



Underneath her skin,
she just wants to fit in

Freckles

cecelia ahern

FRECKLES

Cecelia Ahern



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Dedication

For Susana Serradas

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PROLOGUE

The crunch of a snail under my shoe, in the darkness. The crack of the shell. The squish. The ooze.

It hurts me at the back of my teeth, a shooting pain through a nerve in my gums.

I can't pull my foot up fast enough, I can't rewind, the damage can't be undone. I've hit the squishy interior of the snail's sluggish insides. Flattened and twisted them into the ground. I feel the mush on the sole of my shoe for the next few steps. Carrying a crime scene on a slippery sole. Death on my shoe. Smearred guts. A twist and wipe rids me of it.

It happens walking at night, on rain-slicked ground, when I can't see where I'm stepping and the snail can't see who's stepping. I've always felt bad for the snail, but now I know what it's like. Retribution. Karma. I now know how it feels for my outer shell to be cracked, for my insides to feel exposed.

He stepped on me.

He walked with me for a few steps too, his sole slippy with my mush. I wonder if his soul is slippy with me too. If he felt the crack and ooze of me under his gaze as he spat his hate-filled words and then walked away. My shield taken with him for a few steps before he realised he was still carrying me. A twist of his shoe, like extinguishing a cigarette, and I'm discarded.

The remainders of me on the pathway. Cracked and exposed, an unprotected soft interior I've worked so hard to protect. A leakage of all the parts that were so well-contained. Feelings, thoughts, insecurities all oozing out. A silvery slivery track of emotional entrails.

I didn't see his foot coming. Wonder if I took him by surprise too.

Even though it may feel like it, this is not where it all ends. I'm not dead. I'm crushed and oozing. A smithereened Allegra Bird. You can't fix the broken outer shell. But you can rebuild.

One

When I was thirteen years old I connected the freckles on my arms together, like a join-the-dots puzzle. Right-handed, my left arm would become a web of blue pen lines. After a while it developed into drawing constellations, mapping them out from freckle to freckle until the skin on my arm mirrored the night sky. The Plough – the Big Dipper to some – was my favourite constellation to draw. It was the one I could immediately identify at night, and so when it was lights out in boarding school and silence descended upon the halls, I turned my reading light on low, clenched a blue gel pen, and traced the seven stars from freckle to freckle until my skin resembled a night-map.

Dubhe, Merak, Phecda, Megrez, Alioth, Mizar and Alkaid. I didn't always choose the same freckles, sometimes I liked the challenge of replicating this constellation elsewhere, sometimes on my legs, but crouching over for such a long period of time stung my back. Also it didn't feel natural, like I was forcing these other collections of freckles to become something they weren't. There were the ideal seven freckles, perfectly aligned already on my left arm to specifically be the Plough, and so I eventually gave up on the other freckles and each night, after my morning shower had washed the ink away, I would begin again.

Cassiopeia followed. That was an easy one. Then Crux and Orion. Pegasus was a tricky one with a total of fourteen stars/freckles, but my arms saw more sunlight than the rest of my body, face not included, so it had a higher concentration of melanised cells, perfectly positioned for a fourteen-star constellation.

In the darkness of our boarding school dormitory, in the cubicle beside me, Caroline heavy-breathed as she touched herself thinking nobody knew, and Louise on the other side of me turned pages on the anime comics that she read with a torch. Across from me Margaret worked her way through an entire bag of mini Crunchies before sticking her fingers down her throat and

puking them out, Olivia practised kissing against a mirror while Liz and Fiona kissed each other. Catherine sobbed quietly because she was homesick, and Katie wrote hate mail to her mam who had cheated on her dad, and everyone else in the all girls' boarding school immersed themselves in their secrets in the only small space that they could call their own while I mapped my freckles like they were stars.

My private act didn't stay secret for long. I would do it nightly, and blue pen on top of blue pen, night after night, eventually doesn't wash off. The ink lodged itself in the pores in my skin and even a scouring brush, hot water and a highly stressed nun, Sister Lettuce – nicknamed by all of us due to her tendency for beginning every sentence with Let us ... Let us give thanks and pray. Let us open our books to page seven. Let us do lay-ups because she was also our basketball coach – couldn't do anything to get it off or make me stop. I received odd looks in the shower room, at swimming, when wearing short sleeves. The weird girl with the pen marks on her arm. They're patterns on the celestial sphere, animals, mythological people and creatures, gods and objects, I'd tell them, holding my arm out proud, never ashamed of my designs. The response to that was a lesson in ink poisoning. More trips to the counsellor. Extra laps of the running track. They knew physical health equalled mental well-being and they were trying to busy me with as many activities as they could to distract me from vandalising my skin, but it all felt like punishment to me. Run her in circles. Get that girl away from her skin. But you can't get a person away from their skin. They're in it. They are it. No matter what they said, I couldn't stop. Every time the lights went out, and the silence moved in like a mist from the sea, I felt the familiar longing to connect with my skin.

I wasn't embarrassed about the pen marks. I didn't care if people stared. The only big deal was the commotion they made of it and I certainly wasn't the only girl who had marks on their skin. Jennifer Lannigan cut herself with a blade, tiny little cuts all over her legs. I had a good view of them in English class, the white gap between the top of her grey socks and the end of her grey skirt. We weren't allowed to wear make-up in school but after hours Jennifer wore white make-up, black lipstick, pierced her own lip and listened to angry music by angry men and for some reason her entire package made it acceptable to us that she would do this insane thing to herself.