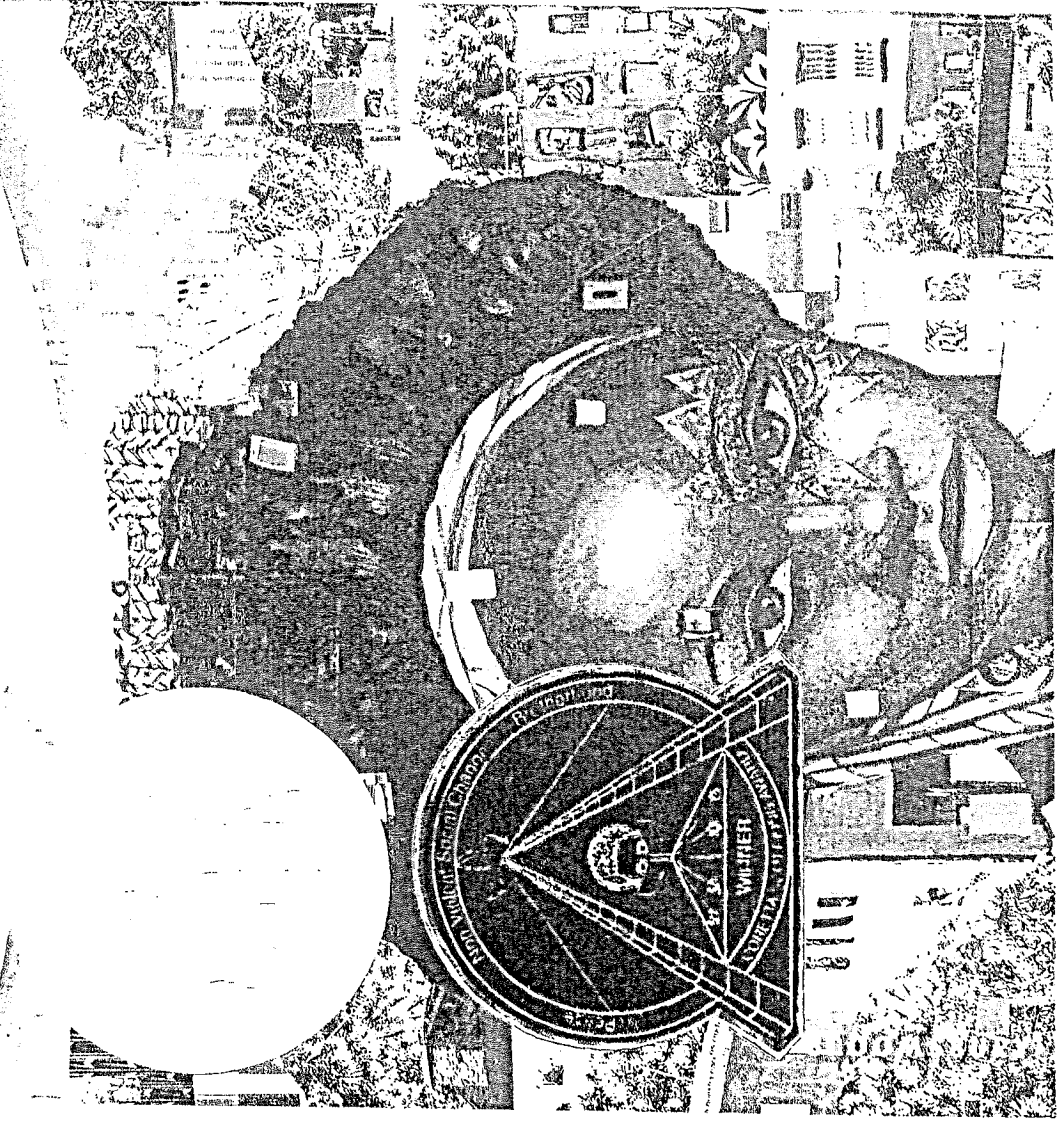


"Watson's elegantly crafted novel speaks to the myriad of people searching for themselves in the world."
—Jacqueline Woodson, award-winning and bestselling author of *Brown Girl Dreaming*

PIECING ME TOGETHER



RENÉE WATSON

RENÉE WATSON is the author of the teen novel *This Side of Home* and two acclaimed picture books: *Harlem's Little Blackbird* and *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen*, which was featured on *Where Hurricanes Happen*. Her middle-grade novel, *What NBC Mighty News*, debuted as an ABC New Voices Pick. She lives in New York City.

www.reneewatson.net



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when walking down dark streets, know how to duck at the sound of a shooting gun. I do. I am the girl who walks down the hallway, hoping for at least one boy to notice me. But the boys at school don't like me because I look nothing like their mothers, look nothing like the Dream. The boys over here, well, to them I am good for tutoring and friendship and advice giving. I am.

So Maxine is wrong—so wrong—about me.

But she is also right, because I know more than that, want more than that. Right because I am the girl who spends her summers reading books and working, tutoring at the rec, when a lot of her friends are at the rec, playing their summers away. I am the girl who knows when to stop talking back to a teacher because I know my mother will be waiting for me when I get home, asking me if I forgot who raised me. I am the girl who dreams of going places: to college, to grad school, all around the world, if I can.

Maxine is right and wrong. *Those girls* are not the opposite of me. We are perpendicular. We may be on different paths, yes. But there's a place where we touch, where we connect and are just the same.

34

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to belong

Life has only been school all day, tutoring afterward, and sad looks from Sam, who thinks I have forgotten about her. I tell her I haven't been hanging out with anyone, not even Lee Lee, and I used to see her every day. She believes me, I think. But it doesn't make her feel any better when I say, "Sorry, I can't come over." Today, though, I don't have anything to do after school, so we decide to go to Pioneer Place to shop. Well, Sam's shopping. I'm just going.

Sam drags me in and out of stores for the rest of the afternoon. The only stores we go into are for skinny girls, so I'm glad I don't have any money to buy anything. "Let's go in here," she says. We step into a store lit by bright lights and with music so loud, we can barely hear each other talk. Sam stops at the first rack and picks up a blue long-sleeved shirt that's thin and

low-cut. She holds it up to her torso and then tosses the shirt over her arm.

I have never been able to pick up a shirt, hold it up to my body, and know it can fit. I have to try everything on. Everything.

We walk to the next rack. "What about this skirt? Too short?"

I look at it, then look at the mannequin to see where it falls on her. "Um, it might be fine if you wear leggings under it."

Sam grabs a skirt in her size and adds it to the growing bundle on her arm. She goes rack to rack, deciphering jeans, shirts, and skirts. Her arms are so full that one of the salesclerks comes over to us and asks if she can start a room. She is white with curly red hair and freckles that can barely be seen unless you stand close to her. Her nails are painted emerald green and they match her leggings. "I'll put you in room four," she says. Sam continues to the back of the store. The woman looks at me. "Is there something I can help you with?"

I smile. "Thanks for asking, but I don't think there's one thing in here that could even fit my pinky toe, let alone my whole body." I am joking, but I guess she doesn't think I'm funny. She doesn't laugh or even smile.

She says, "We don't allow loitering in our store."

"Loitering? I'm just—I'm waiting for my friend."

"You are more than welcome to wait out there," she says, pointing to the bench sitting outside the entrance.

"So, I can't look around?"

"Well, of course, you can. But you can't stand idle and—I walk away. There's no point in arguing with her; plus I see a cute bag on sale in the back of the store. On my way to the bags, I get distracted by all the earrings. I try on a few pairs and then pick up a thick bracelet the color of a pomegranate and sitting in the clearance basket. It's chunky and wide, and it looks like it might fit me. I pick it up and try to slide my hand through. It will barely get past my knuckles. I try again, squeezing my fingers together as close as they can go, but the bracelet won't go on. I put it back into the basket.

"Excuse me," the salesclerk steps toward me. "I'm sorry. I just noticed you still have your bag with you. Do you mind if I take it and hold it behind the counter?"

"I, uh—"

"It's store policy."

I look around the store. The woman standing at the rack next to me has her clutch in her right hand. She is white. The woman two racks from her has a purse hanging on her left shoulder. Also white. Before I can object, she says, "Your bag is quite large. Much larger than theirs, which is why—"

"If you're not taking everyone's bag, you're not taking mine," I tell her.

"I'm sorry, but if you don't cooperate, I'll have to ask you to leave."

"Don't worry about asking me." I walk out of the store, right past all the other women who heard this lady ask me for my bag while they are still holding on to theirs. None of them say

anything. Most look away, like they are trying not to witness this. Others stare and shake their heads in disappointment. I'm not sure if the gesture is geared toward me or the clerk.

I sit on a bench outside of the store and wait for Sam. One of the women who was able to hold on to her purse comes out of the store, a shopping bag in hand. She walks over to me and says, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I had to let you know that what that woman did to you was wrong. If I were you, I'd write a letter to her manager." She walks away, and I am left with her apology and the scent of her lingering perfume.

When Sam comes out, she asks, "Why'd you come out here?" I tell her everything that happened.

"No way," she says.

"I'm serious. That really just happened," I tell her. "Did you get to take your backpack into the dressing room?" She looks at mine, lifts it up to hers, and says, "Yes, but yours is a little bigger."

"By, what? An inch? Really, Sam? You're going to side with that racist salesclerk?"

We walk to the next store. "I wouldn't call that racist," Sam says.

"So what would you call it?"

"I don't know. Maybe you seemed up to something because you weren't buying any clothes."

"So big girls can't go into stores for skinny girls and look at the accessories? That's a problem too?"

Sam slows down. "That's not what I'm saying. I don't think it had anything to do with your race or your size. I think maybe she was just trying to do her job. That's all."

I don't know what's worse. Being mistreated because of the color of your skin, your size, or having to prove that it really happened.