Accepting your Insecurities

It’s the very early hours of a Saturday morning. Sirens blaring and lights flashing around me. I’m strapped down to a stretcher, my whole body violently shaking. It feels like someone is banging on my head with a hammer. My stomach, flipping in circles, threatening to spill what’s inside out on the ground beneath me. As I struggle to release my hands from the tight black straps holding me down, the EMT tells me they're taking me to the hospital. Rolling me out of my college apartment, the freezing cold February air slaps me in the face as I try to piece together the moments that got me here. He tells me that I am suffering from a severe blood sugar complication. A high blood glucose level caused by lack of insulin in my system for multiple hours. What I thought was a few hours of freedom from my insulin pump ended up having severe consequences. Sitting in the back of the ambulance, fear flooded my body. For the first time in a decade since my diagnosis I realized how serious the effects of Type One Diabetes could be.

Growing up with this condition made me self conscious. I have always been introverted. I hated being the center of attention. Having a serious medical condition since the age of nine can change that. I felt like everyone was watching me. Wanting to know if I was okay, how I was doing. Watching me prick my finger, small red droplets of blood pooling out of my callused fingers. Watching me inject myself with insulin, drawing a needle full of clear liquid before plunging it into different parts of my body every few hours. Having to lay down for fifteen minutes if my blood sugar was too high or too low. Feeling lightheaded, shaking uncontrollably, feeling nauseous, waves of anxiety coursing through my body at the uncertainty of how my blood sugar was going to react. Getting stares every time I pulled out my medical supplies. Having to explain what was wrong with me to other children my age. Their confused looks and judgment when they didn't understand why I was different from everyone else. I felt like my disease was taking away so much.

I was diagnosed at nine years old. I was hospitalized for three days suddenly because of rapid weight loss, dehydration, polyuria, fatigue. I had no idea what was happening to my body. All I knew was that something felt wrong. I spent those three days in Boston Children's Hospital, hooked up to multiple IV's, receiving shots of insulin every few hours, getting my fingers pricked, watching my parents talk to doctors and nurses. Watching them break down in tears when they thought I wasn't looking. I was terrified.

What would a diagnosis of Type 1 Diabetes mean for my future? How much would it affect my perception of myself and how I lived my life? I sat in that hospital bed, thinking about how different my life was going to be. How fast I was going to have to grow up. How much more responsible I would have to become. How I would now have to count every single carb I ate. How I would have to inject myself with insulin and prick my fingers multiple times a day. I was going to leave this hospital and be a completely different version of myself.

When I started middle school, a boy in my sixth grade class told me he didn't want to sit next to me because I was contagious. He told the other kids that if they got too close to me or if they ate too much sugar, they would get diabetes just like me. And nobody wanted that. He laughed in my face. Made diabetic jokes every time he saw me. He thought it was funny. "Kids are cruel", my mother told me while I was curled up in my bed crying uncontrollably in her arms."Their actions show more about the person they are, not who you are…they're just insecure." I felt ashamed of my condition. Resented the fact that I had to deal with something other people my age didn't have to. I can't count the amount of times my mother told me this throughout the years. But still, I always felt like the insecure one.

Two years after my diagnosis my doctor recommended I start using an Insulin Pump and Continuous Glucose Monitor. A small black box with a long tube connected to a needle that you inject into your body every three days. I had to hook it onto the waist of my pants. The long tube twisting and turning on the side of my body and connecting to a small needle in my stomach. This is how I would get my insulin now. A thin gray monitor with a long thin wire that I would inject into my arm every two weeks. It would read my blood sugar automatically. Two devices that are supposed to make managing type one diabetes so much easier. So much more manageable. And it did. I didn't have to prick my finger as much. I didn't have to inject myself with a needle everytime I wanted to eat. It was nice to have devices to rely on. To not have to worry as much as I did when I was first diagnosed. But even though these monitors made it easier to manage my condition, they also made me feel like I had something branded on me. A constant reminder of what I was going through.

During my freshman year of college, I sat in a large lecture hall taking an exam, not realizing that my blood sugar was beginning to drop low. Insulin pumps set off obnoxious and loud alarms when your blood sugar drops too low or shoots up too high. They are supposed to alert you to consume carbohydrates or give yourself insulin to get your blood sugar back in range. In that Nutrition 400 class, my insulin pump began to vibrate and beep loudly over and over again. My whole body froze, and I began to panic. I knew what happened next. Everyone's head turned. All eyes were on me. My professor looked up from his podium in the front of the hall. My face turned red and I shrunk down in my seat, trying to hide myself from the attention of others. I felt so embarrassed. So ashamed. The beeping stopped and I raced out of the hall. Locked myself in the bathroom. Tried to take deep breaths to calm myself down.

As I grew older, my insulin pump became the one thing I hated most in the world. The thing that made me less worthy than others. The constant reminder that I would always be different. I began to try and conceal my condition as best as I could. I wore baggy clothes that covered my insulin pump and injection sites. I took my medication in the school bathroom. I'd insert my sites into parts of my body that nobody could see. That nobody would notice. I silenced my monitors in fear that they would go off in class or social settings. I would edit my tube out of pictures before posting them so nobody would question what was wrong with me. I’d go out with people and not give myself insulin in fear that I would pull my pump out and get criticized instantly. My insulin pump became my biggest insecurity. The one thing that kept me alive. The one thing that saved my life had become the one thing I hated the most.

I was at a highschool party my sophomore year when a guy approached me and asked if I was a robot. There were people surrounding me shoulder to shoulder, laughing and singing to the loud blaring music in the background that I thought I had misheard him. He laughed as he tugged on my insulin pump tube and pointed to my Continuous Glucose Monitor on my arm. He told me I had so much metal connected to me that I looked like a hybrid. That it “sucked” that I had to wear those all the time. He was clearly drunk, but his words still felt violating. I turned my back on him, trying to escape his gaze. Trying to hide my monitors from him. I hated how they brought unwanted attention to me. I hated that no one understood that I needed these to stay alive. All they saw were things attached to me that no one else had.

My insulin pump had always felt like extra baggage. Something weighing me down. I had to have it connected to me all hours of the day. Because my pancreas stopped producing insulin on its own, my pump was like a makeshift pancreas, injecting me with insulin whenever I ate. I had to wear it all day and night, even when I was sleeping. Rolling over in bed and hitting my injection site or rolling over the small black metal box was uncomfortable. I had a tube hanging off my body at all times. I would get it hooked on door handles or drawer knobs and rip my injection site out, blood oozing from my stomach and bruising almost instantly. I would have to wear it when I played sports. It would slide off my waistband constantly and I would have to pick it up and reattach it countless times. It was extremely frustrating constantly having these things attached to me. It sometimes hurt, it was uncomfortable, my body became covered in bruises and bumps. Scars that I will have branded across my body for the rest of my life. I missed my body from before my diagnosis.

When I got to college, I started taking my insulin pump off when I would go out. For those few hours I felt free. I felt normal. I felt like I could finally just be me. Not the version of me that has diabetes. No one asked me questions, gave me strange looks, made comments or jokes. It felt like my alternate personality. The version of myself I could have grown up to be if I hadn’t been diagnosed with Type One Diabetes a decade ago. Those few hours on the weekends when I could forget about my insecurities was like a drug. I would come home after a night out, wishing that I could feel that way forever. I would also come home after a night out feeling extremely sick. You need a constant stream of insulin in your blood for your body to function properly. And while I thought those few hours of freedom were harmless, I had no insulin in my system to maintain my blood sugar levels. I would come home vomiting, shaking, feeling like I hadn’t drunk water in days. My whole body would ache in the morning, my head would pound for hours. I was slowly killing myself everytime I took off my insulin pump. But I still did it. Because I was young and naive and stupid and I wanted to feel like a normal human being more than I wanted to feel healthy. I risked my life in those few short hours just so I wouldn’t feel like I was different from everyone else.

Sitting in the Dover Emergency Room that early Saturday morning, I thought about the events that led me up to this moment. For those next few hours I didn’t think about what other people would think about me. What other people would say. What other people might ask. For those next few hours I thought about what I would think about myself. I asked myself, *“Is it really worth it? Am I that insecure about a little black box that I would risk my life for other people's acceptance? Other people’s validation?”* I thought back to my younger self, how insecure and scared she was to accept this condition as something that made her, her.

If I could go back in time, I would tell my nine year old self that it’s okay to be different. It’s okay to be flawed. It doesn’t make her less of a person because she is struggling with something that other people might not understand. I would tell her that she is strong. That she is capable. That she has value. That being connected to an insulin pump, that having a tube hooked to her for the rest of her life doesn’t make her less of a person. I would tell her that now she wears her insulin pump with pride. That she doesn’t try to cover it up. That she is finally confident. That she is proud to be someone who has come out on the other side of her condition. That she enjoys telling other people about what she struggles with, what she has gone through. Because having Type One Diabetes has turned her into the person she is today. If I could go back in time I would tell her that my insulin pump is now something I am not ashamed of. Because it keeps me alive. Because it has taught me so much about myself. Because while it used to be my biggest insecurity, it has become something I am proud to wear. It has become something I am not ashamed for the world to see.