

EARLY BLOOMER

Her breasts first appeared at the tender age of ten. And it's taken her almost 20 years to recover from the insult. **By J. Courtney Sullivan**



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There were seven of us on the block, all born within a year of one another. We called ourselves the Garden Street Girls, and we each had our defining traits. Noreen was the oldest; Kate was a tomboy who played hockey and protected us from bullies on the bus; I was the bossy one. I wrote plays for us and always gave myself the starring

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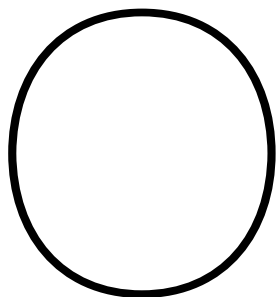
role. When we decided to start a band, I humbly named it Courtney and the Jets.

We ran in a pack all year long. In the

winter, we built snowmen and went sledding at the golf course. In autumn, we raked the neighbors' leaves without being

asked, and then rang their doorbells to inform them that they owed us five bucks. In spring, we played kickball and four-square in the street until dusk, screaming the random and meaningless phrase “Hi Bob!” at anyone who dared to drive past.

In the summertime, we spent every waking moment in our bathing suits. We wore one-pieces in solid colors or floral patterns, the butts sagging and worn. There was nothing stylish about them—they were simply uniforms for the things that needed doing. We ran through the sprinkler in them. We rode our bikes in them. We laid out in them for hours, emulating teenagers we had seen on the beach, hoping in vain for a tan. (Most of us had pasty Irish skin, and so the best we could expect, really, were constellations of freckles and pink noses that started peeling the next day.) We swam in the town pool, and in the frigid Massachusetts sea, where our lips turned blue as we did handstands in the waves.



ur bodies were vehicles for experiencing the world. I didn't give mine much thought beyond that. Until the first sunny

morning of June 1991, when I ran up to my bedroom to pull on my Speedo, and looked in the mirror with horror: I was only ten years old, and I had sprouted breasts. I knew instinctively that this was the worst thing that had ever happened to anyone, ever. I had noticed the hideous mounds before and been shocked to find three dimensions where there had formerly been just two. Hidden under a T-shirt or a nightgown, they didn't seem so bad, but now there was no denying them.

I parted the curtains and looked down at Noreen's front lawn across the street, where my friends were arranging themselves on a blanket, as blissfully flat-chested as ever. I began to panic. I went into my sticker box under the bed and pulled out two round oversize Say No To Drugs stickers that my grandmother had given me. I stuck one over

each little booblet, hoping they might somehow render my lumps invisible—proto-Spanx, if you will.

Unfortunately, the others saw right through me. More to the point, they saw right through my bathing suit. An awkward conversation ensued, during

which I maintained (and always have, up until this moment) that I absolutely did not have Say No To Drugs stickers stuck to my chest.

The Garden Street Girls didn't try to spare my feelings. A few nights later, Noreen and Kate cornered me during a sleepover.

“You have boobs,” Noreen said accusatorily.

“No, I don't.”

“You do,” Kate said.

“So do you guys,” I said lamely.

“No,” they said in unison.

And just like that, I was an outsider.

From then on, I tried everything I could think of to cover them up, tape them down, and generally deny their existence. When I said my prayers before bed each night, I added a couple extra Hail Marys, in the hopes that the Blessed Mother might take pity on me and shrink them while I slept. Afterward, I would lie down in bed and attempt to sleep on my back with my mother's copy of *The Joy of Cooking* on my chest, just in case that might flatten me out.

Of course, nothing worked, and before school started that fall, my mother said I needed a bra. She took me to a store in the mall called Lady Grace, where an old, smiling Russian lady with cold hands ran a tape measure around my chest and welcomed me into womanhood. I was mortified. I had no interest in becoming a woman—not yet. And certainly not if my friends weren't coming with me. When I got home, I stashed the bra away like a murder

weapon, still in its white plastic bag.

I hid it in the bottom of the Ker Plunk! box. Ker Plunk! was a fairly boring marble game that we had mostly outgrown. Even so, the Garden Street Girls found the bra in no time.

“What's this?” Kate asked me, hold-

The bra's white cotton cups were separated by a tiny blue bow; never had something so dainty seemed so sinister.

ing it up. I can still remember the sight. The bra's white cotton cups were separated by a tiny blue bow; never had something so dainty seemed so sinister.

I looked at it and said plainly, “I have no idea.”

Every time I wore the bra to school, I could think of nothing but the public ridicule that would befall me if anyone saw so much as a centimeter of the strap. During geography class I went to the bathroom to check on its position about once every ten minutes, which probably accounts for the fact that I still don't know the state capitals.

I longed for a friend who shared my torment. Finding none in my neighborhood or at school, I turned, as I often did, to books. But when I searched for a character like me, I found myself frustrated by so many flat-chested whiners whose plight I simply could not understand. In fiction, everyone wanted to be the *first* to get breasts. The girls to be pitied were always the late bloomers. It dawned on me then that all of my favorite plucky heroines—Anne of Green Gables, Jo March in *Little Women*—were rail-thin and slight. Even Judy Blume, that old faithful soother of adolescent woes, could offer up only young women who chanted, “We must, we must, we must increase our bust!”

The only fictional figure I could find who was in my same predicament was Punky Brewster. And when she resolved her issues by proudly asking her adoptive father for an “over-the-shoulder boulder holder,” I immediately knew

two things. One, we were nothing alike. Two, Punky wasn't raised Catholic.

Unlike her, I could see no way of transforming my embarrassment into pride. My little A-cup breasts made me burn with shame. I was afraid to run and climb, feeling positive that these actions might draw attention to my condition. In nearly every photograph from that time, my position is the same: arms crossed way up high, covering the offending area.

Despite my efforts, they only got bigger. The next summer, I started wearing a giant T-shirt over my bathing suit every time I went into the ocean. Anyone who's ever done this, or seen someone do it, can tell you that it doesn't actually improve matters. Not only do you have breasts, you now have breasts and a wet two-man tent clinging to your body.

The August I turned 14, I went to a

sleepaway theater camp, where my roommate was a 15-year-old who had been on stage all her life. She already had D-cups, and she was prouder of them than she was of her callback for "Les Miz" on Broadway. If her enthusiasm didn't change my mind exactly, it at least made me take note: Maybe big breasts weren't the end of the world after all.

But I still wasn't sure that I wanted them. By then, even the actress who played Punky Brewster had had a reduction, telling *People* magazine, "Now I can be free." She confessed that boys called her "Punky Boobster" and that people started to think of her as a bimbo. As a teenager, I felt incredibly lucky that no part of my name lent itself to such a pitch-perfect taunt. As a budding feminist, I was angry on her behalf for the bimbo slurs. It seemed unfair that something a girl never wanted in the first place could damn her to such a fate or

convey something about her personality that she didn't feel was true.

In ninth grade, I started attending a private school in Boston. I missed riding the bus with the Garden Street Girls in the morning, walking home together in the afternoon. Yet high school offered a chance at reinvention. I still had the biggest breasts in my class, but suddenly this became an asset instead of a curse. New friends complained that they couldn't pull off the dresses I

could, and the first boy to see what was holding those dresses up declared that my boobs were identical to Cindy Crawford's. To my great astonishment, I was called perky, enviable, and perfect. Or, I should say, my breasts were called those things. Accepting compliments about them didn't feel egotistical, because in a way I still thought of them as foreign objects, not a part of me at all.

In college and afterward, I started to



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To read an exclusive excerpt from Sullivan's novel *Maine*, available later this month from Knopf, download *Allure* from the iTunes Store now.

go a little too far in the opposite direction of my adolescent self, flaunting my breasts in a way that sometimes bordered on tacky. I wore low-cut black tops on dates and ultratight sweaters to work. I figured I had suffered for them in my childhood, so I may as well reap the benefits as a young adult. I'm forever grateful that this stage of my life ended shortly before the days of Facebook picture tagging. When I see the photographs now, I have to fight the urge to grab a thick black Sharpie and draw a turtleneck on myself.

My relationship with my breasts changed again in my mid-20s. I suppose this was the point at which I finally accepted them, as indicated by the fact that I more or less forgot about their existence for the first time in a decade and a half. These days, my style can best be described as unintentional. I don't cover up my chest, nor do I flaunt it. It's just sort of there. Conversations among my friends on the topic of breasts usually have more to do with midnight feedings and mammograms than cup size. The stakes have been raised with age, and

My theater-camp roommate was prouder of her D-cups than she was of her callback for *Les Miz*.

now these body parts that were always purely ornamental are largely about function and risk. It's not that vanity has gone out the window, it's just that we're vain about other things: bags under our eyes, wrinkles, and weight gain, to name a few. If the look of our breasts plays any role, it's something along the lines of *Dear God, just don't let them sag*.

The Garden Street Girls are far-flung, but we still get together once or twice a year. Last summer, Caitlain got married at a beach club on Cape Cod, and we all toasted her around a table overlooking the ocean. On that trip, as I usually do now, I wore a bikini to the beach. There is something freeing about swimming and moving unencumbered again, even doing the occasional handstand, the

same way I did as a child, though of course it can never be exactly the same.

Every now and then, that old have-versus-have-nots debate resurfaces. Someone mentions something about the horrors of having to wear a padded bra all through high school and argues that she had it way worse than I did, and I try to at least fake a little empathy. I suppose we all have a moment when we cross a line that can never be uncrossed. That moment when the body becomes something more than the instrument that gets us from A to B; after which we can never again sit among six girls in bathing suits without comparing ourselves to them. Maybe the agony isn't about being too big or too small, but the simple fact that we've begun to take notice. ♦