



Portrait by Patrick Kehoe

**'I'm not
going
to stoop
and
apologise
and
grovel'**

Two years ago, Rachel Dolezal was a respected black rights activist and teacher in Washington state. Then she was exposed as a white woman who had deceived almost everyone she knew. Why did she do it? She tells Decca Aitkenhead she had no choice - and, despite universal hostility, continues to identify as black

Spokane is a modest town of wide streets and snow-capped horizons in Washington state, 90 miles from the Canadian border. Its population is 91% white, and voted heavily for Donald Trump. The lunchtime crowd in a downtown hotel bar is too absorbed in the ice hockey game on big screens to notice the woman who sidles into the lobby, and though curious to see what kind of attention she would attract, I feel relieved for her. Her great spiralled mane bounces as she approaches in a jade dress and heels, but only a fool would mistake the look for self-assurance.

Two years ago, life was going well for Dolezal. Branch president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and chair of Spokane's police ombudsman commission, she was well known and respected for her civil rights activism. Her Eastern Washington University students adored her; her 21-year-old son was about to intern for a diversity advocacy group in Washington DC; her younger son was doing well in high school. When a local TV news crew arrived one afternoon to interview her, Dolezal thought they were there to talk about hate crimes.

"Are you," asked the reporter, "African American?" Like a cartoon, her features froze. "I don't understand the question." The reporter pressed, "Are your parents white?" Dolezal turned from the camera and fled.

Footage of the confrontation flew around the world. Dolezal's white parents released photographs of their daughter as a blonde white child, and appeared on TV to denounce her as a fraud; she had been living a lie, pretending to be black, when she was no more African American than they were. Dolezal resigned from her NAACP position, was fired by the university, lost her local newspaper column and was removed from the police ombudsman commission. Enthralled by her disgrace, talkshows and radio phone-ins sneered and raged. Why did she do it? What had she been thinking? When it emerged that she had once sued

a university for discriminating against her because she was *white*, Dolezal's notoriety was complete.

African American commentators called her a "blackface", guilty of the worst extremes of cultural appropriation. She was "mentally ill", and had cheated black people out of positions that were rightfully theirs. When Dolezal quoted the activist Dick Gregory to black talkshow host Loni Love - "White isn't a race, it's a state of mind" - the host exploded: "No, let me tell you something. I'm black. I can't be you, I can't reverse myself. That's the difference." Twitter span with comic memes, and still burns with comments along the lines of: "Why hasn't anybody beaten her up already?"

"This is obviously an issue a lot of people want to say things about," reflects Dolezal now. "And it needs to be talked about, so it's kind of helpful to create a punching bag. There's nobody saying, 'Well, that's racist if you say that about Rachel', or 'That's sexist if you say that about Rachel.' There's no protected class for me. I'm this generic, ambiguous scapegoat for white people to call me a race traitor and take out their hostility on. And I'm a target for anger and pain about white people from the black community. It's like I am the worst of all these worlds."

Today Dolezal is jobless, and feeding her family with food stamps. A friend helped her pay this month's rent; next month she expects to be homeless. She has applied for more than 100 jobs, but no one will hire her, not even to stack supermarket shelves. She applied for a position at the university where she used to teach, and says she was interviewed by former colleagues who pretended to have no recollection of having met her. The only work she has been offered is reality TV, and porn. She has changed her name on all her legal documents, but is still recognised wherever she goes. People point at her and laugh.

The 39-year-old says she can count the friends she has left in town on her fingers. "Right now the only place that I feel understood and completely

accepted is with my kids and my sister." She has written a memoir, titled *In Full Color*, but 30 publishing houses turned her down before she found one willing to print it. "The narrative was that I'd offended both communities in an unforgivable way, so anybody who gave me a dime would be contributing to wrong and oppression and bad things. To a liar and a fraud and a con."

She wrote it, she says, "to set the record straight. But also to open up this dialogue about race and identity, and to just encourage people to be exactly who they are." Some will read it as the first draft of a new version of identity politics, which casts race - just like gender - on a spectrum, and its author as the world's first trans-black case. Others won't believe a word of it. I'm not even sure whether this is a story about race, or a strange tale of one family's dysfunction.

Dolezal was born at home in 1977, "on the side of the mountain" in rural Montana, to a pair of white Christian fundamentalists called Larry and Ruthanne; they entered "Jesus Christ" on her birth certificate as the only other witness to her birth. From a young age, Dolezal and her older brother Joshua were put to work on the family homestead, weeding vegetables, foraging for berries and hunting elk; in full-length homemade dresses and dog hair sweaters, she "looked like something out of *Little House On The Prairie*". Dirt poor and uneducated, her parents lived by the Bible, spoke in tongues and beat her.

"I felt like I was constantly having to atone for some unknown thing. Larry and Ruthanne would say I was possessed and exorcise my demons, because I was very creative and that was seen as sensual, which was of the devil. It seems like everything that came naturally, instinctively to me was wrong. That was literally beaten into us. I had to redeem myself," she says with a light, mirthless laugh, "from being me. And I never felt good enough to be saved." »

Rachel Dolezal aged 18



SPLASH

'I felt I was constantly having to atone for some unknown thing. I was very creative, which was seen as of the devil'

Blond and freckled, “like Pippi Longstocking”, she recalls choosing brown crayons to draw pictures of herself with dark skin and curly hair, like the Bantu women she saw in National Geographic. She would hide in the garden, smear herself in mud, and fantasise that she had been kidnapped from Africa. What she describes as a profound sense of not belonging followed her to school, where the other children wore trainers and had Doritos in their packed lunches, not elk tongue sandwiches. She did everything she could to fit in, picking huckleberries to earn money to buy Nikes, “but I knew I wasn’t one of them. I was always on the fringe.” The only person who really understood her life was Joshua, but he was the favoured child, the son, and her relationship with her brother grew increasingly uneasy.

Dolezal says the first true love she ever knew was for the black Haitian baby and three African American babies her parents adopted in quick succession when she was 15. They said they were “saving children from the war on the unborn”; but Ruthanne soon self-diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, and the care of Dolezal’s new siblings fell to their big sister. Simply changing their homemade cloth diapers, Dolezal writes, “was like working on an assembly line”. As they grew older, she became highly attuned to racial bias in Montana, and felt fiercely protective towards them. She learned to braid their hair, taught them black history, and writes: “A funny thing happened. I began to feel even more connected to it myself. I began to see the world through black eyes.”

She read about a fellowship in Jackson, Mississippi which preached racial reconciliation and ran a Christian community where blacks and whites pooled their wages and shared their meals. When the time came to leave for college, she chose a school in Jackson, and set off for the south. On arrival she joined the fellowship, and at college signed up to the Black Students’ Union. “I didn’t really feel comfortable around

southern whites, because the world view in the south is just so ingrained. But I felt this huge sense of homecoming with regards to the black community. On the white side I noticed hatred, fear and ignorance. And on the black side I noticed fear, anger and pain. I felt more at home with the anger and pain towards whites, because I had some anger and pain - toward not just my parents but also, even though I wouldn’t have been able to articulate it then, towards white supremacy. I unapologetically stood on the black side. I was standing with my convictions, standing also with my siblings, standing with justice.”

As time went on, she took to wearing dashikis and braiding her hair. “For me it was a political statement. It was me saying: ‘I am renouncing the propaganda standards of European beauty being superior.’ It was almost like cultural disobedience, going the other way, to say, ‘You know, this is actually beautiful to me.’” Cultural appropriation wouldn’t become a buzzword until many years later, “but I had the clear feeling that I didn’t want to offend anybody,” Dolezal says. Cultural appropriation is defined as “taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions or artefacts from someone else’s culture without permission”; Dolezal consulted African American women in her church about the protocol of braiding her hair. “And they were like, ‘To copy is to compliment.’ Everybody said that.”

When strangers began to assume from her appearance that she was black, she did not correct them. “I felt like the misperception was maybe that it was biological. But I felt what they were perceiving was accurate.” For the first time in her life, she felt beautiful.

Her parents didn’t think so. “They would act disgusted, like, ‘Why would you do that to your hair?’” Visits home became increasingly tense, for though still terrified of God and hell, Dolezal was growing more and more conflicted. “I was attracted to women as well as men, for which

I felt very, very sinful. I mean, my first kiss was with a black woman, and it was like a whole year repenting for the feelings that I got from it.”

Salvation, in every sense, presented itself in the form of an African American born-again Christian in Jackson called Kevin. In her final year of college, when she was 22, the couple became engaged. Months before they were due to be married, Dolezal lost her virginity to him. “I called and told [her father] Larry the next morning. It was like a confessional, basically, and I said I want to make it right with God. So, sex on Monday, we got married on Friday.”

It was not a happy marriage. She says Kevin hated her looking black, so Dolezal went back to “repressing and censoring myself” by dressing as a white, silky blonde. He was bewildered by her application to study fine art at Howard University in Washington DC - “Why do you want to go to a black university?” - but she won a graduate scholarship and teaching position on the strength of a portfolio of artwork featuring exclusively black and African themes. If Howard was surprised when their scholarship student turned out to be white, Dolezal says no one ever said so. “The whole first year everything was fine. Everyone was cool.”

But by the end of her first year she was heavily pregnant, at which point her tutor rescinded her scholarship and teaching position. She sued Howard for discrimination on the grounds of gender, and - in a move that would later prove reputationally catastrophic - also race: because she was white.

Dolezal blames her lawyer. He “latched on”, she says, to the fact her tutor had told her: “Your white relatives can probably pay your tuition.” But she looks awkward and defensive as she says this. “I didn’t understand. I wasn’t a law expert. I don’t know precedents. I don’t know all these strategies and ways to fight a case.” Did she honestly believe she was discriminated against for being »

Rachel Dolezal in 1996 with her parents, Larry (left) and Ruthanne (right), her brother Joshua, and three of the four children the family had recently adopted



The first love she knew was for the babies her parents adopted when she was 15. ‘I began to see the world through black eyes’

white? “I would say the primary discrimination was gender.” She pauses. “It sounds bad, right. It sounds like I just played that card for my advantage. But I just knew that if I did not have my scholarship, we were going to lose our apartment and Kevin was going to have to drop out of school.”

The couple and their young son, Franklin, moved to north Idaho. The marriage was increasingly unhappy. She recalls a photo taken of her shortly before she and Franklin left, “with bleach blond hair. And I look so dead inside. I remember feeling like I was almost gone, like I had repressed and suppressed all of myself.”

At Howard she had been introduced to the idea that racial identity was “an invention of human beings”; an arbitrary classification devised by colonial whites to justify their power and privilege. “It’s socially constructed as a world view, and people operate within it, but that also means that it can be reconstructed or deconstructed. And this was a great awakening for me, because it meant I wasn’t forced to own whiteness. It wasn’t like the honest thing to do is say, ‘I’m white’, because race is a social construct. And this gave me this great sense of internal freedom: I wasn’t actually all fucked up. I was actually on to something this whole time.”

Newly divorced, she reached a decision. “For the first time in my life, I really decided consciously to be free from the repression, and free from feeling like I had to do things in a way that was acceptable to other people. I had the courage to be exactly who I was.” From that day on, Dolezal would be unambiguously and publicly black, and remains so to this day.

It was surprisingly easy. She sunbathed, styled her hair into braids or dreadlocks or weaves, and applied bronzer when her tan faded. She stopped going to church, began dating men and women, ticked the box marked ‘black’ on medical and employment forms (she still does today), and when anyone asked about her ethnicity, she

would say she was “mixed”. If asked which parent was black, she would say her mother was white. She made extra income by braiding hair.

Wasn’t she lying? “The times that I tried to explain more, I wasn’t understood more. Nobody wanted to hear, ‘I’m pan-African, pro-black, bisexual, an artist, mother and educator.’ People would just be like, ‘Huh? What? What are you talking about?’ So I felt like by not talking about my biological ancestry, I gave people the opportunity to relate to me as an individual, not part of a group.”

But she was presenting herself as part of the “black” group, wasn’t she? “I do think a more complex label would be helpful, but we don’t really have that vocabulary. I feel like the idea of being trans-black would be much more accurate than ‘I’m white’. Because you know, I’m not white. There is a black side and a white side on all kinds of issues, whether it’s political, social, cultural. There’s a perspective, there’s a mentality, there’s a culture. To say that I’m black is to say, this is how I see the world, this is the philosophy, the history, this is what I love and what I honour. Calling myself black feels more accurate than saying I’m white.”

Dolezal began working at two colleges, one in north Idaho, one in east Washington. Before long she was teaching African and African American art history, devising an Africana studies syllabus, and working a third job at the Human Rights Education Institute (HREI), where she was soon made director of education. She became friends with an older civil rights activist who observed, “It seems like you could use a dad and Franklin could use a grandpa,” and became her informal adoptive father; she called him Dad. When her adoptive teenage brother Izaiah came to live with her, Dolezal became his legal guardian and presented him - at his request - as her biological son.

With the jigsaw of her new racial identity complete, Dolezal’s profile as an academic and

civil rights activist began to attract the attention of local white supremacist groups. Nooses started turning up on her front porch, and racist hate mail in her mailbox. Sinister men showed up at her office to issue threats; there were mysterious break-ins. In 2011 she moved the family across the state border to Spokane, and became involved in the local NAACP chapter. As the Black Lives Matter movement grew, Dolezal became an increasingly vocal protester, and was persuaded by fellow activists to apply for a vacancy on the Spokane police ombudsman commission. She won the position, and was nominated chair. Elected president of the NAACP’s Spokane chapter a few months later, by 2015 she was “not just perceived as black, but black and ‘uppity’.” She had never been happier.

Dolezal might still have been leading that life today. But in spring 2015, the Spokane police chief wearied of his troublesome ombudsman chair, and hired a private investigator to dig around for dirt. The PI knocked on Larry and Ruthanne’s door in Montana. All it took was a few words and old family photographs, and the chief was rid of his irritant at a stroke. The press were tipped off, the “Rachel Dolezal race faker” story broke, and within days Dolezal’s whole life lay in ruins.

Not once in three hours does Dolezal’s composure falter as she relives this story. I’m not sure how to read the glassy self-possession. Sometimes I wonder whether the isolation of her childhood left her strangely disconnected, naive about human nature and unable to grasp the way most people’s minds work. How else to explain why it never occurred to someone so clearly intelligent that black people, her friends and colleagues especially, might be furious with her?

The charge that she cheated them out of opportunities rightfully theirs came as a terrible shock. All her activist positions, she points out, were unpaid, and her Howard scholarship was »

Dolezal at a Black Lives Matter event at Eastern Washington University, January 2015



“The times I tried to explain, I wasn’t understood. Nobody wanted to hear “I’m pan-African, pro-black, bisexual””

neither reserved for black students nor won by false pretences. She says she has always been breadline poor; the idea that she got rich by pretending to be black looks absurd.

But to appropriate blackness without having experienced a lifetime of racism strikes many African Americans as equally absurd - and insulting. Dolezal wasn't prepared for this critique, either. "Have I had experiences by other people identifying me as black and behaving towards me as black? Yes. Just for as long as maybe somebody who was born categorised as black? No."

Some of the worst things that have happened to Dolezal came in her childhood and her marriage - before she presented herself as black. Does she think some African Americans struggle to see that white people can suffer, too? "I think there's definitely a stereotype of white privilege, and that stereotype gets expanded to mean rich, not oppressed, not suffering, et cetera. And yes, it's a misperception." The undeniable existence of white privilege, she argues, does not preclude the possibility of white pain.

Dolezal's desire to correct this misperception in her book is entirely understandable, but I wish someone had told her that readers can only take so much misfortune before doubt sets in: I have never read a more exhaustive encyclopaedia of outlandish injustice. In person, by contrast, she comes across as highly credible, and her central claim that a lie can be more honest than a biological "truth" has an internal logic. I don't think Dolezal deliberately or knowingly lies. What she calls her "creative non-fiction" does, though, make me uneasy. She has admitted to fabricating needless deceptions in the past - she once claimed to have been born in a tepee - which makes me worry that her subjective concept of truth matters more to her than veracity. The way she justifies her race discrimination claim against Howard feels more telling than I think she realises: "I felt I was surviving in order to protect other people. It was

my financial aid package that Kevin relied upon, I was seven months pregnant, so you know, a black man and black child also needed this." What makes victimhood such a dangerous narrative is the false promise that it can justify almost anything.

She seems to have been inexplicably wronged by an extraordinary number of people, and I wonder if one reason behind so many fallouts was others' nagging sense that she was somehow hiding something. As she says herself, "I've never been fully transparent or an open book, even to those you'd call close friends." In the aftermath of Dolezal's exposure, friends and activists abandoned her; the women's leadership group to which she belonged expelled her. The only friends who stood by her were the handful of clients whose hair she braids. Just as her world was imploding, Dolezal discovered she was pregnant. Her son Langston, after the writer Langston Hughes, has just turned one.

Dolezal finds herself in a curious catch-22. Nowadays we would not call someone who presents as a woman, but was registered a boy at birth, a liar. We would not blame her for any subterfuges she might have felt compelled to commit, or cite them as proof of her untrustworthiness. But because Dolezal is seen to have lied about her race, her credibility has been undermined in the eyes of the law. Her book contains many details about her family which she says help make sense of her story; but they have not been corroborated by them, so cannot be repeated here for fear that a libel court would reject them as the claims of a self-confessed liar.

If the narrative of fluid, non-binary gender identity is now widely accepted, Dolezal believes the same should apply to race. "It's very similar, in so far as: this is a category I'm born into, but this is really how I feel."

Is racial identity as fluid as gender? "It's more so. Because it wasn't even biological to begin with. It was always a social construct." »

Dolezal's son, Franklin, left, and Izaiah, her adoptive teenage brother; Dolezal became his legal guardian



'I felt I was surviving in order to protect other people. A black man and a black child relied on my financial aid package'

'Who does she think she is?' Rachel Dolezal in her own words: an extract from her new book

I arrived at Belhaven college in Mississippi in 1996 aged 18, looking like I'd just stepped off the set of Little House On The Prairie. Wearing a homemade dress and no makeup, I walked into the cafeteria on the first day and saw that it was completely segregated, with all the tables occupied by white students, except for one on the far side of the room.

As I walked through the room, my heart nearly skipped a beat. Everyone looked so normal compared with me. Searching for a reassuring face and not finding one, I arrived at the black table in the corner. That I shouldn't sit there because I was born to white parents and all the table's occupants were black didn't occur to me. I gravitated to where I felt most comfortable, and, after the initial awkwardness wore off, that's how the people sitting there made me feel.

Looking back on this moment, I wonder if the students at that table felt sorry for me. Regardless of their motivations, they were incredibly kind to me. When they started talking about the Black Student Association (BSA) meeting scheduled for that afternoon, they only shrugged and smiled when I expressed a desire to join them.

It was the first meeting of the year, which meant dues needed to be paid and all the leadership positions filled. Excited to join my first student organisation, I secured my membership with a five-dollar bill and watched as people were voted into office. It quickly became clear that no one wanted to be the historian (responsible for documenting the club's activities). There was a long, awkward moment of silence. Finally, I raised my hand and started walking towards the front of the room. As I did, I was greeted with barely muffled snickering. Even the president, Winston Trotter, couldn't stop laughing. "Hold up," he said. "Why are you here?"

Being raised with no sense of humour whatsoever, I delivered an overly earnest speech explaining how passionate I was about black culture, how I'd always felt a connection with blackness, and how deeply I cared about my siblings' future. "But what exactly do you know about black history?" someone asked.

The rambling dissertation that followed encompassed all the black historical figures I admired most, and was so long-winded Winston had to cut me off. "We need to wrap this meeting up, so let's just go ahead and vote."

Running unopposed, I won in a landslide.

As I got more involved with campus activism, my appearance became more Afrocentric. I started wearing my hair in box braids and sporting dashikis and African-patterned dresses. I thought these clothes were beautiful, and in the Mississippi heat, the fabric did a good job of keeping you cool.

Most people didn't know what to make of me. »

Trans commentators have been incensed by the suggestion of parallels. “Transgender people transition out of medical necessity,” wrote one. “Dolezal’s ‘transition’ to black, on the other hand, is surrounded by layers of deception.” They argue that her colour was a choice, so cannot be analogous to their gender identity. But if we believe someone born without ovaries or a womb can be a woman, and accept radical surgery as a legitimate corrective necessity, is it so different for a woman who is born white but feels black to reposition herself on the racial spectrum?

According to Dolezal, some trans people saw no difference between her sense of identity and theirs; one group printed up “TransRachel” T-shirts and mailed her one. Last year Rogers Brubaker, a professor of sociology at the University of California drew similar parallels in his book, *Trans: Gender and Race In An Age Of Unsettled Identities*.

“I feel that I was born with the essential essence of who I am, whether it matches my anatomy and complexion or not,” says Dolezal. “I’ve never questioned being a girl or woman, for example, but whiteness has always felt foreign to me, for as long as I can remember. I didn’t choose to feel this way or be this way, I just am. What other choice is there than to be exactly who we are?”

It’s possible that Dolezal’s story isn’t really about race at all. When Larry and Ruthanne exposed her, the humiliation and rejection “felt like reliving my childhood trauma on a global scale”, she says. Sometimes I wonder whether Dolezal is locked into a family psychodrama being played out through faith and race. Her description of the decision to begin a new life as a black woman sounds uncannily like being born again; her sons have been raised to regard white society with the same fearful suspicion she was taught to feel for the godless, in the bunker mentality of her Christian childhood. Although

Dolezal, far right, on a protest while president of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP



“spiritual”, Dolezal is no longer religious. She is estranged from two of her adoptive brothers, has not spoken to Larry and Ruthanne or Joshua for years, and does not expect to again. “I was talking to Izaiah the other day, and I said, ‘I don’t even know if I’d go to their funerals.’”

What hurts Dolezal most is not her parents’ betrayal or white people’s mockery, but the anger of the black community. “I did feel like I was evicted in 2015. That was very painful, to feel kicked out of it. I think it’s a mix of anger and sadness really for me, because I’ve struggled to stay away from turning bitter. But I do resent the fact that people knew that I gave so much, and I’ve done good things in the community. And when I could no longer do things for people I was thrown away.”

But Dolezal, say her critics, was still left with a privilege no one truly black will ever enjoy. She could always choose to be white again, and so by definition can never know what it really is to be black. I ask Dolezal if she considered going back to being white.

“No. This is still home to me. I didn’t feel like I’m ever going to be hurt so much that I somehow leave who I am, because I’m me. It really is who I am. It’s not a choice.”

In all the intrigue and drama of her disgrace, does she think she’s done anything wrong? “No, I don’t. I don’t think you can do something wrong with your identity if you’re living in your authenticity, and I am. If I thought it was wrong, I would admit it. That’s easy to do, especially in America. Every politician, they’re like, ‘I’m sorry’ and then they just move on and everybody’s like, ‘Oh, they apologised and it’s all good’. Five minutes later, nobody remembers it. I’m not going to stoop and apologise and grovel and feel bad about it. I would just be going back to when I was little, and had to be what everybody else told me I should be - to make them happy.” ●

‘I feel like I was evicted. That was very painful, to feel kicked out when I’d done good things. I struggled not to turn bitter’

“So, what are you?” I was often asked. Because I didn’t know how to articulate who I was, I’d end up telling them nearly everything about my life. I’d usually start off by saying that my parents were white before describing how I was instinctively drawn to black aesthetics, culture and history; then I would mention my siblings and the racial justice work I was doing.

These rambling answers satisfied few people - and bored the pants off most. People just wanted me to say I was black or white. They didn’t want to hear, in all its boring complexity, about my journey to self-identification. I could see it in the way they stopped making eye contact; they were tired of listening. I noticed how much more comfortable black people who assumed I was black were around me. The minute I corrected them, the comfort level disappeared, so I stopped doing it. If they identified me as a light-skinned black woman or a mixed-race woman, which they frequently did, I didn’t mind.

My laissez-faire attitude was much more difficult to maintain when it came to filling out applications and medical forms. When I was living in Mississippi, I felt I should continue ticking the white box - even though I’d begun to feel that that description was increasingly misrepresentative. I would sometimes check Other. If I could, I would avoid making a selection altogether.

The increasingly Afrocentric look I sported invited all sorts of criticism. Some said it was “just a phase”, while others, mostly white students, told me I shouldn’t dress the way I did because it was disingenuous or looked silly. While walking through the cafeteria one day, proudly wearing a dashiki and a headwrap, I passed a table of white girls and heard one of them say, “Who does she think she is, wearing all that stupid African shit? She’s not black!”

As I continued to make my way toward the black table, my friend Nikki, a member of the BSA and a star of the women’s basketball team, confronted the girl. “You’re sitting there talking about Rachel’s outfit while you’re probably getting a yeast infection from wearing those skintight jeans,” she said loudly. “Besides, Rachel’s a lot blacker than I am, so deal with it!”

It was the first time anyone had recognised and defended how I felt. It made me feel understood, like I’d finally found my place in the world.

This is an edited extract from *In Full Color: Finding My Place In A Black And White World*, by Rachel Dolezal, published next month by BenBella Books at £16.99. To order a copy for £14.44, go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846.