

I was a sweaty baby, my mother says. Every few hours during the night, I would cry and cry until she came to soothe me in my crib, blanket damp, forehead shining.

One night, when I was six or seven, we were watching the Chicago Bulls on WGN. As the game neared its close, one of the Bulls stepped up to the line for two clutch free throws. Something in my stomach tightened as the first shot went up and in. In the interminable interval between shots, the player dribbling to steady himself, I looked down at my feet glistening in the light of the tableside lamp. “Isko kya pasina aara hai!” my father said to my mother, surprised at how much my feet were sweating. I turned back just in time to see the second shot splash through the net.

After that, whenever we played Street Fighter II, the loser of each round making way for the next kid, I made sure to wipe the controller with my T-shirt before handing it over. I was discreet. No one needed to see.

The medical term for it is hyperhidrosis. While there are forms that occur later in life secondary to cancers, nerve disorders, or infections, the primary focal form usually starts in childhood with spontaneous sweating in the underarms, palms, soles, and groin. My sweating could indeed be spontaneous, but anxiety intensified it until my hands dripped, my shirts were soaked, and any half-decent shoes were ruined within a few months. I could not remember which had come first. I had poured forth since I was in a crib, yet the churn in my stomach dated

back at least as long. Both only got worse over time.

One early fall day in ninth grade Oklahoma history, I sat in the back row of the air-conditioned classroom working hard on an essay. As I scribbled topic and supporting sentences, I felt a sudden trickle down my side. I tried to ignore it and concentrate on my work, but the sweat continued. I became increasingly anxious. The people next to me would notice, and they probably wouldn’t say anything, but they would think it. The more my thoughts were consumed with my classmates’ ridicule, the more my previously dry hands began to sweat as well. My paper became damp underneath my palms. The sweating and my anxiety about it began to feed into each other with increasing rapidity until the two blurred in a spinning vortex. I was about to lose it when the bell rang, and I was released, free to go to the bathroom, where I raised my arms and looked in the mirror at the damp cloth of my green polo shirt.

From then on, I painstakingly planned what I would wear. Darker colors, always an undershirt. No flip flops, always socks with shoes. During exams, I had to have extra paper to put underneath my writing hand, otherwise I would soak through the scantron. Holding hands was a reliable trigger, so I was relieved that dancing with my prom date required nothing more than my hands on her hips. Consciously and unconsciously, I did all that I could to avoid that whirling, sudden spiral which threatened to return at any time, without warning.

It is true that sweat can simply be the result of honest effort. Yet Genesis 3:19, part of God's admonishment to Adam, illustrates how the expectation of effort quickly becomes a curse of obligation—"By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

In my father's plans for my life, which he typed up and put into a laminated binder, there was no time for a breather. He explained that rest would lead to inertia, which would inevitably lead to my eventual ruin. In his mind, the only bulwark against the tides of fate and free market capitalism was a plan, solid and immovable. The plan could only become real through relentless effort, which was what he had given in his own life. My sister and I marveled at the files my father kept regarding every aspect of our existence, stacks of paper covered in his neat, small hand outlining retirement plans, educational goals, and spelling bee strategies. Only later did I understand the anxiety that drove him to act the way that he did. In America, he knew, everything could be lost in an instant.

My father called home from work every day around lunch. On one such call, sometime in the summer break after sixth grade, I told him about a careers book I had checked out from the library and asked him if the average salary of a computer programmer, there listed at around \$50,000 a year, would be enough one day. Though I don't remember his answer, I do remember my incredulity that Soundgarden broke up later that summer. Why would they voluntarily give up guaranteed fortune after working so hard to get it? Why would they resign themselves once again to the vicissitudes of chance?

In high school, I got a B+ in pre-AP biology. I cried while pleading with my teacher for any way to raise my

grade. I still remember the look of quiet concern on her face as we talked after class and I could not explain the panic that gripped my heart.

The newest research suggests that anxiety disorders are partially heritable, with multiple vulnerability genes interacting with environmental and epigenetic factors to produce the conditions. Hyperhidrosis is also postulated to be partially inherited through an autosomal dominant mechanism, though the penetrance, or likelihood that a genetic abnormality will produce a problem, is variable. We do not yet know why some with the requisite mutation are smooth and confident, while others melt like ice cream in the sun. All I do know is that my father's hands were never clammy when he showed me how to hold a tennis racket or start a lawnmower.

Me, I stared at my palms in awe at the amount of sweat pouring from my skin, gleaming in the lines others read for their fortunes. I stared at my palms in anger, trying to will them dry. Most often, though, I stared at them with an uneasiness that inevitably bloomed into horror at what others would think if they only saw, and I wondered what original sin continued to supply this inexhaustible well.

In our culture, a perceived lack of self-control can swiftly lead to self-loathing, as many who've battled their weight or an addiction can testify; there is little we tolerate less than what Roxane Gay has termed an "unruly body." In the movies, it's always the sneak thieves and untrustworthy operators with the clammy handshakes, unable as they are to fully bury their deception inside themselves, and it was not long before I had convinced myself of the disgust others would necessarily feel on seeing my sweat, on touching it, and what my wet palms would involuntarily signify about what burned within. To be noticed, that is what I most dreaded.

I had difficulty moving with confidence. I could not get comfortable because I could not forget the physical fact of my skin, oozing, dripping. My friends made fun of the half-hearted wave I would make on entering a full room while others were hugging and shaking hands. I didn't know how to be with a girl, how to hold her hand or touch her face or hold her close. White dress shirts gradually turned yellow at the underarms. I read articles on how to interview successfully, but I could not firmly shake anyone's hand. I remember going to the bathroom after an interview for medical school and peeling off my suit jacket to find my shirt soaked from underarm to waist.

In the Vedic tradition of the *Upanishads* with which I was raised, the body is analogized to a chariot, and the five senses to five wild horses, each pulling in a different direction while the passenger, the soul, is fast asleep, taken in wayward, widening circles. My father preached that nothing was more necessary than discipline, control of our bodies and our moods. His favorite epithet was to call another "emotional". His siblings were too emotional when they fought over what to do with the family property in India. We were too emotional when we cried after we were scolded for doing something wrong. As I grew older, I understood that it wasn't the emotions themselves that disgusted my father, but their display. To lose control was to expose one's weakness, and that was a mistake he felt this world would always punish.

I eventually did get into medical school, motivated not only by my personal statement desires to study the cutting edge of science and help others at their worst, but also from a tacit acceptance of my father's contention that happiness in this country was only possible by means of economic security. Before I chose a major in college, we sat in the upstairs game room, going over the numbers, tallying the facts. "People will always get

sick," he told me, "and they will always need medicine."

I thought my admission letter meant safety, but instead of sanctuary, I found relentless competition. Towards the end of second year, in preparation for clinical rotations, we were all required to learn the art of venipuncture. I remember the basement classroom where we experimented on drawing each other's blood. I was anxious, and my hands became so sweaty that a latex glove broke while I was trying to slip it on. To my embarrassment, I had to go to the bathroom to get some paper towels to dry myself before trying again. I thought my classmates would be laughing at me, but I found them busy slipping needles under each other's skin.

America had already begun its transformation into a nation of solitary sufferers. Robert Putnam and George Packer wrote about the disintegration of civic institutions that once bound us together. Chronic pain became epidemic. "Deaths of despair" grew every year. Sweat had turned me further inwards, as well. I knew which days would be sweatier than others from the way my muscles felt in the first few minutes after I woke up. I obsessed with whether my sweat was visible to others, constantly checking my clothes for stains. I hesitated every time I met someone, wondering what they would think about my touch, especially if they were the type too polite to say anything. I struggled to reconcile these preoccupations with the perceptions of others—my parents were bemused the few times I expressed my frustrations, and my friends thought it was something quirky, like a lisp or a hairstyle. I had always been lost in my own head, but my confusion over my shame only succeeded in driving me yet deeper inside myself.

In medical school, I was taught therapeutic touch—when to shake a hand, how to reassure at the bedside. We went through encounters with simulated patients and

watched the recordings of ourselves fumbling through the boilerplate of compassion. I taught myself nuances only I would need. How washing my hands at a sink before entering a patient room allowed me an excuse to dry them. How putting on a pair of nonsterile gloves before the sterile gloves required for a procedure allowed the second pair to slide on smoothly. How a hug or a pat on the shoulder allowed me to plausibly skip a handshake on the way out of a room. I learned how I could comfort another. I learned how to be with another.

Inhabiting the role of physician gave me an unexpected refuge from my roiling uncertainty. When I felt the sweat coming, I supported myself against its solid walls. My new white coat provided further reassurance. A furrow of the brow, a gesture of the hand—these gave me new gravitas. Instead of worsening my feelings of inadequacy, the examination room surprisingly became a rare place in which I could be the confident actor I'd always wanted to be, and, my patients, perhaps lost in their own fears, began to see something in me I'd never expected.

Initiated into the medical fraternity, I sought medical answers to what I now saw as a medical problem. I read about hyperhidrosis in textbooks, finally putting a name to what had been the only reality I knew. In those heady days, I thought that defining my issues as illness would be the first step in finding a cure, and I steeled myself to go to the psychiatrist recommended by our student health service. I remember telling her something of my trials of sweat, but she saw in me nothing more than the typical anxiety and depression that were rampant in my medical school class. She was kindly picking for me the SSRI she thought would least increase sweating. But I did not find an answer in citalopram.

I went on to a dermatologist, who marveled at my palms. When the prescription strength antiperspirant he

recommended did not help, he prescribed an anti-cholinergic called glycopyrrolate which did nothing but make my mouth dry and my heart race. There were more drastic measures available—when on my ICU rotation, I saw a teenager in recovery from a surgical procedure called a sympathectomy, where the nerves controlling sweat are physically severed, and the internet was full of devices and injections purported to be miracle cures—but by then, I was already sliding back into my baseline desire to conceal. I was getting better at keeping a stony face no matter what discomfort roiled within. The worse I felt, the more determined I was to let no one else know, to rein in the insubordinate senses, to control the sensations of the body. My father's words echoed in my head—this is what we had to do as Indians in this country. Still the sweat came.

During these years, the gap between rich and poor grew. Violence against minorities continued. Medical care bankrupted the uninsured and insured alike. By some measures, we were living in the wealthiest country that had ever existed, though it was also true that the level of ambient anxiety was becoming increasingly difficult to handle. I sweated through shirts and socks and white coats. I sweated when I sat in the temple and I sweated when I met a friend for lunch. I sweated when I wrote. I looked for other ways to soothe myself. Alcohol worked, though with obvious limitations. While running physically drained the moisture from my body, yoga, with its emphasis on learning how to be with one's self, calmed me more deeply, and I soon became addicted to the dry and serene state I achieved after a short practice.

In my time off, I drifted through online dating, increasingly trapped in endless trains of thought. Sweating had led me into reflexively concealing behaviors for so long that the urge spilled over into my emotional life, where I avoided vulnerability at all costs. On a blind date

in 2013, I finally met the woman who would later become my wife. To my initial shock, she did not immediately recoil from my touch. Instead she treated me with a patience I had not thought I deserved, and to my ongoing surprise, it was not long before everything important between us began to work.

We made plans. We set a date for our wedding. She is South Indian, and in that tradition, I was required to be shirtless during the ceremony. My feet would be bare. I would sit on a stage this way for four hours, legs crossed, lights shining down on me, hundreds of friends and family looking on. Maybe a different person would have expressed their misgivings, but I had been unable to explain myself my entire life. The words would not come.

I did not drink before the ceremony, but I ran a few miles and did an hour of yoga the night before. I knew this would not be enough, wound up as I was with excitement and nerves. In the morning, I went outside into the humid heat of Houston in July and danced in my baraat procession, sweat pouring down my face and soaking through my clothes. In the hotel, I took off my kurta and changed into a white dhoti wrapped around my legs for the ceremony, covering my chest with flower garlands. I walked down the middle of our crowded wedding hall to the stage with my parents and future in-laws, soon joined by my soon-to-be wife. My feet began to sweat, my underarms began to trickle. Most of the guests were talking to each other, catching up with old friends, engrossed in their own conversations.

The sweat from my feet worsened in contact with the hard, non-absorbent plastic of the stage. I wiped my hands constantly on the small towel given to us to dry ourselves between the parts of the ceremony that required water. The lights blazed overhead. The photographers snapped photos; the videographers squared their

cameras on the two of us. I looked around anxiously, scanning the crowd from left to right, seeing my parents and in-laws, falling backwards into the whirling vortex that I knew so well. I felt sure someone would notice my glistening skin and damp dhoti and wonder what was wrong, yet to this day, no one who attended the wedding has commented that I looked especially anxious at any point during those hours. I maintained a stubborn façade of calm, but as I sat onstage, I wanted nothing more than my insides to match my happy face. For just a few minutes on this biggest day, I wanted to forget the physical fact of my body, wet and uncomfortable.

As part of the ceremony, I had to hold my now wife's hand, wrapping my fingers over hers. If she was bothered by how sweaty my skin now was, she did not mention it. Maybe she was lost in her own emotions about our wedding day, or maybe she did not mind. Maybe she knew that nothing she could say would make a difference. Later that evening, we had our first dance at the reception. I was calmer now, dressed in a dark suit, but as my wife and I clasped hands with a John Mayer song playing overhead, my palms were nearly dripping, her fate now bound up in mine.

Native cultures across North America have long practiced the purification ritual Westerners now call the sweat lodge. The Lakota tradition, most widely known, terms this ritual *inipi*, or "to live again." Under the direction of a spiritual leader, participants in this ritual sit for hours in a lodge made of young willows, sweating profusely in the steam billowing from hot rocks covered in water, passing the sacred pipe and invoking prayers to the divine spirit *Wakan Tanka*. At the end of the ritual, the participants, now purified as new snow, come forth from the lodge, passing from darkness into light. In recent decades, new age charlatans have turned these sacred

practices into profit-making enterprises, attracting those seeking some temporary peace amidst the confusing mess of our modern world. In 2011, a motivational speaker named James Arthur Ray was convicted of negligent homicide when his unauthorized ceremony resulted in the deaths of three participants. He was sentenced to two years in state prison.

In our newly plagued world, handshakes have been forgotten. We do not know who has the coronavirus, and all human touch is now inflected with that hesitation. Our trust in each other is disintegrating completely, and we are increasingly lost in our own internet worlds. Isolated from my parents, I speak with them once a week on the phone. During a conversation last month, my father was in a pensive mood, perhaps particularly affected that day by news reports and the general anxiety in which we are all submerged, and as we talked, he told me again that prayer was all that could now protect us.

It is true that we now spend our evenings together on video chat, chanting the holy mahamantra as my parents had urged for years and I had ignored for as long. Now, with no excuse, and partly motivated by vague guilt, my wife and I mouth the words along with them every night, hoping through this makeshift ceremony to call into existence some force that can protect us.

My mother tells us to concentrate on the sound of the words that we chant, but I am an amateur, and I am instead filled with that spiteful, reflexive boredom that has always overtaken me whenever my parents ask me to do something religious. Being with myself has never come easy. I think of what I need to do in my Animal Crossing village and what we will watch on Netflix later that night, though my unspoken hope is that repetition will eventually imbue my prayers with the sincerity I secretly desire.

It's not until later, in those last minutes before sleep, that I am assailed by the anxieties I previously held at bay. I think about why I still feel like I am one mistake away from losing my job, even though for two years, my partners and patients have repeatedly expressed their satisfaction with my care. My feet sweat. I think about how the coronavirus continues to expose the truth of our tenuous, conditional existence. My hands trickle. I think about my friends drifting away in their own isolation, our president's unending uncalm, and all that must be done in the day ahead. My heart skips a beat. My stomach flutters.

On those nights where sleep is especially reluctant to descend, my thoughts might turn to the child that we are struggling to conceive. My wife worries about what we can do to speed along our fertility. I think about what little security I will be able to give our child when they come, what it will cost me, and what it will cost them. I lie on my memory foam mattress, my chariot careening out of control. Our home is filled with organic produce and natural wines, designer jeans and mid-century inspired furniture, yet my sweat still comes. I spend my days doing work that is endlessly fulfilling, yet real peace remains elusive.

I wonder about the heritability of dreams. I wonder if my father found what he was looking for here, and what exactly it is I'm looking for now. Is what we are looking for even what we need? The minutes pass in darkness, and I renew my makeshift prayers for the future, praying not for my child's success or their strength, their salary or their happiness, but rather only their ease in these United States of America, and if I am lucky when sleep finally comes, it's with a backwards fall into visions of their endless carefree days. 🌃