, she expressed that she doesn't know what might happen if her mother gave up her hobby of sewing, which is why Maleeka continues to wear the clothes her mother makes even though she gets bullied for them. This anecdote reveals why: in wearing her mother's clothing, Maleeka is sacrificing her own happiness and even her well-being at school for her mother's well-being. This quote even reinforces that idea, as kids snicker in the background when Maleeka talks about her mother's sewing. In this way, Maleeka has been forced to make sacrifices for her mother—when, arguably, it should be the other way around. And, in this way, Maleeka's mother isn't an ideal role model for Maleeka.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ Mostly I'm thinking and writing in my diary—our diary, Akeelma's and mine. Lately it's hard to know where Akeelma's thoughts begin and mine end. I mean, I might be starting off with her talking about how scared she is with the smallpox spreading around the ship and killing people. Then I end up the same paragraph with Akeelma saying she's scared that maybe people will always think she's ugly. But I'm really talking about myself. I'm scared people will always think I'm ugly.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Caleb Assam, Kinjari, Akeelma

**Related Themes:**  



**Page Number:** 91

### Explanation and Analysis

As Maleeka continues to write in her diary alongside her writing assignment for Miss Saunders, she becomes more aware of the connections between her life and Akeelma's life. In the first few letters Maleeka wrote from Akeelma's perspective, parallels between the characters became clear, with Akeelma becoming a stand-in for Maleeka and Kinjari becoming a stand-in for Caleb. But this quote represents a turning point for Maleeka, in that she is more conscious of how she's using her writing as a way to work through her feelings, confront her fears, and make sense of the world around her.

In this specific letter, Maleeka ties herself and Akeelma together because of their mutual insecurities about their appearances. Even though Maleeka's insecurity has been evident from the beginning of the novel, this is the first time she truly acknowledges it as a fear rather than a fact. Up until now, she's simply accepted that others believe she's ugly. But here, Akeelma's story helps Maleeka recognize that she may only be *afraid* of what other people think—she doesn't actually believe that she's ugly. Whereas before, Maleeka relied on other people's perspective to assess herself, now she is starting to see that she may have a different view. This subtle change is key, as Maleeka's writing later enables her to see herself as beautiful, to care less about what others think, and to overcome her bullies.

☝ I showed this last part to Miss Saunders. She said this is powerful stuff. "Writing is clearly one of your gifts, Maleeka," she said. I know it sounds stupid, but when I was leaving Miss Saunders's classroom, I hugged them papers to my chest like they was some boy I've been wanting to press up against for weeks. It feels good doing something not everybody can do.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Caleb Assam, Akeelma, Miss Saunders

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

While Maleeka continues to write Akeelma's story, she periodically shows her work to Miss Saunders. Maleeka's reaction to Miss Saunders's praise demonstrates both how important Miss Saunders influence is on Maleeka, and how

empowering Maleeka's writing has become. Only because of Miss Saunders did Maleeka begin and continue the writing assignment. Miss Saunders recognized her talent, and in encouraging Maleeka to develop it, Maleeka has grown more confident in her writing and in herself overall. Miss Saunders's words clearly fill Maleeka with a pride that she wouldn't have had without Miss Saunders's affirmation.

Maleeka's metaphor also illustrates how her writing gives her more confidence. In hugging the papers to herself as if they were "some boy," she connects the papers to Caleb. Just as Caleb helps foster her self-esteem by telling her that she's pretty, Maleeka's writing helps affirm how brilliant she is. In this way, Maleeka's writing and the character of Akeelma help empower Maleeka—and recognizing that she can do something that "not everybody can do" boosts Maleeka's self-esteem as well.

## Chapter 22 Quotes

☝ The words is written out real neat and straight and strong.

Brown  
Beautiful  
Brilliant  
My my Maleeka  
is  
Brown  
Beautiful  
Brilliant  
Mine

Momma is calling me. I can't answer. My mouth is full of Daddy's words, and my head is remembering him again. Tall, dark, and smiling all the time. Then gone when his cab crashed into that big old bread truck. Gone away from me for good, till now.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Maleeka's Mom, Maleeka's Dad

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 118

### Explanation and Analysis

When Maleeka shows her mom the writing she did for the library contest, her mother directs her to an old poem that her Maleeka's dad wrote for Maleeka before he died. The short poem is so valuable to Maleeka because it counters many of the messages she hears from her classmates. While many of them mock her for her dark skin, here her father associates her brown skin with both beauty and brilliance.



The poem's simplicity, coupled with the fact that it's written on a brown paper bag in "neat and straight and strong" handwriting, gives it a kind of common, unremarkable source—and yet its plainness is exactly what makes it so moving to Maleeka. As she notes here, receiving new words from her father after his death is revolutionary, and the words are so valuable to Maleeka that she decides to frame the poem so that her father's words can buoy her every day. This also highlights the value of positive role models in children's lives. Maleeka notes that her father's skin was as dark as hers, and that she never minded it until kids started making fun of her. To have a role model in her life who looked like her and was confident in himself would have been incredibly valuable for Maleeka, and this is why his words are such a buoy to her confidence.

## Chapter 24 Quotes

☞ At midnight, if you have eyes to see  
There's beauty and there's majesty.

Char don't understand what's going on with me. She looks at me and calls me stupid, the way I'm smiling to myself.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison (speaker), Charlese Jones, John-John McIntyre

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 127

### Explanation and Analysis

When John-John calls Maleeka "midnight" as an insult for her dark skin, Maleeka recalls a poem that describes how beautiful midnight is. This illustrates how much Maleeka has grown over the course of the book: early on in the novel, Maleeka would simply accept the insults her classmates hurled at her, and their words would often make her feel insecure about herself. Now, Maleeka no longer takes the bullying at face value. Instead, she has the ability to view the word in a way that boosts her self-esteem rather than detracting from it. In fact, it gives her so much buoyancy that Charlese even feels the need to comment on her good mood and try and take her down a peg, as Charlese's bullying is often prompted by jealousy over other peoples' happiness and confidence.

This poem adds another dimension to the empowering nature of writing. In an indirect way, Maleeka's new interest in writing is what brings her to read the poem that she cites here at the library, because she was already there to submit



her work to the competition. And, just like Maleeka's own writing, this poem—the last two lines of which she cites here—helps Maleeka understand herself and her dark skin in a more positive light.

☞ "Listen up, Maleeka," Caleb says, grabbing hold of my arm, and whispering in my ear. "Your girl Char is whacked. You better stay clear of her before she ends up taking you down with her."

"Char and me are friends," I say quietly.

"Yeah, right," Caleb says, shaking his head. "Char's the kind of friend that will get you locked up or shot up," he says, walking away.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison, Caleb Assam (speaker), Miss Saunders, Charlese Jones

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 129

### Explanation and Analysis

As Charlese plans to get back at Miss Saunders for giving her bad grades, Caleb cautions Maleeka not to get involved in Charlese's trouble. Caleb's advice draws a clear contrast between himself and Charlese. In his warning that Maleeka will be "locked up or shot up" if she remains friends with Charlese, he illustrates how Charlese's violent behavior can only spell trouble for Maleeka in the long term. Like Miss Saunders, who tries to separate Maleeka and Charlese because she recognizes that Charlese is a bad influence on Maleeka, Caleb not only supports Maleeka but also encourages her to rid herself of the toxic friendships in her life.

Additionally, Charlese and Caleb's behavior is another contrast between them. While Charlese is planning to trash Miss Saunders's room and forcing Maleeka to take part, in this passage, Caleb invites Maleeka to a get-together with his friends so they can brainstorm different ways to improve their school. Thus, the difference between them lies not only in how they support and treat Maleeka but also how they act in general. Meanwhile, Maleeka's reaction encapsulates her mindset in this moment: while internally she wants to go with Caleb and recognizes the truth in what he's saying, she still has residual insecurity. She worries about what might happen if she decides not to be friends with Charlese.

## Chapter 25 Quotes



☝☝ “This ain’t right,” I whisper.


Char grabs hold of my hand, and says, “Do it, or I ain’t never gonna bring you no clothes.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“You protecting Miss Saunders?” Char wants to know. “You protecting that hussy? Why? She don’t like you, neither. All the time making a fool out of you in class. You stupid girl. Do like I say or I’ll do something to mess you up.”

**Related Characters:** Charlese Jones, Maleeka Madison (speaker), JuJu, Raina, Raise, Miss Saunders

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 135

**Explanation and Analysis**

When Charlese, Raise, and Raina are vandalizing Miss Saunders’s classroom, Maleeka starts to protest. This exchange is another marker of Maleeka’s personal growth over the course of the novel. Whereas before, she would never have spoken up, now she is more attuned to injustice and wants to stand up to Charlese’s cruelty. Even though Maleeka’s “whisper” indicates that she is still hesitant about confronting the biggest bully in her life, she is still able to find her voice. Additionally, the fact that she refuses Charlese’s offer of clothes is another indication of Maleeka’s growth, because clothes have thus far symbolized Maleeka’s acceptance by the other students. Without Charlese’s clothes, she is doomed to be teased and bullied, and yet she still stands up for Miss Saunders. It’s not that Maleeka doesn’t want Charlese’s clothes—but her ability to refuse them on moral grounds demonstrates that she has become more confident in herself.

Additionally, Charlese’s comments about Miss Saunders showcase her cruel treatment of Maleeka, as she continues to use violence and manipulation to control what Maleeka does. In offering Maleeka the clothes, Charlese first tries to take advantage of Maleeka’s insecurity. But when that fails, she tries instead to threaten Maleeka, just as her older sister JuJu threatens others. On the other hand, Charlese’s arguments for why Miss Saunders doesn’t support Maleeka ring hollow, particularly because they are accompanied by Charlese’s cruel insults like “you stupid girl.” Miss Saunders has proven her loyalty to Maleeka, whereas Charlese’s attempts to support Maleeka as a “friend” are just another form of bullying.

## Chapter 31 Quotes

☝☝ “All I done for you,” Char says. “You gonna leave me out to dry like this. Wait till later, you ugly, stupid black thing.”

*Call me by my name!* I hear Akeelma say, and I scream it out, too. “Call me by my name! I am not ugly. I am not stupid. I am Maleeka Madison, and, yeah, I’m black, real black, and if you don’t like me, too bad ‘cause black is the skin I’m in!”

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison, Charlese Jones (speaker), Maleeka’s Dad, Caleb Assam, Miss Saunders, Akeelma

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 157-158

**Explanation and Analysis**



When Miss Saunders meets with Charlese and Maleeka to find out the truth about who vandalized her classroom, Charlese continues to bully and insult Maleeka. However, this is the breaking point for Maleeka: all of the events of the book culminate to give her enough confidence to fight back against Charlese, and to confess that Charlese forced her to mess up Miss Saunders’s room. All of the major themes of the novel recur here: first, the influence that the character of Akeelma has on Maleeka demonstrates the immense power that her writing has given her. After writing about the life of a strong-willed 13-year-old slave girl for months, Maleeka is able to draw on the strength of her character and feel empowered about her own life.

Throughout the book, Charlese has used Maleeka’s insecurities to manipulate and denigrate her, and this exchange illustrates her continued attempts to do so as she calls Maleeka an “ugly, stupid black thing.” However, thanks to Miss Saunders’s and Caleb’s support; her dad’s words; and Maleeka’s newfound confidence in herself, Maleeka is finally able to stand up to Charlese’s bullying. As she says, she has learned to love the “skin [she’s] in” and affirm her worth in front of Charlese. This is the main moral of the story: that the best way to stop bullying is to overcome one’s insecurities. Fittingly, the novel’s climax shows Maleeka doing just that.

☝☝ Charlese gives me a hard look.

She pushes past Miss Saunders and me and makes her way to the door. “Look at you two—two ugly-faced losers,” she says. Miss Saunders don’t even stop Char. She lets her go. Then Miss Saunders hugs me to her, and I feel safe inside.

**Related Characters:** Charlese Jones, Maleeka Madison (speaker), Miss Saunders

**Related Themes:**  


**Page Number:** 159


### Explanation and Analysis

After Maleeka reveals that Charlese forced her to trash Miss Saunders's room, Charlese hurls a final insult at the two of them. Coupling Maleeka and Miss Saunders in this manner reinforces how much influence Miss Saunders has had on Maleeka over the school year. When Miss Saunders first arrived, she refused to be bullied by Charlese and ignored the insults that Charlese made about her face, making it clear that she loved herself. And in this moment, Maleeka does the same thing by affirming her self-esteem. Even though Charlese calls her ugly, Maleeka now recognizes that this isn't true—and that, if she doesn't let Charlese make her feel inferior, Charlese has no power over her.

In addition to setting a good example for Maleeka, Miss Saunders also provides crucial support. While initially, Maleeka was skeptical of Miss Saunders and thought that she should steer clear of her to avoid comparisons between them, here Maleeka recognizes Miss Saunders's positive influence. After feeling so afraid of what Charlese might do to her if she were to reveal Charlese's involvement in vandalizing Miss Saunders's classroom, Maleeka now feels "safe inside" with Miss Saunders's support. This emphasizes that positive adult role models have the power to make children feel secure, confident, and comforted—and this dynamic is what allows Maleeka to bravely stand up to Charlese.

**Related Characters:** Maleeka Madison, Caleb Assam (speaker), Maleeka's Dad

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 161-162

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, Caleb writes a poem for Maleeka in which he calls her his "sweet dark chocolate candy girl." The poem, and Maleeka's response to it, demonstrate the value of supportive relationships. Caleb's descriptions of Maleeka as an Almond Joy hearken back to Maleeka's own description of the girls at Central Middle School, the nicer school across town. She commented that there were "no Almond Joy-colored girls" like her, clearly viewing this description as negative. Maleeka's dark skin was something she was insecure about, something that marked her as not belonging. Here, however, Caleb frames Almond Joys and other dark candies—metaphors for Maleeka's dark skin—as desirable.

Caleb's framing helps Maleeka realize that her skin is a positive aspect of herself rather than a negative one. And, importantly, Maleeka no longer needs the hand mirror that her father gave her in order to see herself in a positive way; she can now see herself positively in any mirror. The mirror reminds her that confidence comes from herself, but Caleb is also helping to foster that confidence. Furthermore, Caleb's poem ties back to the poem Maleeka's father wrote for her before he died, which also helped foster Maleeka's confidence. Maleeka even wants to hang Caleb's poem next to her father's, which demonstrates how much she values his support.

## Chapter 32 Quotes

●● Would you be my Almond Joy  
My chocolate chip, my Hershey Kiss  
My sweet dark chocolate butter crisp?

Caleb's poem makes me cry. It is so sweet. I look at my face in the mirror and smile. I promise myself to hang Caleb's poem on the wall with Daddy's and the one from the library.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

The first time Maleeka sees Miss Saunders, she knows that the woman is “a freak like [her],” and that Miss Saunders will be teased relentlessly. Her first name is a man’s name, Michael, she’s tall and fat, and there’s a white stain spread across her face. Maleeka has spent a lot of time trying to fit in at McClenton Middle School, and she knows to stay clear of anyone else who will be immediately marked as different.

On Miss Saunders’s first day, she asks Maleeka where the principal’s office is. She’s wearing expensive **clothing**, and Maleeka tries not to look at her face. Maleeka tells her where the office is, and when Miss Saunders asks Maleeka’s name, a boy named John-John McIntyre says that Maleeka isn’t worth knowing. Miss Saunders stares John-John down and tells Maleeka that her skin is pretty, like a “blue-black sky after it’s rained and rained,” which she says comes from a favorite poem of hers.

When Miss Saunders walks away, John-John turns to Maleeka and says he doesn’t see her as pretty—he just sees her Blackness. John-John starts singing a song about how he can’t see Maleeka because she’s so dark. Maleeka notes internally that John-John is really short and is as dark as she is, but since second grade he’s been teasing her about being too Black. He sings the song constantly.

Maleeka explains that she’s been teased all her life: for being too Black, for being too tall and skinny, and for her ill-fitting **clothes**, which her mom makes by hand. She often borrows nicer clothes from one of her classmates, Charlese. But one day, the week prior, Maleeka was strutting down the hall and feeling really good in one of Charlese’s dresses when Charlese yelled at her to take off the clothes, and so Maleeka did. After that, Maleeka made up her mind not to let people treat her badly. But she knows that saying so is one thing, and making it happen is another. She hopes that Miss Saunders doesn’t make her situation worse.

*This opening passage establishes several key dynamics at Maleeka’s school. First, Maleeka illustrates that students will make fun of anything they see as different, as she points out the many attributes for which Miss Saunders will be teased, including a skin condition that is implied to be vitiligo. And even though Maleeka doesn’t yet explain exactly what makes Maleeka a “freak,” students have clearly bullied her for her own differences as well.*



*In Miss Saunders’s first exchange with Maleeka, she immediately recognizes that Maleeka is a target of ridicule from students like John-John. Even without fully understanding that Maleeka is insecure about her dark skin color, Miss Saunders tries to boost Maleeka’s self-esteem and counter the bullies in her life.*



*Being teased for her skin color makes Maleeka feel insecure about being too dark-skinned—John-John even implies that being Black and being pretty are mutually exclusive. John-John’s song about not being able to see her only makes Maleeka feel even worse about her skin color. Yet, in noting that John-John has the same skin color as she does and that he is very short, Maleeka hints at the idea that John-John bullies her because of his own insecurities, so that she’ll be teased instead of him.*



*Maleeka describes her many insecurities: aside from her skin color, she is also anxious about her body and her clothes. Clothes, in particular, represent Maleeka’s desire to be accepted by her peers. Like John-John, Charlese bullies Maleeka because of her own insecurities. When Maleeka looks good and feels confident in her dresses, Charlese makes her take off the clothes in order to make herself feel better by comparison. And even though Maleeka knows that she shouldn’t let Charlese mistreat her and that friends shouldn’t tear each other down, she struggles to stand up for herself—a problem that will recur throughout the novel.*



## CHAPTER 2

Maleeka doesn't want to go to fifth period because she has to sit next to John-John, and all he'll do is sing the song about her under his breath. When Maleeka goes to her locker to retrieve her coat, she sees Miss Saunders coming down the hall. Miss Saunders tells Charlese and the boy she's kissing, Worm, to get to class. Charlese laughs at her and rolls her eyes, but Miss Saunders says that she's the new English teacher and that Charlese can either get to class or go to the office. Charlese retorts that she's not going to look at Miss Saunders's face for a whole class period.

When Miss Saunders again tells Charlese to get to class, Maleeka grows nervous because Charlese won't appreciate Miss Saunders talking back to her. Miss Saunders says that she's traveled all over the world, and there's nothing Charlese can say about her face that she hasn't already heard. Charlese then asks why Miss Saunders at McClenton, and Miss Saunders explains that she wants to give back to the school. Charlese says that, if that's the case, Miss Saunders can give up her designer shoes and watch. Charlese's older sister JuJu has been taking care of Charlese since their parents died two years earlier, and JuJu sells designer clothes at a big discount, so Charlese can recognize expensive clothing.

Worm tells Charlese that they should get out of there, but Charlese stands her ground. Then Tai, the math teacher, interrupts, greeting Miss Saunders—they're old college roommates. Tai tells the kids that Miss Saunders really makes things happen. Then, she tells Worm, Charlese, and Maleeka to get to class.

## CHAPTER 3

Maleeka, Charlese, and the twins Raina and Raise meet in the girls' bathroom every morning. They put on makeup and gossip, and Maleeka changes into the **clothes** that Charlese brought for her. That day, Charlese says that Maleeka's skintight navy-blue jean dress would look perfect if Maleeka had hips and boobs to go with it. Maleeka laughs, knowing that she has to accept whatever Charlese says in order to get along with her.

Maleeka didn't always hang out with Charlese—last year, she hung out by herself, went to class, and got As. Only Caleb Assam noticed her—Caleb is the smartest boy in school, and he is very cute and friendly. While most people saw Maleeka as skinny, poor, and Black, Caleb said she was pretty. He walked her to class, wrote her poems, and gave her a ring. But soon, when people started to notice them together, they belittled Maleeka in front of Caleb.

*Here, Maleeka demonstrates the negative impact that the school bullies have on her. John-John harps on her insecurities so relentlessly that she tries to skip class in order to avoid it—something that will become a pattern for Maleeka. Additionally, just as Maleeka predicted, school bullies like Charlese also try to tease Miss Saunders because of her difference, just as they do with Maleeka.*



*Even though Maleeka is nervous about how Charlese might treat Miss Saunders, here Miss Saunders immediately models good behavior. Because Miss Saunders has overcome any insecurity regarding her face, Charlese can't bully her for that insecurity, and Miss Saunders is instead able to stand her ground. Meanwhile, the fact that Charlese's parents died, and that her older sister JuJu takes care of her, also illustrates the need for good role models. Charlese's lack of a stable parental figure is likely part of the reason she behaves badly.*



*Tai's statement that Miss Saunders really "makes things happen" hints at the enormous effort that Miss Saunders will make with her students—particularly with Maleeka—and the positive impact that she will have on those students because of her good role modeling.*



*Even though Maleeka appears to be friends with Charlese and the twins on the surface, Charlese clearly continues to bully her about her insecurities. She tries to make Maleeka feel worse about herself in order to make herself feel better by comparison.*



*The way Caleb treated Maleeka shows how valuable loving and supportive relationships are for young adults. Even though other people started to make fun of Maleeka because of their relationship, Caleb's compliments boosted her self-esteem regardless, sending the message that she's worthy of affection.*



One day, on the bus going to a class trip to Washington, D.C., Caleb sat next to Maleeka. Kids teased them relentlessly. John-John started singing his song about Maleeka, and the whole bus began to sing it even though teachers tried to make them stop. Then, Caleb apologized to Maleeka and moved to the front of the bus with his friends. Everyone laughed, clapped, and gave him high fives. Maleeka was devastated.

After Caleb's betrayal, kids picked on Maleeka more than ever. She didn't want to go to school for a while, but her mom made her go. Then, Maleeka came up with a plan, offering to do Charlese's homework in exchange for Charlese letting Maleeka hang out with her for protection. Charlese gradually agreed, and kids stopped picking on Maleeka. Charlese also started bringing in **clothes** for Maleeka to wear so she didn't embarrass Charlese. But Maleeka thinks that even the clothes don't make up for Charlese's hurtful words.

## CHAPTER 4

Maleeka is late to Miss Saunders's class that morning. Everyone has already started writing in response to a prompt on the board, "What does your face say to the world?" Maleeka writes three sentences before she has to hand her paper in. Miss Saunders asks Maleeka to share what she thinks, but Maleeka stays quiet. John-John says that his face tells the word that people better respect him, but Maleeka thinks that his face is more scared than mean.

Miss Saunders asks what her own face says to the world. Maleeka, annoyed that Miss Saunders has embarrassed her twice already, says that Miss Saunders's face tells the world that she's a freak. Miss Saunders says that she used to see her face that way, but gradually, she grew to love her face and accepted herself. Miss Saunders then explains that her face says she's smart, sexy, confident, caring, and sometimes cold. Miss Saunders's confident attitude excites the students.

Then, Miss Saunders tells the kids more about herself: she works at an advertising agency downtown. A few months ago, her company came up with a program that lets professionals take a leave of absence for a year to teach in inner-city schools—and Miss Saunders always wanted to teach. Miss Saunders then hands out a test, explaining that she wants to figure out what the students do and don't know; they won't be graded for it. When John-John asks why they have to do it if it won't be graded, she replies, "Because I say so."

*In some ways, Maleeka illustrates how a betrayal by someone she considers a friend is even worse than a betrayal by those she considers enemies. Caleb's decision to abandon Maleeka for his friends only leaves Maleeka feeling even more insecure than she was before, because she no longer has his support.*



*Maleeka's exchange with Charlese demonstrates her understanding that friendships should be supportive and mutually beneficial. At the same time, however, she understands that her relationship with Charlese isn't entirely genuine. Even though Charlese gives Maleeka nicer clothes—which helps Maleeka be more accepted by the other students—Charlese still bullies and manipulates Maleeka under the guise of friendship.*



*Maleeka again notes some of John-John's underlying vulnerability. John-John thinks that his face says not to mess with him, which aligns with his pattern of bullying. However, Maleeka recognizes that John-John is actually afraid, and that his bullying stems from his own insecurities about being perceived as small and weak.*



*Miss Saunders again models good behavior for her students. Rather than letting Maleeka's comments get to her, Miss Saunders shows the kids her self-confidence. She doesn't need others to think she's beautiful in order to accept herself, demonstrating that true self-esteem comes from within.*



*Miss Saunders demonstrates how important teaching and improving her students' lives is to her, as she gave up a high-paying job in order to come to McClenton. She also demonstrates that she doesn't just want to take a passive role and automatically give her students good grades; instead, she wants to make sure that they're actually learning and achieving their potential.*



## CHAPTER 5

When Maleeka gets home, her mom takes her downtown to buy new **clothing** because she got a bonus at work. So, the next day, Maleeka is excited to “look like somebody” without Charlese’s help. She’s excited that all eyes are on her. But Charlese rudely says that it’s about time Maleeka’s mom broke down and bought her some new clothes.

That day, in English class, Miss Saunders partners Maleeka and another girl named Desda for a group project instead of letting the students choose their partners. Desda is short and fat and has won awards for her cooking, but she’s a very poor reader and writer. For the assignment, Miss Saunders asks the class to pretend that they’re teenagers living in the 17th century and to write a diary about their experiences. She says that she wants them to understand what it’s like to see the world through someone else’s eyes.

At first, Maleeka and Desda do nothing for 10 minutes. But when Miss Saunders reminds them that they only have 20 minutes left, Maleeka gets to work. She writes about a teenage girl on a slave ship. The girl doesn’t have much to eat, and she’s embarrassed that a boy named Kinjari can see her sitting in her own filth with her head shaved. But when Kinjari stares at the girl, she wonders if she’s beautiful. She writes that “Beauty is where one finds it, my father used to say.” Then, the girl falls ill, and Kinjari is gone when she wakes up. Another girl, who’s been stealing the girl’s food, says that Kinjari was thrown overboard—but the girl doesn’t believe it. Maleeka signs the entry “Akeelma,” which is close to her name backwards.

Desda asks how Maleeka learned to “talk proper” like Akeelma does. Maleeka says that, before her dad died, he read her books with characters that spoke like that. Then, Miss Saunders collects and reads some of the stories to the class. When she reads Maleeka and Desda’s, she compliments them on the writing. After class, Miss Saunders offers to give Maleeka and Desda extra credit to keep doing the assignment. Desda admits that Maleeka did most of the writing, and Maleeka agrees to keep going. She thinks to herself that she actually likes the writing.

*Again, Charlese’s bullying not only targets Maleeka’s insecurity about her clothing but also her own insecurity about being liked. By implying that Maleeka never looks nice, Charlese is trying to lift herself up by comparison. Maleeka’s excitement about her clothes also demonstrates how much freer she feels when she confidence in herself, rather than being beholden to Charlese for her clothing.*



*Miss Saunders gives the students this writing assignment to get them to think more empathetically, demonstrating writing’s power as a way of understanding other people, and the world around them, a little better. Additionally, in choosing the kids’ partners rather than letting them pair up, Miss Saunders is perhaps trying to split up Maleeka and Charlese, already recognizing how bad of an influence Charlese is on Maleeka.*



*Maleeka’s writing assignment has many parallels to her own life. Like Akeelma—whose name implies that she is a stand-in for Maleeka—Maleeka is concerned about being ugly and unlikeable. Kinjari mirrors Caleb, as he finds Akeelma beautiful regardless of how she views herself or how others view her. The girl who steals food likely represents Charlese. And even Akeelma’s reference to her father’s advice foreshadows Maleeka’s dad’s advice later in the book. Thus, the writing assignment not only becomes a creative outlet for Maleeka but also a way of understanding herself and those around her better.*



*Here, Miss Saunders begins to play an important role as a guardian in Maleeka’s life. She recognizes and encourages Maleeka’s talent for writing in hopes of helping Maleeka live up to her full academic potential. And the fact that Maleeka chooses to continue the assignment illustrates how it’s a vital tool for her to understand herself and develop pride in her intellect.*





## CHAPTER 6

A few days later, a girl named Daphne confronts and attacks Maleeka for kissing Daphne's boyfriend, Worm. Maleeka doesn't admit that it was actually Charlese who was kissing Worm. Charlese is also in the hallway, but she doesn't step in as she watches Daphne grab hold of Maleeka's braids and punch her.

When Maleeka starts to fight back, Miss Saunders comes in to break up the fight. However, when Miss Saunders grabs hold of Maleeka, Daphne smacks Maleeka across the face and then shoots snot all over her shirt. Miss Saunders tries to help clean Maleeka up as Mr. Pajolli, the principal, grabs Daphne, but Maleeka furiously backs away. Maleeka tells Mr. Pajolli that Miss Saunders doesn't know what she's doing. Mr. Pajolli has another student escort Maleeka to the nurse's office, while Maleeka wonders when Miss Saunders will leave her alone.

## CHAPTER 7

Maleeka isn't allowed to watch TV, use the phone, or hang out with friends for three weeks because of the fight. Mr. Pajolli, Maleeka's mom, and Miss Saunders also agree that Maleeka should work in the school office. Miss Saunders explains to Maleeka's mother that Maleeka is "wasting her potential," and that keeping her close to the principal's office could help get her back in line. Maleeka's mother is glad that Miss Saunders cares about how Maleeka is doing in school.

During Maleeka's first day working in the school office, she files papers and listens as teachers come in and complain about Miss Saunders without realizing that Maleeka is working behind the desk. They say that Miss Saunders expects things to change at the school with a drop of the hat and is pushing the kids too hard. Mr. Pajolli tells the teachers that there's nothing wrong with a bit of change. When one of them finally spots Maleeka working in the office, he says that they shouldn't reward "bad kids" who misbehave. Mr. Pajolli replies that all of the students are good, but some just need more support than others.

*Again, while Maleeka is theoretically friends with Charlese, here Charlese proves that she has no intention of actually supporting or protecting Maleeka—she only looks out for herself and takes advantage of others.*



*Maleeka's anger at Miss Saunders is ironic, because Miss Saunders was trying to be helpful while Charlese was anything but. Maleeka doesn't yet recognize that the best solution to bullying is to find people who are actively trying to support her (like Miss Saunders) rather than those who allow her to be beaten up on their behalf (like Charlese).*



*Both Miss Saunders and Maleeka's mom want to make sure Maleeka can fulfill her potential. Seeing the bad influence that Charlese has on Maleeka, Miss Saunders recommends the job at the principal's office so that Maleeka can learn responsibility and stay out of the trouble that Charlese often causes.*



*Even though the other teachers criticize Miss Saunders for pushing the kids, Mr. Pajolli shares Miss Saunders's perspective. While the other teachers have given up on "bad kids" like Maleeka, Miss Saunders recognizes that Maleeka has potential and gives her the opportunity to fulfill that. This suggests that recognizing kids' abilities, pushing them to take advantage of their talents, and encouraging them to stay out of trouble are key qualities in a good role model.*



## CHAPTER 8

On Saturday, Maleeka's mom eases Maleeka's restrictions at home, and Maleeka's friend Sweets comes over to her house. Maleeka and Sweets have been best friends since kindergarten, but Sweets goes to the school for high-achieving students across town. Maleeka had the grades to go to that school as well, but when she went to the interview, she froze. The school was big and clean, and most of the girls were white and had long, straight hair. Sweets said that it's not about a person's race, it's about "how you feel about who you are that counts" to get into the school. Now that Sweets is at the new school, she studies most of the time.

When Sweets comes over, she talks to a boy named Larry on the phone. Meanwhile, Maleeka looks in a plastic **mirror** that her dad gave her when she was little. She has her dad's eyes and her mom's lips. She also has the same skin color as her dad, which she didn't used to mind until kids started teasing her about it. Out of the blue, she gets an idea to cut her hair so that people might start to see her differently. When Sweets hangs up, Maleeka tells her about the plan. Sweets says that her cousin Ronnie opened a hair salon recently, and that Ronnie will give Maleeka a haircut if Maleeka works in the shop for three Saturdays.

After Maleeka convinces her mom to let her get her hair cut, she goes to Ronnie's salon. As Ronnie cuts Maleeka's hair, the women in the salon tell Maleeka that to wear a haircut like hers, she needs attitude. They give her clip-on earrings and lip gloss, and they teach her how to strut. When Ronnie is finished, Maleeka likes what she sees. The other women tell Maleeka how good she looks, and she gets up and starts walking around the salon, snapping her fingers and feeling good. She is confident, and Sweets and the other women in the salon encourage her. Maleeka feels like she's a runway model.

## CHAPTER 9

On Monday, students bombard Maleeka, asking her what happened to her hair. By third period, they start to make fun of her for it. By fourth period, she wears a baseball cap she brought from home. Desda tells Maleeka not to let the others get to her, but Maleeka goes to the bathroom and starts crying. She tells herself that someone will always say something negative, no matter how she looks. She knows she looks good, but seeing herself in the bathroom mirror is different from seeing herself at Ronnie's salon.

*Maleeka's experience applying to the other school demonstrates the severe impact that bullying can have on children. Because Maleeka has been told over and over again that her skin is too dark and that she's too poor, she doesn't feel like she belongs at a fancier school populated mostly with white children, despite the fact that her grades indicate she does belong there. Sweets's statement, then, emphasizes the importance of self-esteem.*



*Maleeka didn't mind her dark skin until kids started to tease her about it, which again emphasizes the fact that bullying and insecurity can be a vicious cycle. The more people bully Maleeka for her skin, the more insecure she feels about it, and the more the bullying hurts. The mirror that her father gave her, however, symbolizes Maleeka's acceptance of herself. As her dad told her, Maleeka needs to look at herself through her own eyes, rather than caring about how other people see her.*



*Getting a new haircut is a way for Maleeka to boost her self-esteem. Doing so changes how she sees herself—and hopefully this will change how others see her as well. The other women's reactions also demonstrate how valuable supportive friends and role models are to a person's self-esteem. Because the women in the salon give her accessories, compliment her, and teach her how to walk with confidence, Maleeka feels better about herself than she has thus far in the novel.*



*Looking at herself in the bathroom, Maleeka experiences a turning point. As students continue to bully her over a hairstyle that she felt confident about the previous day, she recognizes that she can't rely on others to affirm her, because kids can always find something negative to say.*



Maleeka thinks of her dad, who used to say that she had to see herself with her own eyes. Maleeka pulls out the plastic **mirror** her father gave her and looks at herself. She blows her nose, splashes some water on her face, and puts on a little lip gloss. Then, Maleeka stuffs her baseball cap in her bag and walks out of the bathroom.

*Looking at the plastic mirror symbolizes Maleeka's understanding that the only approval she needs is her own. Throwing away the baseball cap reinforces this idea, because Maleeka knows that as long as she has confidence in herself, no one else can make her feel insecure.*



## CHAPTER 10

Maleeka's alarm clock never rings when it's supposed to, and so her mom always has to wake her up to go to school. Maleeka gets dressed, ignoring a new shirt her mom made and putting on a turtleneck that isn't as bad because their neighbor helped her mom make it. Sweets often asks why Maleeka doesn't tell her mom that she doesn't want to wear the clothes, but Maleeka worries what might happen if her mother doesn't keep sewing.

*This chapter highlights some of the difficult dynamics between Maleeka and her mom. Maleeka doesn't fully reveal why she allows her mother to sew her clothes, but she's sacrificing her own happiness at school in order to make her mother happy—a reversal of the typical parent-child dynamic wherein the parent makes sacrifices for the child.*



In the kitchen, Maleeka's mom is reading up on the stock market. She sews Maleeka's clothes so that she can invest the money she saves, but often she just spends it buying lottery tickets or playing the stock market. Maleeka's mom always looks for new ways to make money, though they're still poor. A lot of people think her mom is crazy, but Maleeka knows that her mother is smart and has a big heart. She kisses her mom as she rushes out the door.

*Even though Maleeka and her mom love each other, Maleeka recognizes that her mom doesn't always model good behavior. She buys lottery tickets and tries to play the stocks rather than making sure that Maleeka has what she needs.*



## CHAPTER 11

Maleeka explains that it's a bad idea to make the school lunch ladies angry—but today, Charlese is mouthing off to them. And sure enough, there's lettuce in Charlese's milk, dried food on her fork, and something indistinct on her hamburger bun. Maleeka offers Charlese her bologna sandwich, but Charlese refuses. She tells Maleeka to take her tray back and ask for another plate. When Maleeka hesitates, Charlese threatens to beat her up if she doesn't do it.

*Even though Maleeka hangs out with Charlese for protection and friendship, Charlese is cruel to Maleeka. Thus, Charlese contrasts with people like Desda or Caleb who genuinely want to support Maleeka and be her friend.*



Maleeka picks up Charlese's tray, gets back in line, and tells Miss Brown, one of the lunch ladies, what the problem is. Miss Brown says that she'll take the food back, but not from Maleeka, and Charlese starts yelling from across the room. Maleeka takes the food and tries to scrape off the bun, adding ketchup and mustard to it. When she returns to the table, Charlese tells her to get lost.

*Maleeka continues to take abuse from Charlese because of her own insecurities about being made fun of. She is desperate to be accepted by others, and yet her "friendship" with Charlese leaves her feeling abused as well.*



Maleeka leaves the table and sits next to Desda to eat her bologna sandwich. While she's eating, Caleb comes over and says that he needs to talk to her. When Maleeka gives him the excuse that she and Desda are busy going over homework, Caleb says that he'll talk to her later. Before he leaves the lunchroom, Charlese tries to stop him, but he doesn't pay her any attention and keeps walking. Desda then actually asks Maleeka about the math homework, and Maleeka shows her how to do it, explaining that it's easy.

Toward the end of lunch, Charlese leaves, surrounded by boys. Raise comes to ask Maleeka for her, Raina's, and Charlese's math homework. Maleeka gives it to her, but she lies that she didn't have time for the social studies paper—even though she has the paper in her bag. When Raise leaves, Desda tells Maleeka that she shouldn't do anything for them. Maleeka responds, "yeah, right."

## CHAPTER 12

The next day, Charlese doesn't come to the bathroom in the morning, so Maleeka is forced to keep her own **clothes**. Maleeka knows that Charlese is punishing her. Before class, Maleeka reads *Life of a Slave Girl*, which Miss Saunders gave her to help with her writing. When the late bell rings, a teacher tells Maleeka to get to class and pick up a paper she dropped—it's one of Akeelma's letters. In this letter, Akeelma writes that she watched another girl steal the last of her food, explaining, "she is a lion who cares for no one but herself."

When Maleeka gets to Miss Saunders's class, John-John stops her and comments on her "new **clothes**." Thinking of Akeelma, Maleeka asks him why he's always picking on her. She tells him that the song he sings about her isn't right. John-John tells Maleeka that she's always acted like she's better than him: in second grade, when Maleeka first started at the school, the teacher told her to sit next to John-John. But Maleeka said that she wanted to sit up front, next to Caleb (who has lighter skin) instead. Presently, Maleeka tells John-John she didn't care about Caleb—she only wanted to sit up front because she couldn't see the blackboard. John-John says that Maleeka still gave him plenty of reasons not to like her. Maleeka and John-John arrive in the classroom, but Miss Saunders isn't there yet. Maleeka is excited to have a substitute teacher, but just then, Miss Saunders rushes into the room.

*In contrast to Charlese, Caleb and Desda are there to support Maleeka—but she's so worried about being made fun of that she basically ignores the people who are trying to boost her confidence. Charlese's behavior toward Caleb also illustrates how her bullying is motivated by her own insecurity. The more attention Caleb pays to Maleeka, the more Charlese tries to sway his attention to herself and denigrate Maleeka, because Charlese is jealous of her.*



*Even though Maleeka is still doing Charlese's and the twins' homework, she is also starting to gain more confidence in herself and rebel against their abuse, as demonstrated by the fact that she doesn't give them their social studies homework. Maleeka understands that it's not fair for them to abuse her and then expect her to do their assignments, even though she goes along with this arrangement most of the time.*



*Miss Saunders fosters Maleeka's writing talent by giving her *Life of a Slave Girl* (a fictional homage to Harriet Jacobs's [Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl](#)) pushing her to live up to her potential. Meanwhile, Maleeka's writing continues to reflect her own life. The girl who steals Akeelma's food mirrors Charlese, and Maleeka demonstrates that she understands (even if unconsciously) that Charlese only cares about herself. Withholding the clothes, which allow Maleeka to be accepted by her peers, shows that Charlese has no interest in actually supporting Maleeka—she simply wants to manipulate her.*



*Clothes continue to symbolize Maleeka's acceptance at the school: without Charlese's nice clothing, Maleeka is again picked on for the ones her mother sews. Additionally, John-John's story sheds more light on his motivation for bullying Maleeka. He was insulted by the fact that she wanted to sit next to someone with lighter skin rather than next to him, illustrating how his bullying stems from his own insecurity over his worth and his Blackness. Even when Maleeka corrects this misconception, John-John refuses to change his behavior, demonstrating how something that happened to him five years earlier has made a deep impact on him.*



## CHAPTER 13

Miss Saunders apologizes for being late, and then she sees that someone has drawn on the board. There's a woman's face on it: the left side is smooth and pretty, while the right side is cracked and drooping. Miss Saunders quickly erases the board quickly and then starts a discussion on [Romeo and Juliet](#). Maleeka mumbles that no one wants to talk about this stuff. When Miss Saunders asks what they want to talk about, John-John says, "why Maleeka's so black," and Miss Saunders kicks him out of the classroom. Maleeka gets annoyed that Miss Saunders is making a big deal out of what John-John said. John-John forces out a fake apology, and Miss Saunders lets him stay.

The class continues to talk about [Romeo and Juliet](#), and one boy named Jerimey says that it doesn't make sense to kill yourself over someone you love, because you should love yourself most of all. He says that if you love yourself above everyone else, you'll take good care of yourself, and you won't try and make trouble because that's just going to cause more problems for you.

Desda says that she wishes someone would kill themselves over her, because it's romantic. Maleeka disagrees. She says when her dad died three years earlier, her mom fell apart. At 10 years old, Maleeka had to brush her mom's teeth and feed her. Then, a year ago, her mom finally got up and bought a sewing machine. The more **clothes** she made, the happier she got. Maleeka concludes that nothing good comes from loving someone so much that you can't live without them. The class is quiet until the bell rings.

## CHAPTER 14

A few days later, Charlese tells Maleeka that she doesn't like how Maleeka has been acting lately, so Maleeka ditches her office work to hang out with Charlese, Raina, and Raise. In the hallway, they run into Miss Saunders, who promptly walks Maleeka to the office. As they walk, Maleeka comments on Miss Saunders's nice clothes. Miss Saunders explains that she had to wear suits for her job at the ad agency.

*Miss Saunders again proves that because she's not insecure about her face, she's not susceptible to bullying. In addition, telling John-John that she'll kick him out for his comment sets a good example for the students of not tolerating any kind of bullying. Even though Maleeka feels that Miss Saunders is only making things worse, it sends a message to the other kids that bullying is unacceptable in Miss Saunders's classroom.*



*Jerimey's assessment of [Romeo and Juliet](#) ties back to the novel's overall lesson about bullying. He emphasizes that having high self-esteem and being secure in oneself means that a person doesn't have to make trouble for others. Conversely, bullying is rooted in insecurity.*



*Here, Maleeka goes into fuller detail about why she wants to make sure her mother keeps sewing: without it, she worries about her mom's well-being. This highlights how, even though Maleeka's mom wants what's best for her, she doesn't always model good behavior or take care of her daughter's needs, and Maleeka is often forced to take on a parental role.*



*Miss Saunders continues to act as an important role model in Maleeka's life. She constantly tries to make sure that Maleeka isn't getting into more trouble, separating her from Charlese and the twins and trying to give her more responsibility in the office.*



As they walk, Maleeka asks Miss Saunders why she's at McClenton rather than the Catholic school or the private school nearby. Miss Saunders turns the question around and asks why Maleeka is there, because Miss Saunders knows that Maleeka passed the test for Central Middle School. Maleeka is annoyed that Miss Saunders knows something about her, but she doesn't know anything about Miss Saunders. Miss Saunders explains that, for a long time, she worked 18-hour days and traveled the country constantly. When she turned 40, she didn't want to do this anymore. She says it was wearing her down to be so competitive all the time; she likes teaching better.

## CHAPTER 15

In the office, other teachers complain about Miss Saunders being too pushy and assigning too much homework to the kids. While Maleeka starts to work, Charlese comes in and starts talking to Maleeka—but Miss Carol, the secretary, tells Charlese to go to class. Then, Mr. Pajolli comes out of his office, and Charlese asks if she can work too. Mr. Pajolli says she can if she pays the fines for the books she's lost. Charlese argues with Mr. Pajolli and says that she would never work for free anyway.

Mr. Pajolli asks what class Charlese has now. She tells him she has math with Tai, and she complains about how boring it is. Mr. Pajolli says that nobody can be bored in Tai's class, and Maleeka thinks that that's true. Tai has also been coming into the office and asking Mr. Pajolli if Maleeka can do some of her homework during her office time. Mr. Pajolli agreed, and Maleeka was frustrated and annoyed at all the teachers who've been causing her grief.

## CHAPTER 16

Maleeka spends two hours on Saturday morning writing in Akeelma's journal; she's shocked that she actually likes doing the work. Her mom also piled chores on her, until Maleeka told her that she had homework to do. She writes in her journal about the rough sea, about being chained together with other slaves, and about being beaten. Akeelma concludes that she will be "strong like the sea and the wind."

When Maleeka finishes her work, Sweets calls. Maleeka says that she's going over to Charlese's later because she has new **clothes** for Maleeka. Sweets doesn't say much and hangs up. Maleeka's mom has her do more chores, and at four p.m., Maleeka finally leaves for Charlese's house.

*Miss Saunders already knew about Maleeka's application to Central Middle School, which provides some background as to why she pushes Maleeka so hard. She knows that Maleeka (and other students) have more potential than they're letting on, and she chose to be a teacher to help foster that potential and act as a good mentor.*



*Here, the novel ties Maleeka and Miss Saunders's situations together in another way. The teachers are picking on Miss Saunders for her different teaching methods, which mimics how students pick on Maleeka for anything different about her—particularly when, like John-John, they see her as trying to act better than the rest of the students. Likewise, the teachers are annoyed by Miss Saunders acting like she's a better teacher or that she can get more from the students than they can.*



*Like Miss Saunders, Tai is another good mentor for Maleeka and affirms why the office job is beneficial for her, as it helps Maleeka keep her grades up. As Maleeka has proven, it's not that she has difficulty with math homework—she just isn't motivated to do it. But when the teachers take Maleeka under their wing, she's able to live up to her potential.*



*This is a turning point in Maleeka's journaling. Not only does she draw parallels between herself and Akeelma's life, but she also uses Akeelma's words to empower herself to be confident and stand up to the injustice in her life.*



*Clothes continue to symbolize how Maleeka's powerful need for acceptance and self-worth. She wants Charlese's clothes so much so that she abandons a supportive friend for one who continues to bully her.*



At Charlese's house, there's loud music playing. JuJu and 10 other people are dancing, and some people are playing along to the music. Maleeka thinks that the party is just starting, but Charlese says it's finishing from last night. She hasn't slept; JuJu paid her \$400 to clean up and serve food during the party. JuJu hosts parties all the time, and people come from all over to attend. Maleeka thinks that she could never live like this, with strangers in the house all the time. It doesn't bother Charlese, but when she and Maleeka find a quieter room, she promptly falls asleep.

Suddenly, JuJu yells from downstairs, and Charlese wakes up and runs to her sister. Maleeka realizes that JuJu is only 25, but she's the only family Charlese has. Maleeka sits and waits for a bit until she finally goes downstairs and sees Charlese running around, letting people in, and handing out drinks. Maleeka walks out the door.

## CHAPTER 17

As soon as Maleeka gets to the street, two boys start following her. Maleeka tries to ignore them, but they catch up to her. One of them twists her hands behind her back, and the other asks her for a kiss, calling her a "pretty black thing." Maleeka yells for them to let her go, but there's no one else in the street. She starts crying and shaking her head, and she kicks the guy who's holding her. He lets go of Maleeka, and she digs her fingernails into the other boy's stomach. The second boy hits her in return and puts his hand over her mouth; Maleeka immediately bites down on him and won't let go.

Finally, Maleeka lets the boy go, and he starts loosening his belt with his good hand. Maleeka runs as fast as she can until she's almost at her house. She sits down, shaking and crying. By chance, Sweets appears, and Maleeka tells her what happened. Sweets promises not to tell Maleeka's mom and gives her a tissue to wipe her face. Sweets feels sorry for Maleeka, knowing that this happened because she had to go to Charlese's. When Maleeka arrives home, she tells her mom that a few boys were picking on her, but she doesn't go into detail. Her mom tells her to be careful, and Maleeka goes to bed without dinner and cries herself to sleep.

*JuJu's parties, and her treatment of Charlese, indicate that she's a poor role model. Charlese is essentially treated like a servant in her own home and is at the beck and call not only of her sister, but also of the guests at the parties. Even though this gives Charlese an income, it doesn't set a good example for her, as she foregoes success in school and her own well-being in favor of helping JuJu with whatever she needs.*



*The fact that Charlese doesn't have anyone looking out for her well-being only underscores her need for a better role model than JuJu. JuJu's yelling also helps explain some of Charlese's own anger issues and poor treatment of others, as she is simply mimicking her sister's behavior.*



*The incident with the boys adds complexity to the idea that Maleeka should be confident in her appearance. While Maleeka is made fun of at school for attributes that she views as ugly, she is also targeted by boys like this who think she's pretty. In both circumstances, their assaults dehumanize her and prey on her insecurities, making Maleeka feel helpless and vulnerable.*



*Maleeka's escape from the boys' assault demonstrates the deep toll that bullying and physical harassment take on her. Particularly because she doesn't think that she can confide in her mother, Maleeka feels extremely isolated, vulnerable, and unprotected. However, she does have Sweets to help lift her spirits, once again underscoring the value of supportive friendships. Maleeka also begins to see the irony of her situation: she hangs out with Charlese for protection, but that friendship often puts Maleeka in even more dangerous situations.*



## CHAPTER 18

A month later, Maleeka can't forget what happened with the boys. She spends a lot of time in her room, writing in Akeelma's diary. Maleeka explains that it's hard to know where Akeelma's thoughts begin and hers end: when Akeelma says that she's scared people think she's ugly, Maleeka knows that she's really talking about herself. She even writes about what happened with the boys, only from Akeelma's perspective on the boat. She also writes that when Akeelma was running from the men on the ship, she spotted Kinjari and discovered that he wasn't dead after all.

When Maleeka shows her writing to Miss Saunders, Miss Saunders says that writing is clearly one of her gifts. Maleeka is proud to excel in writing. Charlese then spots Maleeka in the hall and tells her that the girls are hanging in the bathroom next period. Maleeka says that she has to work in the office, to which Charlese responds that Maleeka is a "good little slave." Maleeka is upset; she knows that if Charlese knew what girls like Akeelma went through, she wouldn't be talking down slaves. Charlese says that Maleeka better be in the bathroom.

Maleeka reckons that hanging out in the bathroom is more fun than stapling papers, so she meets Charlese, Raise, and Raina there. As the other girls put on makeup, smoke, gossip about boys, and draw on the bathroom stalls, Maleeka rereads one of Akeelma's letters. Charlese spots the letter and makes fun of Maleeka for continuing to write them. She takes out a cigarette lighter and sets one of Maleeka's pages on fire. Maleeka blows it out quickly.

Raina, Raise, and Charlese then start to talk about Maleeka like she's not there. Raina says that Maleeka is ugly and notes that their grades haven't improved even though Maleeka is doing their homework. Charlese says that she can't cut Maleeka loose until the big book report is due in social studies. Suddenly, Miss Saunders comes into the bathroom, flushes the girls' cigarettes down the toilet, and says that she's surprised to see Maleeka there. Charlese says that Maleeka isn't a goody two-shoes like Miss Saunders thinks.

Miss Saunders then accidentally bumps Charlese, who drops her lipstick. Charlese complains that Miss Saunders bumped her on purpose, but Miss Saunders reminds her that she's not a child and doesn't play games. After telling them all to go to the office, Miss Saunders pulls Maleeka aside. She points out that Maleeka was doing well in class and working in the office, and she advises Maleeka to choose better friends. In the office, Miss Saunders reports that the girls were cutting class, smoking, and destroying property.

*Maleeka is becoming even more conscious of how her writing reflects her own life, whereas before, the connections were more subconscious. Maleeka directly relates her life to Akeelma's and understands that writing is a way for her to work through her own feelings and experiences. Kinjari's return to the story thus reflects Caleb's desire to make amends with Maleeka—and, in turn, Maleeka's wish to reconnect with Caleb.*



*Miss Saunders is an important force in Maleeka's life: only through only through Miss Saunders's mentorship is Maleeka able to foster her talent for writing. And, in turn, Maleeka's writing empowers her to recognize the injustice in her own life. Even if Charlese views Maleeka as a "slave," she knows that she's strong and worthy.*



*Again, Charlese demonstrates a keen instinct for bullying Maleeka in ways that make her more insecure. While Maleeka has been using her writing to build her confidence and empower her, Charlese burning her letters is a way to undermine that confidence.*



*Charlese continues to prove the irony in her and Maleeka's relationship: while Maleeka tries to be friends with her to protect her from bullying, Charlese already bullies Maleeka. In addition, it's clear that Miss Saunders recognizes this, which is why she makes an immense effort to separate them whenever possible, so that Maleeka can replace her bad influences.*



*Miss Saunders again emphasizes Maleeka's need to find better friends, knowing that friends should be supportive rather than prone to bullying and preying on a person's insecurity. Miss Saunders's ability to recognize this and try to make Maleeka understand it emphasizes Miss Saunders's importance as a positive role model in Maleeka's life.*





## CHAPTER 19

Maleeka goes to detention, which is in a hot, cramped room in the basement. She writes another letter: Akeelma describes going up to the top of the boat and crying with delight when she saw the sun. When she returns below decks, Kinjari is with her. Suddenly, as Maleeka is writing, Caleb comes into the room and sits two desks away from her. When Maleeka asks what he's doing there, Caleb explains that he got caught cleaning the boys' bathroom. Soon, Miss Birdy, the detention teacher, tries to prevent them from talking.

Maleeka passes Caleb a note, asking why he was cleaning the bathroom. He says that it's not right when students trash the bathrooms, and that he has to take a stand when things aren't right. Maleeka wonders internally why he didn't take a stand that day on the bus last year, when everyone was making fun of her. She doesn't respond to Caleb and instead starts writing in her own diary. She writes that she doesn't want to forgive Caleb for what happened on the bus.

Caleb moves close to Maleeka again and tells her that he shouldn't have left when other kids started teasing her on the bus. He says that ever since he and Maleeka started hanging out, kids teased her—he figured that if he got away from her, they would stop. But Caleb tells Maleeka that he still likes her, and since kids are still bullying her even when he's not around, he figures that he can't make her life worse. He apologizes and says that he won't let her down again, but Maleeka isn't sure she can forgive him yet.

## CHAPTER 20

Miss Saunders asks Maleeka to come to her room at 3:30 p.m., but Maleeka makes her wait until 4:45 p.m. When she gets to Miss Saunders's room, she's not there. The janitor tells Maleeka that she's in the auditorium. When Maleeka arrives, she overhears Tai and Miss Saunders talking confidentially, and Maleeka remains backstage, unseen, to listen in. Miss Saunders says that her students are really engaged, but half of her seventh graders are failing—their test-taking skills are terrible. Tai advises Miss Saunders not to kill their spirits by failing them and making them think that nothing they've done counts. She says that tests aren't the only way to prove what they've learned.

*Maleeka continues to use her writing not only as a way of thinking about the world, but also as a way to think about her path going forward. She starts to recognize the trouble that Charlese causes in her life. Like Akeelma, Maleeka no longer wants to be “below decks” (that is, in detention) and would rather see the sun (be freer and happier). Meanwhile, the fact that Maleeka writes about Kinjari just before Caleb comes into the room reinforces the connection between Caleb and Kinjari.*



*Maleeka reveals that part of her insecurity comes from Caleb's betrayal. His rejection of her shook Maleeka's confidence even more than the bullying did, so his actions seem unforgivable to her. Yet Caleb continues to show that he's a more supportive friend and a more positive influence than Charlese: whereas Charlese pressures Maleeka to make a mess in the girls' bathroom, Caleb tries to clean the boys' bathroom up.*



*Here, Caleb reveals the full story about his leaving Maleeka. Rather than rejecting Maleeka, Caleb was trying to prevent others from bullying her further. He demonstrates that he is a true friend and that he really wants to support her. But Maleeka's hesitation to trust him suggests that betrayals from friends often hurt worse than betrayals from enemies.*



*Tai reinforces that good mentorship, like friendship, is about supporting students rather than making them feel insecure about the work they've done. While Miss Saunders wants the students to live up to their full potential, Tai emphasizes that this may not necessarily translate to good test scores, and that squashing their enthusiasm would only lead to worse performance. As Maleeka has proven, giving students the opportunity to excel creatively—even if they don't do well on tests—does more to foster their love of learning than anything else.*



Tai acknowledges that the kids have been hard on Miss Saunders, but she says that no one is perfect. Miss Saunders says that she always tried to be perfect: when she was little, she prayed to God to make her face perfect. When he didn't, she tried to be perfect at everything else she did to make up for it. Tai says that that's a lot of pressure to put on herself and her students. Then, she reassures Miss Saunders that she's a great teacher and that the kids will like her no matter what she looks like—it's her need to be perfect that will ruin her. Just then, Miss Saunders spots Maleeka backstage.

*While Miss Saunders doesn't let the kids' bullying make her feel insecure, her insecurity fuels another aspect of her life: her perfectionism. This is why she pushes her students so hard on tests and assignments. Yet Tai's advice affirms that Miss Saunders doesn't need to make perfect students out of the kids: instead, she just needs to foster their intellect and creativity, as she does with Maleeka.*



## CHAPTER 21

Miss Saunders is furious at Maleeka for listening in on their conversation, but Maleeka promises that she won't repeat anything she heard. The next day, Miss Saunders calls Maleeka her into her room again to talk about her writing assignment. Reading Maleeka's work, Miss Saunders compliments her and gives her two As. She also says that Maleeka can keep it up if she wants, and she asks if Maleeka has told anyone about her conversation. Maleeka says no.

*Miss Saunders follows Tai's advice in working with Maleeka; she recognizes that test-taking isn't the only way for Maleeka to prove that she's learning. Maleeka's work shows that she's developing creative writing skills—and in giving her As and allowing her to continue the assignment, Miss Saunders is encouraging those skills.*



Maleeka tells Miss Saunders that she acts like the only person who's ever been teased. Maleeka says that lots of people tease her, and she asks Miss Saunders if she has any friends. Miss Saunders says that it was hard to keep them because she traveled so often for work, but she's been friends with Tai since college—Tai was the one who suggested that Miss Saunders come to McClenton. Maleeka says that she's glad Miss Saunders has one friend.

*While Maleeka illustrates her growing self-confidence in speaking candidly with Miss Saunders, she also reveals some of her insecurity. Even though Charlese and the other girls make fun of her, Maleeka would rather stick with them because she's insecure about not having friends—she even looks at Miss Saunders as an example of someone who has few friends. Though Maleeka hasn't yet acknowledged that friends shouldn't tear other friends down, she does recognize the value of friendship in giving a person confidence.*



## CHAPTER 22

After talking to Miss Saunders, Maleeka walks to the library because she wants to enter her writing in a contest. The winner will get \$100. Maleeka signs up, planning to turn in her papers the next day. She stays up half the night neatly transcribing her existing pages and writing more material. On the boat, Akeelma knows that when they dock, Kinjari will likely be hired as a boatbuilder. He tells her, however, that he'd rather be a slave with her than be free by himself.

*Miss Saunders has given Maleeka so much confidence in her writing that she even seeks out a writing competition, demonstrating the importance of good role models and mentorship to Maleeka's schooling. Additionally, Maleeka continues to draw parallels between Akeelma and herself, as Kinjari's statement mirrors the fact that Caleb would rather be teased by other students and be with Maleeka than be alone and bullied less.*



In the morning, Maleeka shows her mom what she's written. Her mom is impressed—she tells Maleeka that she could be a professional writer. She also reveals that Maleeka's dad used to write letters and poems, and that he wrote one for Maleeka that she forgot about. Maleeka searches through the box of her dad's things and finds a poem. It goes, "Brown / Beautiful / Brilliant / My my Maleeka / is / Brown / Beautiful / Brilliant / Mine." Maleeka saves the poem in her pocket. When she leaves for school, she hears the sewing machine going crazy.

*Maleeka's dad is an important figure in giving her confidence. Not only do they share a passion for writing, but her father's writing also boosts Maleeka's self-esteem and helps her overcome some of her insecurities. His belief that Maleeka is "brown" and "beautiful" counters Maleeka's idea that her dark skin makes her ugly, as many of her classmates tell her.*



## CHAPTER 23

Maleeka skips lunch that day to hand in her submission to the writing competition. The librarian tells her that over 100 kids have entered the contest, which intimidates Maleeka, but she hands her pages in anyway. Before she leaves, she reads a few poetry books on a library table and thinks of her dad.

*Without Miss Saunders's encouragement, Maleeka likely would have been too intimidated to enter the contest or would not have gotten interested in writing at all. Miss Saunders's confidence in Maleeka's writing has, in turn, boosted Maleeka's own confidence.*



That day, JuJu comes into the office screaming, saying Charlese is failing because of Miss Saunders. Maleeka knows that Charlese only got As before because Charlese cheated off of Maleeka on tests in class; Charlese's grades dropped when Miss Saunders separated their seats. JuJu shouts about how Miss Saunders is mean and ugly. Miss Saunders is then called into the office, and JuJu tells Miss Saunders that this is Charlese's third time in seventh grade and that she has to move up. Miss Saunders counters that Charlese barely completes her assignments. JuJu then says that if Miss Saunders flunks Charlese, she won't be able to teach anywhere else because JuJu "know[s] people."

*JuJu's behavior illustrates the importance of good role models and the harm that can come about when children don't have them. JuJu has been forced into the role of her caretaker in her sister's life, and while she appears to care about her sister, it's clear that she simply wants Charlese not to cause her any problems. JuJu's anger at Miss Saunders also sets an example for Charlese, who bullies and threatens her own peers just as JuJu bullies and threatens Miss Saunders here.*



## CHAPTER 24

Maleeka worries about Miss Saunders, since now all Charlese talks about is how to get back at her. Charlese says that they should meet the next day before school to vandalize Miss Saunders's classroom. Maleeka expresses her hesitance about messing up the classroom, but Charlese says that she knows what she's doing, and then she throws a bottle of nail polish at Maleeka's head.

*Following JuJu's outburst in the school office, Flake demonstrates how JuJu's behavior then trickles down to Charlese. This emphasizes the need for good role models in children's' lives, because bad role models can reinforce bad behavior.*



Just then, John-John comes over and makes fun of Maleeka's skin, singing his usual song. When Charlese tells John-John that she'll kick his butt, he stops singing—but he calls Maleeka "midnight" as he says goodbye. At first, this angers Maleeka, but then she remembers a poem about midnight in one of the library books she flipped through: "at midnight, if you have eyes to see / there's beauty and there's majesty." Maleeka smiles to herself.

*Writing continues to empower Maleeka, and she uses this newfound confidence to combat the bullies in her life. Even though John-John intended "midnight" as an insult to Maleeka's dark skin, Maleeka's ability to relate it to the poem and look at it in a positive light helps her to maintain her confidence.*



Then Caleb comes over, and Charlese gets in his face and asks him about his braids and cologne. He ignores Charlese and tells Maleeka that he and a few friends are getting together the next day to talk about ways to improve McClenton, inviting Maleeka to come. Charlese tells him that Maleeka is busy, but she says that they can all come afterward. Then, Charlese shoves Maleeka.

Caleb pulls Maleeka aside and tells her that Charlese is the kind of friend who will get her “locked up or shot up”—Maleeka she should stay away from her. When Caleb leaves, Charlese screams at Maleeka. Maleeka knows that Charlese’s plan to mess up Miss Saunders’s room is just going to get her in trouble, but that people only turn their back on Charlese if they want to die.

*Charlese’s attempts to interrupt Caleb and harass Maleeka in front of him again indicates that she’s jealous of Maleeka and insecure about being liked. This behavior continues to expose Charlese’s desperate need to control those around her.*



*Caleb not only supports Maleeka, but he also encourages her to rid herself of the toxic friendships in her life. He’s trying to get Maleeka involved in positive work that will help the school, whereas Charlese will get Maleeka involved in nothing but trouble and crime. Given Charlese’s plan to vandalize Miss Saunders’s classroom, this will likely prove true. Yet Maleeka also worries that if she isn’t friends with Charlese, she will only be bullied further—and Charlese may even violently lash out at her.*



## CHAPTER 25

Very early the next morning, Maleeka meets Charlese, Raise, and Raina at school. They sneak past the janitor and enter Miss Saunders’s room, which is unlocked. Raise puts glue all over a pillow and then smears the pillow across the windows. Charlese yanks some curtains down and jabs holes in them with scissors. Maleeka doesn’t move until Charlese prompts her to do something; she erases As in Miss Saunders’s grade book and replaces them with Ds.

Charlese tells Maleeka to burn the foreign money on Miss Saunders’s desk. Maleeka shakes her head, but Charlese threatens not to let her have the bag of **clothes** that she brought, calling Maleeka stupid and flicking an open lighter close to her head. When Charlese puts her hand on Maleeka and squeezes until Maleeka hears her bones crack, Maleeka agrees. She sets the money on fire, crying. She wishes she could undo the whole schoolyear.

*Charlese’s behavior shows the influence that JuJu has had on her as a bad role model. Because her sister tends to act angrily and even violently, Charlese resorts to anger and violence for her own vengeance. Not only that, but she also bullies other people into following her lead. Maleeka is clearly uncomfortable with what they’re doing, particularly because Miss Saunders has been so supportive of Maleeka and her education—and yet Charlese’s threats lead Maleeka to go along with the plan anyway.*



*Charlese continues to use both violence and manipulation to maintain power over Maleeka. She confirms once more that she and Maleeka don’t have a supportive friendship; instead, it’s one fueled by bullying and intimidation. And while Maleeka has grown more secure in herself, she now worries about the consequences of trying to escape Charlese’s influence. This once again exposes the irony of their relationship: Charlese already bullies Maleeka and influences her to do terrible things, so Maleeka shouldn’t be worried about distancing herself from Charlese.*



Suddenly, Maleeka notices that the curtains on the wall caught fire. She, Charlese, Raina, and Raise start to run. Maleeka grabs the bag of **clothes** that Charlese brought, but it rips. As she tries to collect the clothes and run, the janitor notices her, and then he sees the fire in the classroom. Maleeka runs down the school steps and scrapes her knee. She dashes home, crying her eyes out as fire trucks approach the school.

*Here, Maleeka experiences the consequences of being involved with someone as volatile and vicious as Charlese—it can result in tangible harm, like setting Miss Saunders’s classroom on fire. Additionally, Maleeka’s desperation for the clothes as she runs out is symbolic: her the clothes represent her insecurity about being accepted. And her preoccupation with the clothes are what cause her to be caught by the janitor and blamed for what Charlese and the other girls forced her to do. This again illustrates the harm that insecurity can cause, as going along with the crowd and desperately trying to be liked only gets Maleeka into trouble.*



## CHAPTER 26

Maleeka sneaks back into her house, her knee bleeding. When she gets into her room, the phone rings. Maleeka answers it quickly: it’s Miss Jackson, their neighbor. Maleeka’s mom wakes up and takes the phone, talking to Miss Jackson about going with her to the doctor. Maleeka’s mom tells her to go back to sleep. Maleeka promises God that if He gets her out of this mess, she’ll never do anything bad again.

*Maleeka knows she’s going to face severe consequences for vandalizing Miss Saunders’s room, which is why she’s guilty and worried about what she’s done. In contrast to supportive friends like Caleb, Sweets, or even Desda, having a destructive friend like Charlese has only gotten Maleeka in trouble, as Caleb predicted.*



## CHAPTER 27

Maleeka’s mom finds out what Maleeka did and hits her for the first time in Maleeka’s life. Maleeka is suspended at school, and all Maleeka’s mom does is cry. Maleeka’s mom tells Maleeka that she’s not going to learn anything if she tries to help Maleeka. She explains, “you gotta think that you worth saving, baby.” Maleeka has to pay \$2,000 in damages, and her mom says that Maleeka has to figure a way out of her own mess. Maleeka starts crying, frustrated that her mom isn’t there for her when Maleeka supported her mom after her dad died.

*Maleeka’s mom is adamant that Maleeka has to take responsibility for her actions and that Maleeka has to believe she’s “worth saving.” This suggests that Maleeka has the potential for a bright future if she believes in herself and stays out of trouble. At the same time, Maleeka’s criticism of her mother shows Maleeka’s side of the argument: while Maleeka was extremely supportive of her mother after her dad passed away, Maleeka’s mom isn’t modeling the same supportive behavior for her daughter.*



Later that day, the phone rings: it’s Charlese. She asks if Maleeka is going to tell on her, because Charlese will get expelled if the school finds out she was involved. Maleeka explains that she shouldn’t get in trouble by herself. Charlese says that she’ll help Maleeka pay the money back to the school, and then she hangs up. Maleeka knows that Charlese is expecting her to keep her mouth shut. She writes in her diary that even if you can’t see an acorn growing, it’s still reaching for the sun. Maleeka wonders if this is true; she doesn’t feel any stronger or braver than she was a few weeks ago. She rips out the page and throws it away.

*Even though Maleeka now has leverage in her and Charlese’s relationship, she understands that Charlese still thinks she’s weak and that she can be manipulated. Maleeka’s writing about the acorn implies that she’s wondering the same thing about herself—whether she’s growing braver or stronger. Ripping out the page indicates that Maleeka doesn’t feel braver or stronger; however, Maleeka has already shown herself to be braver in standing up to John-John, brushing off people bullying her about her hair, and signing up for the library competition.*



## CHAPTER 28

Later that afternoon, Maleeka's mom sends Maleeka to pick something up at the corner store. There, Maleeka runs into John-John. He makes fun of her for being suspended, and he also says at least Maleeka is keeping her mouth shut about it—squealing on her friends isn't cool. Suddenly, some boys crowd around the two of them—they're after John-John because he told on one of them for shoplifting. They start beating John-John up, and though he tries to put up a fight, it's three versus one.

When John-John falls on the ground, Maleeka grabs a branch from a nearby bush and smacks the boys with it. The boys surround her and close in on her, but then she hears a group of adults coming over. The boys let Maleeka go and run away. Maleeka sees Caleb with the group of adults, who have brooms, bats, and a shovel. Caleb helps John-John up. Maleeka thinks that John-John is always making fun of her, but she saved him today.

When Maleeka gets home, her mom already knows what happened with John-John. She also tells Maleeka that a letter arrived from the library, informing Maleeka that she won the writing contest. Maleeka shows her mother the letter, and they start crying together. Maleeka knows that they both wish her dad could be here for both the good and the bad events.

## CHAPTER 29

Maleeka and her mom frame her congratulations letter alongside her dad's poem. Maleeka then spends the rest of the day worrying about how to handle Charlese. Later, Charlese calls and says that she, Raise, and Raina can only give Maleeka \$100 for the school damages. Maleeka says that she doesn't have a choice but to tell the school what really happened—it's not right for her to get in trouble for something that they all did.

Charlese starts laughing at Maleeka, explaining that she stole Miss Saunders's watch and slipped it into Maleeka's locker—so when the school searched Maleeka's locker, they found the watch. Now, everyone really believes that Maleeka destroyed Miss Saunders's classroom. Then, Charlese threatens to beat Maleeka up if she tells on her. When Charlese hangs up, Maleeka starts rocking herself. She thinks that she's probably going to get expelled.

*The novel again illustrates how John-John's bullying stems from his own insecurity. While he makes fun of Maleeka for being suspended and makes a comment about not squealing on her friends, John-John himself is then attacked for speaking out about someone else's crimes.*



*In the previous chapter, Maleeka wondered whether she'd become any stronger or braver—and this passage proves that she has. In contrast to the earlier incident when two boys attacked her on the street, here Maleeka runs toward danger to defend John-John, rather than running away from it. And in saving John-John, Maleeka proves that she's not trying to make him feel insecure, as he thought she was—rather she's trying to lift him up and help him. Similarly, Caleb's arrival signals his own desire to support Maleeka.*



*Maleeka's winning the competition is a testament to both the newfound power of writing in her life and Miss Saunders's positive influence. Thanks to Miss Saunders's mentorship, Maleeka is able to feel proud of her writing talent, which boosts her self-esteem.*



*Having saved John-John and won the library competition, Maleeka gains a degree of self-esteem. It is this newfound confidence that then enables her to try to stand up to Charlese. Because Maleeka is more secure in herself, she has more opportunity to stop Charlese's bullying.*



*Charlese manipulates Maleeka by framing her and threatening her with violence. However, given Maleeka's newfound confidence after saving John-John and winning the writing contest, there's hope that she'll find the courage to stand up for herself and tell an adult the truth about what happened.*



## CHAPTER 30

Later that evening, Maleeka's doorbell rings: it's Miss Saunders. She tells Maleeka that everyone is saying it was Charlese's idea to destroy the classroom. Maleeka, however, says that some kids said they'd pay Maleeka \$25 to do it. Miss Saunders asks Maleeka to trust her with the truth, but Maleeka insists that she trashed the room alone. Miss Saunders leaves.

*Miss Saunders again tries to help Maleeka find confidence in herself, giving her the opportunity to tell the truth about Charlese. The fact that Maleeka stands by her story suggests that she's truly afraid of Charlese's bullying.*



## CHAPTER 31

The next day, Maleeka is back in school: Miss Saunders asked her to meet before school started. When Maleeka arrives, Charlese is there too, looking very afraid. Miss Saunders again asks Maleeka to tell the truth. Charlese tells Maleeka not to say anything, explaining that if she's kicked out of school, JuJu will beat her up. Charlese also says that if she gets in trouble for Maleeka, Maleeka will have to move to another neighborhood. Miss Saunders just lets Charlese talk, and she puts her arm around Maleeka.

*Charlese indicates that much of the fear she instills in Maleeka stems from her own fear about JuJu beating her up. This again suggests that much of Charlese's bullying stems from her own fears and insecurities, even as she tries to take advantage of Maleeka's insecurities.*



Maleeka thinks about the boys who tried to kiss her, about the ones she saved John-John from, and about Akeelma. Then, Charlese calls Maleeka an "ugly, stupid, black thing." Maleeka hears Akeelma's voice in her head, and she yells at Charlese that she's not ugly or stupid. She says, "if you don't like me, too bad 'cause black is the skin I'm in!" She then confesses that Charlese, Raise, and Raina were the ones who pushed her to mess up Miss Saunders's room, and she feels relieved. Charlese gives Maleeka a hard look, calls her and Miss Saunders, "two ugly-faced losers," and leaves. Miss Saunders hugs Maleeka, and Maleeka feels safe.

*In this moment, Maleeka draws on much of what has happened to her in the past year to overcome Charlese's bullying. First, she knows that she has Miss Saunders's support. Second, her writing about Akeelma empowers her to stand up to the injustice in her life. Third, buoyed by this support, Maleeka no longer feels insecure about the things Charlese tries to make fun of. By affirming that she isn't ugly or stupid, and by embracing her Blackness, Maleeka is able to find new sources of self-esteem and put an end to Charlese's bullying.*



## CHAPTER 32

Raina and Raise are suspended, and JuJu sends Charlese to live with her grandparents in Alabama. Maleeka is relieved. And because Maleeka told the truth about Charlese, she doesn't have to work in the office anymore. One day, Caleb gives Maleeka a poem. It is addressed to "My sweet dark chocolate candy girl" and includes lines like, "Would you be my Almond joy / My chocolate chip, my Hershey Kiss?" Maleeka smiles when she reads it and plans to hang it next to her dad's poem.

*JuJu sends Charlese away, which illustrates that JuJu's poor role modeling has not only led Charlese not to finish seventh grade, but also that JuJu is completely unfit to take care of her younger sister. Additionally, Caleb's poem showcases his support and affection for Maleeka, and the value that Maleeka finds in it. Like her dad's poem, Caleb's emphasizes that Maleeka's dark skin is what makes her beautiful to him. That Maleeka plans to frame it next to her father's poem in her room also confirms how valuable these uplifting messages are for Maleeka.*



Maleeka tells Caleb that the poem is the nicest thing anyone's ever done for her. They smile at each other, and Caleb walks Maleeka to Miss Saunders's class, which is now being held in the detention room. When Maleeka enters, Miss Saunders welcomes her and says that class wouldn't be the same unless she was late. Everybody laughs, and John-John says, "welcome back."

*The final exchanges of the book reinforce Maleeka's journey over the school year. Maleeka has a good role model in Miss Saunders, as she clearly forgives Maleeka and continues to extend kindness to her. John-John also recognizes Maleeka's support for him, which eases his insecurities and makes it unnecessary for him to bully her. And lastly, Maleeka has gained a newfound confidence, both from peers like Caleb and also from her own acceptance of herself.*







## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Emanuel, Lizzy. "The Skin I'm In." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Sep 2020. Web. 30 Sep 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Emanuel, Lizzy. "The Skin I'm In." LitCharts LLC, September 30, 2020. Retrieved September 30, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-skin-i-m-in>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Skin I'm In* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Flake, Sharon. *The Skin I'm In*. Little, Brown and Company. 2018.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Flake, Sharon. *The Skin I'm In*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2018.