

Readers' Theatre:

THE ROCK AND THE RIVER

by kekla magoon

THE SCENE: Chicago, Illinois, 1968. A hospital waiting room. Sam Childs (age 13) was with his older brother, Stick, at a civil rights demonstration led by their father, a civil rights activist. The demonstration was supposed to be peaceful, but when a group of men started attacking people in the crowd, Stick fought back and was injured. Now Stick's in the emergency room, getting stitches in his forehead. Sam and his parents are in the hospital waiting room. Sam's bored, so he decides to wander around the hospital...

CHARACTERS:
SAM – a 13-year-old, African-American boy
SHOP CLERK – an older adult, Caucasian man
NARRATOR ONE
NARRATOR TWO
NARRATOR THREE
NARRATOR FOUR

This scene is excerpted from pages 13-16 of the book:

NARRATOR ONE: I walked past the nurses' desk and down the long hallway. I strolled into the hospital gift shop.

NARRATOR TWO: The man behind the cash register glanced up from his book and eyed me as I entered.

NARRATOR THREE: I walked by a wall of get-well cards and a bunch of little baskets with "It's a boy!" and "Thinking of You!" balloons attached to them. I stopped in front of a basket of fuzzy knit hats and mittens.

NARRATOR FOUR: The mittens made me think of Maxie Brown, the girl I might someday ask to be my girlfriend. I thought of her standing in the schoolyard, her cold bare hands balled up in fists at the ends of her sleeves.

NARRATOR ONE: The sign on the basket read: Mittens \$2.50, Hats \$4.00.

NARRATOR TWO: I stuck my hand in my pocket. I had a couple dollars on me, but I wasn't sure it would be enough.

SHOP CLERK: Put it back.

NARRATOR THREE: The voice startled me, and I turned.

NARRATOR FOUR: The old man behind the counter glared at me.

SAM: What?

SHOP CLERK: I said, put it back.

NARRATOR ONE: He moved out from behind the counter and approached me, shaking his fist.

SAM: Put what back?

SHOP CLERK: Don't give me sass, boy. You think I can't see?

NARRATOR THREE: He came up and grabbed my wrist, yanking my hand out of my pocket.

NARRATOR TWO: Two dollar bills and some coins dropped onto the floor as he pried open my fingers.

SAM: I don't understand. I didn't take anything.

SHOP CLERK: Turn out your pockets, both of them.

NARRATOR FOUR: I inverted the linings in my other pocket.

NARRATOR TWO: The man frowned.

SHOP CLERK: All right, now, get your sticky fingers out of my shop you little –

NARRATOR ONE: He called me a couple of names that would have had Stick tossing fists, or made Father turn cool and stoic as he walked away.

SHOP CLERK: Get out before I call the police.

NARRATOR THREE: I stood there and took it.

NARRATOR TWO: I stared at my two dollars and change spread on the floor beside me, then at the purple mittens.

NARRATOR FOUR: Father would say, pick up your money, walk out right now, don't give this man the satisfaction of humiliating you.

NARRATOR ONE: Stick would say, if you want the mittens, don't let this racist jerk stop you from getting what you want.

NARRATOR TWO: I bent over and gathered up the spilled cash.

NARRATOR THREE: I took a deep breath as I straightened out.

SAM: I want to buy those mittens. The purple pair.

NARRATOR TWO: The man stood there sizing me up. I waited.

NARRATOR FOUR: I'd have to brush past him to get out of the shop, and I didn't want to get that close.

NARRATOR ONE: The man picked up the purple mittens and pointed in the direction of the register. He made me walk in front of him until we got to the counter.

NARRATOR THREE: He moved around behind, keeping an eye on me all the while. He shoved the mittens into a small paper sack and placed it on the counter.

STORE CLERK: Two fifty.

NARRATOR ONE: I handed him my two dollars and counted out 50 cents.

NARRATOR TWO: He recounted it twice, then pointed to the door.

STORE CLERK: Now get your thieving behind out of my shop, and don't come back here."

NARRATOR THREE: I reached for the bag, and cleared my throat.

SAM: Can I have the receipt?

NARRATOR FOUR: No way I'd let him accuse me when I walked out.

NARRATOR TWO: The man ripped the little piece of paper clear of the register without moving his eyes from me and I watched him tuck it into the bag.

NARRATOR ONE: I swallowed the automatic "thank you," that formed in my throat and left the shop without another word.

NARRATOR FOUR: In the hallway, I leaned against the wall until my heart stopped racing. I tried to breathe away the tightness in my stomach, but it was stuck there, like someone's fist.

NARRATOR ONE: I'd forgotten what happens when you go someplace new. How careful you had to be. Why I wasn't allowed to go into the white neighborhoods without Father or Mama.

NARRATOR THREE: I was still shaking a little as I made my way back to the waiting room.

[End of Scene]

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What do you think about this scene? How do you feel after reading it?

Did anything that happened surprise you?

In his mind, Sam considers different actions he could take in response to the unfair accusation. Then he acts. What does his choice of action tell about him?

How would you have reacted, if you were in Sam's place? Would you have bought the mittens?

Why does Sam ask for the receipt? What does this show about Sam, and about the time and place that he lives?