

Clearly, I had a problem. More than a problem. I was powerless over my addiction. My appearance had become unmanageable. The juice—from electrical outlets and batteries to botanicals and fruits—had me hooked. *Hi, my name is Elizabeth, and I'm a dermaholic.*

Bolting for Le MediSpa, I wanted to look in the mirror and say the words aloud, until a split-second realization stopped me. Mirrors, along with all other reflective surfaces, from store windows to shiny hubcaps, were triggers for my urge to use.

Making my way to the medicine cabinet, I worried that the sight of so many tubes, jars, canisters, flacons, and ampoules of bioactive and often mildly caustic compounds would overwhelm my capacity for self-control. But mercifully, I heard a voice rising in the back of my head: Seek out facial oils...calming...oils.

Heeding Colbert's advice, I rifled through the shelves until—bingo!—I struck gold. Liquid gold, that is: bearing a white label marked Quench Elixir, a one-ounce cobalt-blue glass bottle of Diane Higgins' lavender facial oil with sandalwood, orange, and cardamom.

Higgins, my trustworthy facialist for more than 20 years, works out of a very ungussied-up yet weirdly charming Lexington Avenue beauty parlor and brews her own modest line of organic skin-care products, incorporating dried flowers and herbs with therapeutic properties, including calendula for soothing, clove as a gentle antibacterial, and rose geranium for stimulating cell renewal—all of which she grows in her garden in upstate New York.

A few months earlier, in the dead of winter, when there seemed no hope for my cracked, moisture-sapped skin, Higgins had bestowed the lavender oil on me, along with her Artisanal Organic Cleansing Balm, an oil-based facial cleanser, and Hydrating Facial Spritz, an oil-infused spray.

"I believe in babying your skin if it's hypersensitive or if you have microdermabrasion or peels," she had told me. "You don't want to strip your face of hydration. A lot of people are using retinols—I think they're great, but the drying effects need to be counterbalanced."

"But oil? Won't it make me break out?" I had asked.

No, she had assured me, explaining the homeopathic logic that "like attracts like"—her words, as I recall—and that oils, in softening the skin, draw excess sebum from the pores.

(Note: Not all oils are face-friendly. "Mineral oils can irritate some people," says Fredric Brandt, a dermatologist with practices in New York City and Miami. "Mineral oil

has also always been thought to be comedogenic, or pore-clogging.")

In all honesty, I failed to put Higgins' product through the proper paces back when I first had the opportunity. Instead of faithfully sticking with her liniment, I had immediately relapsed, returning to my flesh-searing habits. But now that I had hit rock bottom—my face being too fried at this point to tolerate any more abrasive treatments—the only hope for my recovery was tender rather than tough love in the skin-care department.

In fact, I soon learned that my face was hardly alone in agitating for a change; there seems to be a skin-salvation movement under way, with Bobbi Brown among the leaders of the new cutaneous resistance.

"It's the *anti* of everything on the market," Brown says of her Extra Face Oil, a lightweight emollient of essential oils she created in 2005. "There are so many acids out there now. Face Oil is a way to go back to basics."

So is Josie Maran's Argan Organic Oil, which Sephora introduced in 2009, and because it was a success, the beauty-franchise megalith added other unctuous brands, including Nude, Boscia, Pangea Organics, and Caudalie.

"There's a lot of interest in oils," says Priya Venkatesh, Sephora's vice president of merchandising, skin care. "American women are getting out of the mind-set that oils are bad. High-quality oils can do a lot of great things for the skin."

(No wonder Shu Uemura's cult skin-care product has long been its facial cleansing oil; ditto for Clarins' Face Treatment Oil.)

In my case, it took about six weeks of diligently daubing my face with Higgins' Quench Elixir, often after first cleansing with her buttery balm and misting with her hydrating spray, before my skin appeared clearer and healthier. But were my eyes deceiving me when I thought I spied the inkling of a glow?

"A lot of botanical oils help reduce inflammation," Brandt says when I ask whether there's any scientific evidence for the efficacy of oils. "Oils do hydrate and help increase the lipid content of the skin. Also, since dryness makes the skin more susceptible to free-radical formation, which can lead to collagen breakdown and DNA changes, oils have an indirect benefit in reducing or even preventing the aging of the skin."

Well, hallelujah! Not only had I found a way to wean myself off the hard stuff, turn off my machinery, and restore sanity to my skin, but I could count on gliding toward the future, my face gleaming brighter in spite of my slowly gathering years. ❖

not only ample reserves of chemical preparations, but also an armamentarium of power tools, including but not restricted to zit zappers, sonic skin scrubbers, electrolytic depilators, mechanical massagers, and other state-of-the-art anti-aging systems.

"But still, my skin is a stinking mess!" I wailed to Colbert, throwing up my hands in exasperation.

Squinting and frowning at me, the doctor seemed doubtful, maybe even just a trifle concerned. Did he think I was exaggerating? Possibly hallucinating? Pathologically obsessed with my appearance? Exhibiting all the diagnostic features of body dysmorphic disorder, a chronic mental illness calling for immediate psychiatric, not dermatologic, attention?

Like I cared.

"Just take pity on my pores," I pleaded.

Without another word, Colbert dutifully slipped on a polarized headlamp—a light that penetrates the skin's surface to illuminate its substructures, such as hair follicles and blood vessels. Next, he pulled a magnifying glass resembling a jeweler's loupe from his pocket and, pressing the little lens against my cheek, commenced a millimeter-by-millimeter examination of my skin.

Meanwhile, I reflected on a startling observation my husband had recently made: "Nothing is sexier and more beautiful than even-toned skin," he said. "It operates on a whole different level than other features. Before it's a great ass, it's great skin. Skin has a physicality and therefore a sensuality. I probably took it for granted in my twenties, but now, whether a woman is thin or fat, her age doesn't matter. Her beauty comes down to whether she has soft, smooth, fresh, clean skin."

I was speechless: Never, not in all my 30 years of knowing the man, had he

expressed such partiality! I could only assume that my delusional striving for an immaculate complexion—skin unsullied by sun or stress or any lived experience at all, as well as preternaturally supple and absolutely uniform in tone, with just a hint of pink across the cheeks, the same delicate shade as a maiden's-blush rose—had finally brainwashed him.

Then again, what if it was the other way around? Could he have been silently telegraphing to me his ideal of ageless beauty all along?

"It's a case of status cosmeticus!" Colbert suddenly proclaimed.

"What are status cosmetics?" I said distractedly, having lost my head in a reverie about the mystical origins of my lust for looks forever fair.

"Cos-me-ti-cus," he corrected me. "That's what we call it when people use everything on their skin all the time and end up confusing their own epidermis into thinking it's under attack. You've overstimulated your skin to the point where your immune system is telling you, 'No more.'"

"Oh my God! What should I do?"

"Take a skin-cation," he ordered. "Spend a month healing and soothing and seeking out facial oils."

Yeah, a lot of good some greasy ointment is going to do me, I snickered to myself.

"Oils are traditionally calming," Colbert reassured, obviously sensing my skepticism. "Because the delicate balance between oil and water in your skin has been breached, oils are going to slow the water loss and replace the natural skin oils that you've lost. They're a true salve, and they'll act as a shield against the environment while your face heals itself."

Since Colbert had done the clinical research and safety testing for Rodin Olio Lusso, a select line of face and body

oils derived from flowers and other botanicals, he knew a thing or two about the benefits of unguents. Not that I could easily be convinced. Though I was well versed in oleaginous lore—Indian and Middle Eastern women moisturizing with argan oil, Italian and Turkish women smearing on the olive oil, and Caribbean women coating themselves in coconut oil, not to mention all the grandmas who swore by castor oil—I refused to believe that old-school skin balms could do the job for me. They just seemed too lightweight—too Luddite, really—for the average twenty-first-century Sephora Beauty Insider, and especially for my chemically conditioned, mechanically maintained mug.

Grumbling to myself, I left Colbert's office without so much as a sample-size hydrocortisone cream, let alone the customary dermatologic goodie bag dangling from my wrist. Its absence made me painfully aware of the prospect ahead: pulling the plug, as it were, on Le MediSpa.

No sooner did I arrive home than my heart started to race, my hands began to shake, and from the waist up I was soaked in sweat. Already my collagen fibers were cracking under the pressure to quit my skin treatments cold turkey.

Let's face it: The last time I relied on my own two hands to wash my face predated the Clarisonic Cleansing revolution. That was back in 2006. I'd been "polishing" my skin—apparently to the point of pulverizing it—ever since. But how on earth was I supposed to go about removing my makeup now that Colbert had put the kibosh on my kinetic ablutions? I could hardly go to sleep with color cosmetics clogging my pores. Scarier still: the mass free-radical destruction of my skin. Without any topical or technological reinforcements, what were the odds of its survival?

## MAGIC DROPS



From left: Skin-care visionary Jacques Courlin-Clarins created CLARINS BLUE ORCHID FACE TREATMENT OIL in 1965; ease stressed skin with all-natural DIANE HIGGINS ORGANIC REGENERATING FACIAL OIL or soothing DECLÉOR PARIS AROMESSENCE NÉROLI OIL; SUNDAY RILEY JUNO TRANSFORMATIVE LIPID SERUM masterfully targets multiple skin issues with a natural retinol, vitamin C, omega-3, -6, and -9; dermatologist- and makeup-artist-approved RODIN OLIO LUSSO LUXURY FACE OIL boasts a 10-plus-oil blend; SONYA DAKAR OMEGA-3 REPAIR COMPLEX is a longtime favorite of Hollywood's acne-prone actresses; a citrus-scented pick, DARPHIN ORGANIC TANGERINE AROMATIC CARE fights fine lines and the earliest signs of aging; a favorite of ELLE editors, AROMATHERAPY ASSOCIATES REVITALIZING FACE OIL encourages collagen growth; saturate skin with the fast-absorbing sesame, almond, and olive oils in BOBBI BROWN EXTRA FACE OIL.



# URGE OVERKILL

If you've gotten zapped, buffed, polished, and plumped and have started to look the worse for it, there's a whole new generation of healing, dewy-making products to help. **Elizabeth Hayt** reports

**M**y face is revolting!" I cried out from the examining table the instant David Colbert, MD, a dermatologist based in New York City, stepped inside his treatment room one Monday afternoon back in March.

"I wouldn't say *revolting*," he replied, laughing lightly.

"In revolt!" I declared. "It's the Arab Spring of my skin." My complexion—once so clear, calm, and under control—was now in a rage. Thrusting out my chin to

give Colbert a better glimpse of the angry redness of my skin, I then directed his attention to my cheeks and forehead, where parched patches of flesh were shriveling up and flaking off, leaving my face raw, sore, and scabby. As if that weren't battering enough, my nose was besieged by blackheads and whiteheads, while along my jawline an outbreak of fiery pimples was freshly erupting.

I felt frustrated, confused, and a bit embarrassed. Shouldn't I be well beyond the years of sebaceous-glands-gone-wild—and at the same time, hardly so ancient that my face could be withering and desiccated from early-onset self-mummification?

What made my deterioration even more deplorable: Ever since my midthirties, when my youthful glory succumbed to the ravages of premature aging (frown lines, crow's-feet, droopy eyelids, and the like) as a consequence of once-latent damage that I incurred in my sun-worshipping youth, I have maintained a compulsive commitment to skin care. From braving the plastic surgeon's scalpel to lining up for the latest cosmetic dermatology treatment, as well as performing at-home beauty treatments to rival any professional aesthetician's, and with no amount of pain, bruising, downtime, or dollars ever deterring me, I have been shamelessly willing, even insatiably driven, to do whatever it takes for the upkeep of my face.

"See these brown spots?" I ranted at Colbert, jabbing my finger at my temple. "I never go outside during midday sun. I always slather on titanium-strength sunblock. In the summer, I carry a parasol, no matter how insane it looks. And I use bleaching creams twice a week at minimum. So, why my sudden blight of hyperpigmentation?" I implored, looking the doctor in the eye.

"Um, I really don't see anything," he said.

"Look closer!" I demanded.

Pulling up a medical stool and sitting down, he leaned over my face and calmly asked: "What products are you using?"

"What *don't* I use?!" I exclaimed.

I proceeded to tick off my daily cosmetic regimen, beginning with the morning ritual of alternating or layering applications of retinol creams, alpha hydroxy acids, skin whiteners, antioxidant serums, growth-factor formulations, and peptide complexes.

Nighttime, however, was when I really rolled up my sleeves, administering a series of customized, problem-specific, high-tech treatments for the deep cleansing, intense hydration, and general rejuvenation of my face. With my bathroom serving as my own bliss-world, or as I liked to call it, "Le MediSpa Chez Moi," I had at my disposal