When I was a kid about twelve years old, I was already as tall as I am now, and I had a lot of freckles. I had reached the age when I had begun to really look at myself in the mirror, and I was underwhelmed.  

Apparently my mother was too, because sometimes she'd look at me and shake her head and say, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." 

I had a cousin whose name was Janette Elizabeth, and Janette Elizabeth looked exactly like her name sounds. She had a waist so small that men could put their hands around it . . . and they did. She had waist-length naturally curly blond hair too, but to me her unforgivable sin was that she had a flawless peaches-and-cream complexion. I couldn't help comparing myself with her and thinking that my life would be a lot different if I had beautiful skin too—skin that was all one color.

And then, in the back pages of Janette Elizabeth's True Confessions magazine, I found the answer: an advertisement for freckle-remover cream. I knew that I could afford it if I saved my money, and I did. The ad assured me that the product would arrive in a "plain

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1 Underwhelmed is a word jokingly used to mean the opposite of overwhelmed, so it means "not at all impressed."

2 The phrase you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear is an idiom that means "you cannot make something beautiful out of something ugly."

Vocabulary

flawless (flō'lis) adj. having no mistakes; perfect
complexion (kam plek'shan) n. color, texture, and appearance of the skin

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brown wrapper.”\(^3\) Plain brown freckle color. For three weeks I went to the mailbox every day precisely at the time the mail was delivered.

I knew that if someone else in my family got the mail, I would never hear the end of it. There was no way that they would let me open the box in private. Finally, after three weeks of scheduling my entire day around the mail truck’s arrival, my package came.

I went to my room with it, sat on the edge of my bed, and opened it. I was sure that I was looking at a miracle. But I had gotten so worked up about the magical package that I couldn’t bring myself to put the cream on. What if it didn’t work? What would I do then?

I fell asleep that night without even trying the stuff. And

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\(^3\) People ask for things to be delivered in a plain brown wrapper when they don’t want anyone to know what the contents are.

**Vocabulary**

precisely (pri sî' lē) adv. accurately; exactly
when I got up the next morning and looked at my freckles in the mirror, I said, "Elizabeth, this is silly. You have to do it now!" I smeared the cream all over my body. There wasn’t as much of it as I had thought there would be, and I could see that I was going to need a part-time job to keep me in freckle remover.

Later that day I took my hoe and went with my brother and cousins to the head of the holler to hoe tobacco, as we did nearly every day in the summer. Of course, when you stay out hoeing tobacco all day, you’re not working in the shade. And there was something important I hadn’t realized about freckle remover: if you wear it in the sun, it seems to have a reverse effect. Instead of developing a peaches-and-cream complexion, you just get more and darker freckles.

By the end of the day I looked as though I had leopard blood in my veins, although I didn’t realize it yet. When I came back to the house, my family, knowing nothing about the freckle-remover cream, began to say things like, "I’ve never seen you with that many freckles before.” When I saw myself in the mirror, I dissolved into tears and hid in the bathroom.

My mother called me to the dinner table, but I ignored her. When she came to the bathroom door and demanded that I come out and eat, I burst out the door and ran by her, crying. I ran out to the well house and threw myself down, and I was still sobbing when my grandfather came out to see what was wrong with me. I told him about how I’d sent for the freckle remover, and he didn’t laugh—though he did suggest that one might get equally good results from burying a dead black cat when the moon was full.

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4 The head of the holler is a phrase in Appalachian dialect. It refers to the opening of a small valley.

5 A well house is a shed that covers the deep hole where people used to get their fresh drinking water.

6 Burying a dead black cat when the moon was full refers to a superstitious practice. The grandfather suggests that using freckle cream has about as much chance of working as a superstitious practice.

Vocabulary

veins (vāinz) n. vessels that carry blood to the heart from other parts of the body
It was clear that Grandpa didn’t understand, so I tried to explain why I didn’t want to have freckles and why I felt so inadequate when I compared my appearance with Janette Elizabeth’s. He looked at me in stunned surprise, shook his head, and said, “But child, there are all kinds of flowers, and they are all beautiful.” I said, “I’ve never seen a flower with freckles!” and ran back to my room, slamming the door.

When my mother came and knocked, I told her to go away. She started to say the kinds of things that parents say at times like that, but my grandfather said, “Nancy, leave the child alone.” She was a grown-up, but he was her father. So she left me alone.

I don’t know where Grandpa found it. It isn’t at all common in the mountains where we lived then. But I know he put it in my room because my mother told me later. I had cried myself to sleep that night, and when I opened my swollen, sticky eyes the next morning, the first thing I saw, lying on the pillow next to my head, was a tiger lily.

Tiger Lily, 1815.
Mrs. Frederick Hill.
Private Collection.

Vocabulary

inadequate (in adˈə kwit) adj. not good enough
After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

1. How does the author describe her appearance at the age of twelve? [Recall]

2. What qualities does Elizabeth's cousin have that make Elizabeth feel bad about herself? [Summarize]

3. Compare the way Elizabeth's mother treats her to the way Elizabeth's grandfather treats her. [Compare]

4. **Literary Element** Diction How does the author's use of idioms and Appalachian dialect, such as "the head of the holler," help readers understand Elizabeth? [Analyze]

5. **Reading Strategy** Evaluate Characterization Look back at your graphic organizer to evaluate characterization. Do you think the author thoroughly develops the character of Elizabeth? Explain. [Evaluate]

6. **BIG Question** How do Elizabeth's freckles help make her who she is? [Conclude]

Vocabulary Practice

On a separate sheet of paper, write the vocabulary word that best completes each sentence. If none of the words fits the sentence, write none.

- flawless
- complexion
- precisely
- veins
- inadequate

1. The air was crisp and _________ this morning.

2. We learned in science class that the _________ carry blood to your heart.

3. Compared with his tall, athletic brother, Devon felt _________ on the basketball court.

4. It was _________ twelve o'clock when the lunch bell rang.

5. The lotion is supposed to brighten your _________ so that your skin glows.

6. His performance was _________; there wasn't a single mistake.

7. Sheryl ran without _________ in order to get to school on time.

Writing

Write a Journal Entry Write a journal entry about a time when you discovered something important about yourself. Make the entry come to life by including idioms that you use in everyday conversation.