**The Skin I'm In (Chapter 3)** by Sharon Flake

*This excerpt comes from The Skin I’m In, a novel written by Sharon Flake and published in 1998.* *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.*

I didn’t always hang with Char.  Last year, I hung by myself.  I went to class.  Got mostly A’s.  Nobody even noticed me till Caleb Jamaal Assam came along.  Caleb’s the smartest boy in school.  Cute.  Friendly.  A poet.  I should of known being with him was gonna cause me trouble.
    He stared at me half the year.  I thought he saw what everybody else saw.  Skinny, poor, black Maleeka.  But Caleb saw something different.  He said I was pretty.  Said he liked my eyes and sweet cocoa brown skin .  He wrote me poems and letters.  He put spearmint gum inside.  Walked me to class.  Gave me a ring.  I ain’t told Momma.
    After a while, everybody knew.  Charlese and them laughed when Caleb and I walked by.  They’d stuck out their legs and tried to trip me.  They wrote Caleb notes saying not even the Goodwill would want my clothes.  Somebody said I had hair so nappy I needed a rake to comb it.
    It was that class trip to Washington, D.C., where things really fell apart.  Caleb sat next to me.  They teased us all the way there.  Barks came from the back of the bus.  Spit bombs flew my way.  Then John-John started singing his song.  “Maleeka, Maleeka, we sure want to keep her but she so black, we just can’t see her.”  The whole bus started in.  Teachers tried to make them stop.  By then, it was too late.
    I looked at Caleb.  He gave me the goofiest smile and said, “Sorry, Maleeka…,” and moved to the front of the bus with his boys.  They slapped him five.  Everybody laughed and clapped.  I sat there with a frozen smile on my face like that stupid Mona Lisa.  Till this day, I don’t know nothing about Washington, D.C., just that I don’t ever want to go there no more.
    Things got even worse after that.  Kids picked on me more than ever.  They sang John-John’s stupid song whenever I walked the halls.  They got on my case about every little thing.  My hair.  My clothes.  My color.  My good grades.  The fact that teachers liked me.
    I didn’t want to go to school after a while , but Momma said I had to. So I came up with a plan. I went to Char and said if she would let me hang out with her, you know, kind of look out for me, I would do her homework and stuff. She laughed at first. Said for me to get out of her face. That she don’t want no geeks hanging round her, especially no ugly ones. I didn’t listen. I turned everywhere she was. The bathroom. Lunchroom. The water fountain. I even did her homework a few times to show her I knew my stuff. She gave in after a while, and kids started leaving me alone. After that, Char started bringing clothes to school for me. “You got to look like something when you with me,” she said, kicking a bag of stuff my way. But even those hundred-dollar pants suits she brought in for me to wear can’t make up for the hurt I feel when she slaps me with them mean words of hers.