

mujer a mujer
woman to woman

dejar
to leave



respirar
to breathe



promesar
to promise

la verdad
the truth

PIECING ME TOGETHER



"Important and deeply moving."
JOHN GREEN

RENÉE WATSON



BLOOMSBURY

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1

español

Spanish language

I am learning to speak.

To give myself a way out. A way in.

2

tener éxito
to succeed

When I learned the Spanish word for *succeed*, I thought it was kind of ironic that the word *exit* is embedded in it. Like the universe was telling me that in order for me to make something of this life, I'd have to leave home, my neighborhood, my friends.

And maybe I've already started. For the past two years I've attended St. Francis High School on the other side of town, away from everything and everyone I love. Tomorrow is the first day of junior year, and you'd think it was my first day as a freshman, the way my stomach is turning. I don't think I'll ever get used to being at St. Francis while the rest of my friends are at Northside. I begged Mom to let me go to my neighborhood high school, but she just kept telling me, "Jade, honey, this is a good opportunity." One I couldn't pass up. It's the best private

school in Portland, which means it's mostly white, which means it's expensive. I didn't want to get my hopes up. What was the point of applying if, once I got accepted, Mom wouldn't be able to afford for me to go?

But Mom had done her research. She knew St. Francis offered financial aid. So I applied, and once I got accepted, I received a full scholarship, so I kind of had to go.

So here I am, trying to pick out something to wear that doesn't look like I'm trying too hard to impress or that I don't care about how I look. St. Francis doesn't have uniforms, and even though everyone says it doesn't matter how you look on the outside, it does. Especially at St. Francis. I bought clothes with the money I made from working as a tutor at the rec center over the summer. I offered Mom some of the money I earned, to help with the bills or at least the groceries, but she wasn't having any of that. She told me to spend it on my school clothes and supplies. I saved some of it, though. Just in case.

Mom comes into my room without knocking, like always. "I won't be here tomorrow morning when you leave for school," she says. She seems sad about this, but I don't think it's a big deal. "You won't see much of me this week. I'm working extra hours."

Mom used to work as a housekeeper at Emanuel Hospital, but she got fired because she was caught stealing supplies. She sometimes brought home blankets and the small lotions that are given to patients. Snacks, too, like saltine crackers, juice boxes. Then one of her coworkers reported her. Now Mom works

for her friend's mother, Ms. Louise, a rich old lady who can't do much for herself. Mom makes Ms. Louise breakfast, lunch, and dinner, gives her baths, and takes her to doctors' appointments. She cleans up the accidents Ms. Louise sometimes has when she can't make it to the bathroom. Ms. Louise's daughter comes at night, but sometimes she has a business trip to go on, so Mom stays.

I know Mom isn't here just to tell me her schedule for the week, because it's posted on the fridge. That's how we communicate. We write our schedules on the dry-erase board and use it to let each other know what we're up to. I close my closet, turn around, look at her, and wait. I know what's coming. Every year since I started at St. Francis, Mom comes to my room the night before school and starts to give me the Talk. Tonight she's taking a while to get to it, but I know it's coming. She asks questions she already knows the answers to—have I registered to take the SATs yet, and am I still going to tutor at the rec, now that school has started?—and then she says, "Jade, are you going to make some friends this year?"

Here it is. The Talk.

"Really, Mom?"

"Yes, really. You need some friends."

"I have Lee Lee."

"You need friends who go to St. Francis. You've been there for two years. How is it that you haven't made any new friends?"

"Well, at least I haven't made enemies," I say.

Mom sighs.

"I have friends there, Mom. They're just not my *best* friends. It's not like I go to school and sit all by myself in the cafeteria. I'm fine," I tell her.

"Are you sure?" Mom asks. "Because I swear, it's like if you and Lee Lee aren't joined together at the hip, you act like you can't survive."

Mom doesn't understand that I want to have Lee Lee to look at when something funny happens—something that's only funny to us. Our eyes have a way of finding each other no matter where we are in a room so we can give each other a look. A look that says, *Did you see that?* But at St. Francis, I don't have anyone to share that look with. Most things that seem ridiculous to me are normal there. Like when my humanities teacher asked, "Who are the invisible people in our community? Who are the people we, as a society, take for granted?"

Some girl in my class said her housekeeper.

It wasn't that I didn't think she took her housekeeper for granted; it was that I couldn't believe she had one. And then so many of my classmates nodded, like they could all relate. I actually looked across the room at the only other black girl in the class, and she was raising her hand, saying, "She took my answer," and so I knew we'd probably never make eye contact about anything. And I realized how different I am from everyone else at St. Francis. Not only because I'm black and almost everyone else is white, but because their mothers are the kind of people who hire housekeepers, and my mother is the kind of person who works as one.

Lee Lee would get that. She'd look at me, and we'd have a whole conversation with only our eyes. But now I have to wait till I get home from school to fill her in on the crazy things these rich people say and do.

Mom keeps on with her talk. "I really wish you'd make at least one friend—a close friend—this year at your school," she says. Then she says good night to me and walks into the hallway, where she turns and says, "Almost forgot to remind you—did you see my note on the fridge? You have a meeting with Mrs. Parker during lunch tomorrow."

"On the first day of school? About what?"

Mom shrugs. "She didn't give me details. Must be about the study abroad program," she says with a smile.

"You think so?" For the first time in—well, for the first time ever—I am excited to talk to Mrs. Parker. This is the year that teachers select students to volunteer in a foreign country and do service learning projects. That was the thing that made me want to attend St. Francis. Well, that and the scholarship. When we met with Mrs. Parker, my guidance counselor, I think she could tell I was not feeling going to school away from my friends. But she knew from my application essay that I wanted to take Spanish and that I wanted to travel, so she said, "Jade, St. Francis provides opportunities for our students to travel the world." She had me at that. Of course, she didn't tell me I'd have to wait until I was a junior.

Mrs. Parker always has some kind of opportunity to tell me about. Freshman year it was an essay writing class that

happened after school. Sophomore year it was the free SAT prep class that met on Saturday mornings. *Saturday mornings*. She likes to take me downtown to the Arlene Schnitzer Hall whenever there's a speaker or poet in town, telling me I should hear so-and-so because kids in other cities in Oregon don't get these kinds of opportunities. I know Mrs. Parker is looking out for me—that she promised Mom she'd make sure I'd have a successful four years at St. Francis—but sometimes I wish I could say, *Oh, no, thank you, Mrs. Parker. I have enough opportunities. My life is full of opportunities. Give an opportunity to someone else*.

But girls like me, with coal skin and hula-hoop hips, whose mommas barely make enough money to keep food in the house, have to take opportunities every chance we get.

Before Mom walks away, she says, "I'm going to pick up some groceries after I get off work tomorrow. Anything you need me to get?"

"Did you see what I added to the list on the fridge?" I ask, smiling.

Mom laughs. "That was you? I thought maybe it was E.J. who wrote that."

E.J. is my mom's brother, but I have never called him Uncle E.J. He is twenty, so we are more like siblings. He started staying with us when he dropped out of college. Well, let him tell it: he took a leave of absence, but it's been a year and I haven't heard anything about his trying to go back. Instead he's busy making a name for himself as a local DJ.

Mom walks to her bedroom. "Mint chocolate chip ice cream. I'll see what I can do," she says. "If I have enough money, I'll get it. Promise."

I finish getting ready for school, thinking to myself that I know all about Mom's promises. She does her best to make them, but they are fragile and break easily.

3

dejar
to leave

The next morning I wake up before the sun. So early that only trucks and people up to no good are on the streets. There's nothing in the fridge but baking soda in the way back and half-empty bottles of ketchup, barbeque sauce, and mustard on the door. I drink a glass of water, take a shower, get dressed, and leave by six thirty so I can get to the bus.

I ride the 35 through the maze of houses that all look like one another, like sisters who are not twins but everyone thinks they are. Living here means when people ask, "Where do you live?" and you say, "The New Columbia," they say, "You mean the Villa?" and remind you that your neighborhood used to be public housing for World War II shipyard workers, and they remind you how by the eighties a lot of those apartments were run-down and how really, they were just the projects with a

different name. At least that's what Mom says. She's always telling me, "I don't care if they give the 'hood a new name or not; it's still the 'hood."

Lots of people can't find beauty in my neighborhood, but I can. Ever since elementary school, I've been making beauty out of everyday things—candy wrappers, pages of a newspaper, receipts, rip-outs from magazines. I cut and tear, arrange and rearrange, and glue them down, morphing them into something no one else thought they could be. Like me. I'm ordinary too. The only thing fancy about me is my name: Jade. But I am not precious like the gem. There is nothing exquisite about my life. It's mine, though, so I'm going to make something out of it.

Not only for me but for my mom, too, because she is always saying, "Never thought I'd be here forever. But that's how things turned out." And when she says this, I know she means that if she hadn't had me when she was sixteen, she would have gone to college, would have maybe moved away from Portland, would have had fewer struggles. She never outright blames me for making her life harder than it needed to be; instead she pushes me. Hard. "Because no one pushed me," she says. One of us has to make it out of here, and I'm her only child, her only hope of remaking herself.

Dad saw a different future for himself too. But unlike Mom, I think I changed him in all the best ways. He's always telling me how I made him settle down, get himself together. "And just because me and your mom didn't work out, doesn't mean I don't love you," he tells me. He lives with his girlfriend, who I actually

like, even though I'd never tell Mom that. Mom never talks bad about her, but I know I am not supposed to like this woman, who knew my dad had a girlfriend, a daughter, but flirted with him anyway. This woman, who is white and everything opposite of my mom, with her college degree and good-paying job. I try to stay out of any talk about Dad, his girlfriend, and what happened with him and Mom. At least he's in my life. A lot of my friends can't say that. Dad calls me his queen, says I am the best thing that happened to him.

I think about this as I ride to school. How I am someone's answered prayer but also someone's deferred dream. The bus moves and stops, moves and stops, making its way through North Portland. We pass the transition blocks, where North Portland becomes Northeast. Within just a block or two, you stop seeing modest apartment complexes and start seeing houses and luxury apartment buildings, restaurants with outdoor patios, and shops of all kinds.

The bus stops and four people get off. A white girl gets on and goes to sit in the first empty seat she sees. She has dark brown hair pulled back and twisted into a mess of a ponytail. She is thin, so it's easy for her to slide between the two people sitting at the front of the bus. She opens a book and disappears into it, never looking up.

We enter downtown and Book Girl is still on the bus. Anyone who stays on after this stop, besides me, is someone headed to work. She looks my age, so I doubt she's got a job to go to. I wonder if she's going to St. Francis.

I get off the bus at the same stop as Book Girl. She walks out the front door; I go out the back. I have never seen her before—and I would have noticed if she were taking the bus with me last year. Most of the students at St. Francis live over here, so they walk or drive to school. She is walking fast, too fast for me to catch up to, so I don't get to ask her if she's new. She blends into the flock of students entering the school.

There are a few sections of color in the crowd. There's Rose, one of the other black girls here, who I thought I'd become friends with because on my first day we talked about our braids and swapped ideas for styles. She's a year above me, so we don't have classes together and never have the same lunch period. But whenever we see each other in the hallway, we smile. I should have told Mom about her.

Then there's Josiah—the tech nerd who somehow in a place like this is one of the coolest, most popular guys in the school. I like him when he's with only me, when I'm tutoring him and drilling him on Spanish vocabulary. When it's us, he's regular, just a black guy who loves to geek out and experiment with making apps and learning coding. He's smart. Real smart. Just not so great at making his tongue roll an *r*. But when he gets around his white friends—especially the boys—he puts on a voice and uses slang and acts in ways that seem so opposite of who he really is.

Josiah stops me in the hallway. "Hey, a group of us are going to Zack's Burgers at lunch. You in?"

"Sorry, can't," I tell him. "I have a meeting with Mrs. Parker." He doesn't have to know I can't afford to eat out for lunch.

"Okay," Josiah says. "Next time." He walks away. For so many reasons, I want to say yes to him. Eating a burger at Zack's would be so much better than eating a turkey wrap from the cafeteria, but nothing would make me miss this meeting with Mrs. Parker. I can't wait to find out what country we're going to, what the service learning project will be. Of everything Mrs. Parker has signed me up for, this one means the most. This time it's not a program offering something I need, but it's about what I can *give*.

4

querer

to want

I am sitting in Mr. Flores's Spanish class, and I see that the girl from the bus is here too. Mr. Flores puts the class in pairs, and for a moment I think he's going to have the two of us get together, but instead I am partnered with Glamour Girl. Glamour Girl is one of the few black girls in my grade. But she doesn't exchange smiles with me in the hallway. Her real name is Kennedy, but I call her Glamour Girl because every time I see her, she is applying lip gloss or fixing her hair.

Right now her head is buried in her designer book bag. I look at all the things Glamour Girl is taking out of her bag and tossing onto the desk: a cell phone, a makeup carrier, a coin purse the same color as her bag, a small bottle of lotion, two kinds of lip gloss—one with a pink tint, the other clear—a debit card, and a small tin of peppermints.

I stare at the mints, and my stomach growls. Loud. I wish I could silence it. Big girls can't have growling stomachs.

Glamour Girl curses. She can't find her pen. I'm not surprised. I've never seen her with anything school-related. She puts everything back into her bag. Except the mints. She opens the tin and takes out one round candy. As soon as she puts it into her mouth, I smell peppermint and my stomach rumbles again.

"You want one?" Glamour Girl asks. But she is not talking to me. She is tapping the shoulder of the girl in front of her. Then everyone around us is reaching their greedy fingers into the tin, taking out small round candies. Someone passes the tin to me. There aren't any whole ones left. Just peppermint dust and a few that are broken in half. I take two halves and rest them on my tongue. I close my eyes and suck hard, savoring the cool flavor.

I give the almost empty tin to Glamour Girl and thank her. I am regretting that we aren't friends. Maybe if we were friends, she would have offered the mints to me first and I would have a perfectly round one.

When the lunch bell rings, I don't even stop at my locker. I go straight to Mrs. Parker's office, where she offers me candy from the jar on her desk. I take a cherry Jolly Rancher. Like most of the adults in this school, Mrs. Parker is white. I imagine her to be a fun grandmother to the three boys in the pictures that decorate her office.

There's a picture of her skating with them at Oaks Amusement Park. "Aren't they just the cutest little boys you've ever laid

eyes on?" she says. "Okay, well, I'm biased, but still." The three boys have copper skin and tight dark-brown curls. I look at the rest of the framed photos in her room. There's a photo of a girl, who must be her daughter, standing with a brown man, the three little boys gathered around their legs, at the bottom of Multnomah Falls. Mrs. Parker picks up the photo. "My youngest and her husband," she tells me. Then she picks up a framed photo of her and her grandsons at a Winterhawks hockey game. They are all dressed in Winterhawks jerseys, and the logo in the center of their shirts is a Native American with four feathers in his hair and paint on his face. I wonder how a people's culture, a people's history, becomes a mascot. I wonder how this school counselor and her three grandsons can wear a stereotype on their shirts and hats and not care.

"Are you a Winterhawks fan?" Mrs. Parker asks.

"No, not really."

"Oh, too bad. I get free tickets all the time. Let me know if you ever want to check them out."

"Thank you," I say. Why do people who can afford anything they want get stuff for free all the time?

"Now let's get to business," Mrs. Parker says.

I take a deep breath and prepare to act surprised when she tells me she's nominating me for the study abroad program. She picks up a folder, looks at it, and like an orator who decides to improv instead of using her notes, tosses the folder back onto her desk and asks, "Jade, what do you want?"

To eat.

To travel with the study abroad program. Maybe go to Argentina.

To taste asado hot off the fire.

To lick my fingers after enjoying sweet alfajores—the dulce de leche dancing on my tongue.

To eat and speak Spanish in Argentina, in Costa Rica. In New York, California. In job interviews where knowing more than one language moves your application to the top of the pile.

To give myself a way out. A way in. Because language can take you places.

Mrs. Parker clears her throat. "It's okay if you don't have an answer yet," she says. "That's why I'm here. To help you figure it out. To help you get it once you know what *it* is." She picks the folder back up and hands it to me.

The front of the folder shows a group of black women—adults and teens—smiling and embracing one another. *Woman to Woman: A Mentorship Program for African American Girls*. Mrs. Parker is smiling like what she's about to tell me is that she found the cure for cancer. But really, what she has to tell me sounds more like a honking horn that's stuck, a favorite glass shattering into countless pieces on the floor.

Mrs. Parker tells me that twelve girls from high schools throughout the city have been selected to participate in Woman to Woman. Each of us will be paired with a mentor. "Look at all the great activities that are planned for you," she says. She

takes the folder from my hand and opens it, pulling out a sheet titled *Monthly Outings*:

A Night at Oregon Symphony
Museum Visit at Portland Art Museum
Fun Day at Oaks Amusement Park

"Do you have any questions?" Mrs. Parker asks.

I want to speak up, ask, *What about the nomination for the study abroad program?* I want to ask about that day she looked into my eyes and said, *"St. Francis provides opportunities for our students to travel the world,"* but instead I ask, "Why was I chosen for this?"

Mrs. Parker clears her throat. "Well, uh, selection was based on, uh, gender, grade, and, well, several other things."

"Like?"

"Well, uh, several things. Teacher nominations . . . uh, need."

"Mrs. Parker, I don't need a mentor," I tell her.

"Every young person could use a caring adult in her life."

"I have my mother." And my uncle, and my dad. "You think I don't have anyone who cares about me?"

"No, no. That's not what I said." Mrs. Parker clears her throat. "We want to be as proactive as possible, and you know, well, statistics tell us that young people with your set of circumstances are, well, at risk for certain things, and we'd like to help you navigate through those circumstances." Mrs. Parker takes a candy out of her jar and pops it into her mouth. "I'd like you to

thoroughly look over the information and consider it. This is a good *opportunity* for you."

That word shadows me. Follows me like a stray cat.

I stand up. "What happens if I don't participate?" I ask.

"If you *do* participate and complete the two-year program—keeping your grade point average at a three point five or above—you are awarded a scholarship to any Oregon college," Mrs. Parker tells me.

A scholarship to college?

I sit down, lean back in the seat, hear Mrs. Parker out.

She lowers her voice and talks as if what she is telling me is off the record. "You know, my son-in-law grew up in your same neighborhood. He lives in Lake Oswego now. Not a lot of African Americans live there, you know. And, well, he's a grown man, and even he's having a hard time adjusting. So, well, I think this school can be hard for anyone, but especially if you don't really have anyone who, you know, you can relate to. That's why I selected a mentor for you who went to this school," Mrs. Parker says. "She graduated four years ago. And now she's a graduate of Portland State University. You remind me so much of her," she says.

I don't say anything. I've already made up my mind that I'm going to do this, but I'm kind of enjoying listening to Mrs. Parker beg a little.

"Jade. You're a smart girl. Are you really going to pass on a chance to get a scholarship to college?"

"I'll do it," I say. And then: "Thank you for the *opportunity*."

She hands me a sheet of paper with a list of questions on it. "We'll give this to your mentor before you meet so she can learn a little about you," she says. She hands me a pen.

I fill out the form.

Name: *Jade Butler*
Favorite Color: *Yellow*
Hobbies: *Collaging*

And then there's a question:

What do you hope to get out of this program?

I leave that one blank.

5

promesa
promise

Mom's scent hugs me as soon as I get in the door. She is stretched out on her twin bed. And even though she is resting, I can tell by her face that there is no peace for her, not even in her dreams.

She did not bother to take off her nylons or her shoes that she says are more comfortable than clouds. The TV is watching her, so I turn it off. Mom likes to go to sleep to noise. I think the voices keep her from feeling lonely.

In the kitchen, there are empty brown paper bags on the counter top, which means there are groceries. I open the door to the fridge: milk, butter, mayonnaise, bread, eggs, hot dogs. And in the pantry: peanut butter, jelly, cans of tuna, packages of Top Ramen. And in the freezer: family value–size ground beef, frozen pizzas. And in the way, way back—ice cream. Mint chocolate chip.

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