**The Skin I’m In (Chapter 4)** by Sharon Flake.

*Maleeka gets made fun of at school about her clothes, her grades, even the color of her skin. In this chapter, she talks about getting teased on a school trip and how even her friend Char was ashamed to be seen with her because of her clothes.*

When the second bell rings, I run to Miss Saunders’s class like somebody set my shoes on fire. It don’t help none. Soon as I walk in, I know I’m in trouble. Everybody’s got their head down and they’re writing. Miss Saunders nods for me to take out paper and get to my seat. “What does your face say to the world?” is written on the blackboard. I laugh, only it comes out like a sneeze through my nose.  
    Miss Saunders is collecting papers before I even got three sentences down on my paper. She knows I just slipped in. That don’t stop her from asking me to answer the question, though.  
    “My face?” I point to myself.  
    “Maleeka’s face says she needs to stay out of the sun,”  Larry Baker says, covering his face with a book.  
    “Naw, man,” Gregory Williams says. “Maleeka’s face says, Black is beautiful.”  
    Miss Saunders don’t say nothing. She just crosses her arms and gets real quiet. She don’t care if she done embarrassed me again.  
    “Maleeka?” she says.  
    I don’t answer her question or look her way. I eye the ceiling and count the blobs of gum hanging there like pretty-colored snot.  
    “Can anybody else tell me what their face says to the world?” Miss Saunders asks. Her gold bangles jingle while she makes her way around the room. Miss Saunders is as quiet as a tiger sneaking up on its supper. It’s them Italian leather shoes of hers, I guess.  
    Malcolm Moore raises his hand. Malcolm is fine. He’s got long, straight hair. Skin the color of a butterscotch milkshake. Gray, sad eyes. He’s half and half—got a white dad and a black momma. He’s lucky. He looks more like his dad than his mom .  
    “My face says I’m all that,” Malcolm says, rubbing them six chin hairs he calls a beard. “It says to the homies, I’m the doctor of love. I’m good to ya and good for ya.”  
    Everybody laughs. Faith, his girlfriend of the week, throws a pencil across the room. It bounces off the back of his chair, and lands between his big feet. Miss Saunders gives Faith the eye, letting her know to cut it out.  
    When the laughing’s done, hands go up. Some folks say funny stuff about their face. Others is real serious. Like John-John. He says his face tells the world he doesn’t take no stuff. That people better respect him, or else. I never seen nothing like that in John-John’s face. He looks more scared than mean. I guess there ain’t no accounting for what folks see in their own mirrors.  
    When Miss Saunders asks, “What’s my face say?” don’t nobody say nothing.  
    “Don’t get all closed-mouthed, now,” she says. “I hear you whispering in the hall. Laughing at me.” She walks the aisles again. She stops by me and sits on my desk. “Faces say more than you think. Even mine. Don’t be shy. Say what’s on your mind.”  
    My hand goes up. I figure she’s embarrassed me twice since she’s been here this week. Now it’s her turn. “Not to hurt your feelings…but…I think it says, you know, you’re a freak.”  
    “That’s cold,” Chrystal Johnson says, frowning.  
    Miss Saunders put her hands up to her chin like she’s praying. She gets up and walks the room, pacing. We don’t say nothing. We just listen to the clock tick. Shuffle our papers. Watch for some reaction from Miss Saunders.  
    “Freak,” she says. “I saw that too when I was young.” Then she explains how she was born with her face like that. How when she was little her parents had the preacher pray over it, the old folks work their roots on it, and her grandmother use some concoction to change the color of that blotch on her cheek so it matched the rest of her skin. Miss Saunders says none of the stuff she tried on her face worked. So she finally figured she’d better love what God gave her.  
    “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.  
    Then Miss Saunders comes over to my desk and stares down at me. “It takes a long time to accept yourself for who you are. To see the poetry in your walk,” she says, shaking her hips like she’s doing some African dance. Kids bust out laughing. “To look in the mirror and like what you see, even when it doesn’t look like anybody else’s idea of beauty.”  
    For a minute, it seems like Miss Saunders is getting all spacey on us. Like her mind is somewhere else. Then she’s back, talking that talk. “So, what’s my face say to the world?” she asks. “My face says I’m smart. Sassy. Sexy. Self-confident,” she says, snapping her fingers rapid-fire. “It says I’m caring and, yes, even a little cold sometimes. See these laugh lines,” she says, almost poking herself in the eyes. “They let people know that I love a good joke. These tiny bags? They tell the world I like to stay up late.”  
    “Doing what, Miss Saunders?” John-John asks. “Checking homework, or making out?”  
    Miss Saunders throws her head back and laughs. The lines around her eyes crinkle. The bangles on her arm jingle. “What do I think my face says to the world? I think it says I’m all that,” she says, snapping her fingers.  
     Kids clap like they just seen a good movie, and they yell stuff like: “Go on, Miss Saunders.