



Sweat's not only hell on your sweaters; it can stain your life.

*No matter what I did, even in my calmest, coldest moments, SWEAT RINGS grew under my arms. And my confidence shrank. Enter a few doctors, and things got worse. Welcome to the life and times (and triumph, of course) of a human faucet*

# UNDER-ARMED

I STARTED SWEATING during the summer of 1994, between seventh and eighth grade. By fall, all the girls but me were popping glossy blue Midols and ever-so-indiscreetly sneaking to the bathroom with Tampax in the back pocket of their Quiksilver jeans. I shrank inside my body of bones and ghost-white skin and sweated.

I mean that literally. I was sweating through T-shirts by then, though the peak of my life of perspiration would be another year off, when I achieved the

unthinkable: I sweated through an allegedly water-resistant Patagonia fleece jacket during my ninth-grade biology class.

Sweating is gross. Sweating is dirty. When your teacher takes the chalk and lifts her arm and you spot that wet rim in her armpit, it's OK to giggle and whisper. Sweating is weakness, sweating is nervousness; it's hot and humid Midwestern afternoons; it's being shy in a room full of strangers; it's needing a shower; it's being fat;

it's being fat and dirty and a man.

Nice women don't sweat. Maybe they do—when they are running, all greased lightning and spandex through the glossy pages of magazines, or on television slinging tennis rackets with long, hard arms, hitting things, muscles wet and absorbing the sun.

Richard Nixon sweats. Basketball players sweat big drops that drip to the ground. Men in suits in the humidity in the subway sweat. Cokeheads sweat. Club kids sweat. I sweated. >>



Doctors didn't always understand that their treatments created more problems.

it gave me goose bumps.

We don't have the same secret, I said to myself. We don't have the same secret at all.

Oh, the Internet! If only you'd been there back then, I could have found others like me—these clear-faced children with stock photography smiles who offer comfort on the International Hyperhidrosis Society (IHS) website, these “communities” who could have reassured me that extreme sweating could be “embarrassing, uncomfortable, anxiety-inducing, and disabling,” that it could

“disrupt all aspects of a person's life, from career choices and recreational activities to relationships, emotional well-being, and self-image”!

I missed the IHS's newsletter, support group, and the Q&A with a Miss Teen USA contestant named Frances Rivers who recently treated her hyperhidrosis with a combination of Botox injections and iontophoresis. Three percent of the population is—and was—just like me!

But back then, it wasn't until I found an advice column in my cousin's *Cosmo* that I even knew my condition had a name, that I wasn't overreacting, that the right antibacterial soap would not make all the difference, that possibly I needed a Treatment.

**C**OSMO COLUMN IN hand, I considered my choices. It suggested Certain Dri and a few prescription options. I wasn't ready to tell a doctor, so I took the bus after school to Meijer—a big-box, Super Wal-Mart-esque acre of retailing delights that sat on the outskirts of town—and I didn't tell anyone where I was going.

The testimonials on the Certain Dri box were like people exploding into beautiful dry sunshine, wholesome as powdered milk. It said to rub it on before bed. I did that. It gave me a rash.

So I decided I had to go to see my doctor after all—and she turned out to be a heartless bitch.

“It's a normal part of adolescence,” she told me. “It will pass.”

“It's awful,” I sobbed. “I mean, I can't wear anything...” I cried, and I sweated.

I wanted to clamp my doctor's head under my arm and sweat all over her face. Instead, she wrote me a prescription for Drysol. It turned my armpits into red craters and molten lava of skin, and the sweat still found a way to escape.

It was unbearable. I sweated in a cold room, in a hot room, on the phone, in the hall, home alone, at a party, with a boy, with a friend, doing my homework, in class, outside, inside. Itchy, sweaty, all the time. Sweating helped me hate myself.

*Doctors told me surgery might make my inner thighs sweat more. “SO IT WILL LOOK LIKE I WET MY PANTS all the time?” I asked. “Sort of,” they said.*

In middle school, when this broke out, my best friend was Sydney. Her chubby face and pink-rimmed glasses had once denoted her the less attractive member of our pair. Then, in eighth grade, she developed these really remarkable breasts. They protruded like independent creatures that preceded the rest of her body. They led her into a room, announcing her delicious sexuality, preparing the audience. The boys were in love with her.

I simultaneously wanted to touch her breasts and cut them off. I hated her. I hated her and was her best friend at the same time, because we were in middle school and that's what we did.

Sydney used Secret. At Target, I asked my mom if I could get Secret.

“Will that make you feel better?”

When she said such things, I could feel my intestines scream and push at me from the inside, and the feelings would try to escape through tears. I couldn't tell her how much I hated myself and my body, and I couldn't tell her how much I was sweating right then. I couldn't tell her anything.

I pulled out my baby-powder stick of Secret in Sydney's basement and put it on before basketball practice. She smiled at me. “We have the same secret!” she said, hugging me. She was always nice to me. I felt her nipples on my flat, smooth plane of chest;

Once, when my film teacher shot an after-school special that I was supposed to be in, I wore a long-sleeved shirt and a T-shirt and sweated through both of them. I then threw on a sweatshirt to cover the sweat stains on the long-sleeved shirt, and I sweated so much that sweat poured down my arms and dripped onto the desk. (The scene got cut.)

I started 11th grade at a boarding school for the arts in northern Michigan. Boarding school was perfect, because even though we had light-blue uniform shirts, I could fit an undershirt beneath them and change often, since my >>

room was right there. I also began developing my relationship with the black tank top and the zip-up hoodie.

Meanwhile, the rest of my body was finally shaping up to be all right. As the year went on, I got a boyfriend and friends and confidence. I was tall (5'10") and lithe (130 pounds); my face filled out, my braces came off, I went on the Pill and grew perfect perky breasts and a sizeable ass for my figure. I thought the sweating would pass.

It never passed.

I didn't tell anyone—especially men—the whole truth until much later. I never wore things that fit close to my armpits. I blowdried my underarms. I changed clothing about once an hour. I avoided social functions or jobs that required outfits I would sweat through.

I knew sweat would always hold me back. It would keep me from wearing things that looked good on me, from feeling comfortable going out for an entire day without a change of clothing, from shopping for clothing without the additional concern of my armpit sweat on top of the already urgent concern of my faltering sense of self. For how scrawny I was, the amount of liquid my body was capable of excreting was pretty remarkable.

One night in August of 2000, during my first week at the University of Michigan, I was getting ready to go out. I watched the other girls get dressed in skimpy faux-vintage T-shirts they probably bought for \$50 at Abercrombie & Fitch; I watched them slather on deodorant as if it were a product that did things. I smelled Spring Breeze and Baby Powder and perfume and hairspray and hope, and I put on a black tank top and sweated. We don't have the same secret.

I was sweating, and I couldn't stand it. I called my mom and asked her to pick me up. I told her everything. I cried. I said I felt like a sweaty freak.

"I had it when I was your age," she told me later at dinner. She gestured to her back. "I'd be soaked. My whole back. Now I just use Mitchum.

"It'll get better," she said. "It did for me. It took a while, but it did."

I stabbed my chocolate cake. "Mom, it's never getting better."

A week or so later, I made an appointment to see a surgeon at the University of Michigan Hospital. I was dressed in a paper gown—the most sweat-conductive thing I'd ever worn. I felt wet and naked and cold.

Four doctors entered the room. "When did you start sweating?" one of them asked, and the other three lifted their clipboards, as if I were the guest lecturer in their class.

I told them my story, and they nodded. They took turns feeling my armpits and told me they could remove my sweat glands. They explained how the surgery worked and the possible side effects.

"Some people lose control of the muscles in their face," they said. "Some people have compensatory sweating. Most do in their inner thighs."

"So it will look like I've wet my pants all the time?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"I mean, you could sort of say that's what it looks like."

I scowled. I wanted to cry, but instead I just sweated.

During the third or fourth week of school, I found myself in Morgan's room, drinking from a big jug of grocery-store wine. I noticed that Morgan was also wearing a black tank top for the third day in a row. Morgan was thin and casually cute like me, sarcastic, and smart, but she was gutsier, I think, and prettier.

Then I saw it: Just one little droplet slid down her armpit and dropped off at her forearm.

"Ew," she said, lifting her arm, revealing a wet spot that rivaled my own. "Sweaty McPitts!"

"Oh, my God," I said. "Do you have hyperhidrosis?"

"What?" Morgan asked, wrinkling her nose. "It has a name?"

We couldn't stop talking. I was surprised Morgan wasn't ashamed. All her friends knew—it was a joke; she had two unapologetic dresser drawers

stuffed with black T-shirts, black tank tops, and sweat-stained items of other colors. We talked about all the things we sweated through. I told her that I didn't own any T-shirts—just tank tops and zip-up things to take on and off over them. We talked about sweating onto tank tops, about sweat forming rings down our sides, about sweating so much we thought we might be losing all the water in our bodies. I felt happy that I wasn't alone.

I started letting my guard down with women and telling the truth about the sweating without freaking out that I'd said too much. It got easier as we all grew up. I saw them, too, taking their Lexapro and crying during *The OC* and falling down the stairs after too many drinks and leaving underwear in the living room and bleeding through super-plus tampons and sporting un-made-up forehead breakouts, and binging on someone else's ice cream at 3 a.m.

At first, people think they can relate. "Oh, my God, I sweat constantly, too!" For a moment, I take the bait; I think I have found another companion on this misty path. Then, as the conversation proceeds, I find that we have nothing in common after all. They can live with what they have because it's circumstantial and vacillating; I can't because it's constant and overwhelming.

**I** WAS ABOUT to graduate and was on the verge of moving to New York. I would perhaps be getting "a job," and I would be going on interviews for these hypothetical jobs, and I would have to wear a button-up shirt. I also might not be able to change my shirt 10 times a day.

So when I read in a magazine that doctors had begun using Botox to treat hyperhidrosis, I started saving up. I went for a consultation in December of 2003, a few days before my last week of final exams.

"This has really been a godsend for people," the head surgeon told me. He was much nicer than the doctors from the place that wanted me to get

thigh sweat. "Can I feel?" he asked.

His intern felt, too. She had kind eyes and blonde hair, and she nodded when I told my story. I observed with pleasure that she took a note every time I mentioned a particular symptom or situation that fell in line with the diagnosis she had studied. I was a model patient!

And so they covered my armpits in something made of iodine that turned blue under the lights, revealing where the sweatiest spots were. They told me that I had hyperactive nerves, and that the nerves fired too often and incorrectly. This seemed very right.

"Most people get signals to sweat when it is hot, or when they are playing sports," the doctor said. "But your signals just go off all the time."

So they took a needle and—for \$1000—cut off communication between my overactive signals and the fountains under my arms.

Three days later, I was no longer sweating. I kept checking my underarms, but there was no sweat. I've gone back every six to 10 months since. Even when it's financially impractical, it's desperately worth it. It has changed everything. At 25, I have one less thing to hide, one less secret. I think it's helped me accept all the other secrets that come bubbling to the surface when physical insecurities vanish; I can redirect the energy I once devoted to hiding to deciding what to show. No sweat. **mc**

Condensed from *The Bigger the Better, The Tighter the Sweater: 21 Funny Women on Beauty, Body Image, & Other Hazards of Being Female* (Seal Press, June 2007).

