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Diseases I Have Known

Disease presents itself as such a trivial term; a hypernym. It can mean something curable, like chicken pox or measles. Or it could mean something incurable; chronic, *treatable*. The term *treatable* is like a punch in the face. If doctors were honest, they'd probably say, "*Yes, you can treat your disease, but we can't cure it, and you will have to spend the rest of your life fighting to see another day. Good luck!*" But, of course, doctors are advised against being so blunt. They often refer the diagnosed to specialists who take pride in their work and really do care about their patients, but that does not make up for the weight the diagnosed have to carry for the rest of their lives. Each diabetics' diagnosis compares plays out similar to one another, however, the story of how one perseveres afterwards fares unique. Let me tell you about the sweet story of my transition from a carefree child to a mini-adult.

I'd argue that diabetes persists as the most stereotyped disease today. Diabetes often categorizes as weight-related—you have to *look* it. Without fail, when I tell someone I have type 1 diabetes, they will either ask if it's "the good or bad kind," or say, "you're not fat though." What do those things even mean? Being asked, "can you drink that?" People may not realize how much pain their words and jokes inflict, but in my perspective, this subsists as one of the most painful occurrences I have to bear every day of my life.

Endurance is often seen as a thing to be proud of, but if I had any say in the matter, I would argue that I'd endured enough.

I remember my diagnosis like yesterday. My older brother, Ryan, got married to his high school sweetheart on August 9th, 2019. I spent the entirety of the wedding in the bathroom. I couldn't grasp exactly why my body called for help, and it scared me; I stood nearly seventy pounds as a five-foot-two nine year old. **My mom, a nurse, tested my blood sugar the next morning, and off we went to the doctors clinic.** After test results indicating type 1 diabetes, the clinicians tried to send me home with a vial of insulin and zero direction. At first, I didn't understand what diabetes meant. I knew one of my brothers on my dad's side had it, but he acted so secretive about it that I didn't know what it entailed. **My mom (thankfully) threw a fit about the clinic's neglect, and subsequently, we were transported via ambulance to Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock.** On the two hour ride there, I didn't feel real, almost like I inhabited the shell of a person; looking in at someone else's life. Processing heavy feelings as a nine year old was a well-worn tale, but this one felt so unfamiliar and petrifying that I could hardly even stand to think about it.

During my five day hospital stay, they scheduled me to see a plethora of dieticians and doctors, and there, I was introduced to the hormone injection that my body cannot produce: insulin. The best way to describe the smell of insulin is imagining a gust of air in a dentist's office or even hospital cleaning supplies. Said smell will always spark the sense of dread I felt the first time I realized what diabetes meant. At the hospital, meals were on the dot, and they taught me to count my carbs before anything I ate. A new feeling started to ignite inside of me; indignation. Sixteen days after being diagnosed, my tenth birthday arrived. Looking at my cake, candles lit, my family singing happy birthday; I felt a lack of joy. My life seemed to carry on an unending loop of fury and resentment. I resented my mom for choosing my father, of all people, to have a child with; I resented her incessant asking if I counted my carbs or checked my blood

sugar; I resented the alarms which rang any time I crept out of range; and I resented my father for not even bothering to show up to the hospital when I got diagnosed. Since I received my diagnosis one week before school started, I ended up in homeschool for my fourth grade year. I absolutely hated it, but I excelled; I completed all of my coursework 2 months early and enjoyed a long summer break.

The loneliness got to me. As far back as I can recall, I've always struggled with being lonely. My mom tried her hardest to get me to make friends; I tried my hardest. I had always presented as too odd, too mature, too different. So many times I sobbed into my mother's arms, asking, "why am I not good enough? Why does everyone look at me like I'm a monster? Will it always be this way?" No young child should have to say those words. Even throughout the course of my life, I remained lonely. Every day I struggle; everyone has each other, and I only have myself. What hurts the most is *still* crying into my mom's arms still asking, "Why did they not include me? Why can't I be good enough?" Diabetes has caused others to leave me out of sleepovers and hangouts; nobody wants the responsibility of a stranger's medically-compromised child's life. From the age of nine until now, age seventeen, I have felt like a burden on everyone's life.

For all the time I can remember before diagnosis, I tried to become the best kid possible. I had such a passion for painting, academics, and reading as many books as possible. After diagnosis, I possessed no energy to do anything but contemplate if staying alive proved a fruitless endeavor. Noticing a change within my behavior, my mom placed me in therapy. At first, I refused to talk, but after a year and a few different therapists, I opened up, albeit not fully.

Nobody ever knew the full extent of my feelings, and I couldn't bring myself to say them.

Diabetes has had a substantial impact on my social and academic life. At eleven years old, I started my first year of public school since being diagnosed. School staff has never understood that I am not *happy* about my 504 plan, and would rather not have any medical handicaps than get to "play on my phone whenever I want." During standardized tests the administrators placed me in a room by myself due to the extremely unlikely chance my alarms may sound due to my blood sugar being urgently low. The first year back I experienced hell; kids constantly made fun of the continuous glucose monitor on my arm, I was often called out for being on my phone since kids deemed it 'unfair,' and I had an intense fear of treating my blood sugars in class due to the possibility of being ridiculed or even just looked at.

I wanted nothing more than to go unnoticed and live like everyone else.

It's strange; most people my age eat fruit-snacks and candy out of enjoyment, but to me, they are medicinal. Candy that is often enjoyed as a treat sounds so sickening to me that on some days the utter smell of something sweet makes me sick to my stomach.

Although this disease has had an inimical effect on my life, it has also taught me lessons of perseverance and dignity. Even though my perception of "normal" may be skewed, most days I have my disease under control. Diabetes has taught me to appreciate that the struggles I do have are only this finite. Every day persists a fight to live, and some days are really difficult to endure.

However, my body won't win.

I have so much life left to live, and nothing can stop me from living it. The grip this disease and my mental health try so desperately to have on me will not succeed in controlling me. Although it's bittersweet to accept, my struggles do play a part in who I am. Of course, I wish I didn't have to go through this, but I do, so I will not let it stop me from moving forward. So, to the diseases I have known—better luck next time.