

My First Thanksgiving

By Tiana Penczar

The wooden table sat nine, including myself, and the weight of Thanksgiving food rendered it unmovable. One set of seating arrangements included my aunt, her son, her boyfriend, and his daughter, all placed on a wooden bench three shades lighter than the table. I offered to let my other cousin sit to my right. She had no place to rest her arms on the cushioned dining room chair, and for a moment I envied her, as my father's armchair smashed uncomfortably into mine. I asked him to move over, to which he happily agreed, but his chair found its way back to pushing into mine, armrest against armrest, bending the wood at an unnatural angle. My grandparents sat on matching chairs at either end of the dinner table, both with arms to rest upon, and they had gathered their food first, getting their pick of the bread-roll litter.

As everyone stacked their plates, I fumbled with my phone, searching the internet for which foods had which amount of carbs and how much I could stuff inside my stomach before feeling sick. I wrote down my glucose calculations in the black and white notebook I had to carry everywhere, the gold "T" pasted on the front slowly stripping down to an outline. My family began to eat, but I hadn't yet touched the heavy dinner fork thrown haphazardly on my plate. My black and white striped pen slid across the lined paper of the matching notebook, staining it with numbers and words that have forced their way into my common vernacular. I decided I could deduct one-half scoop of mash potatoes in trade for adding another half-scoop of my dad's homemade stuffing.

My male cousin dipped a plastic serving spoon into the communal bowl of stuffing, reaching over my aunt to grab another serving. His plate was half-empty and painted with gravy. My stomach growled. I surveyed the rest of the food in front of me. Half-empty plates filled my view, as well as greedy hands dipping into each serving bowl for seconds and thirds. My plate remained clean. I hadn't yet finished my carb-counting, nor had I disinfected my insulin pen or injection site. I had to wait fifteen minutes to eat after administering the correct amount of insulin, and by then, I figured, the food would be growing cold and the

dishes they were served in would be getting lighter and lighter as more plates became re-filled.

I placed my notebook on the table next to my empty plate, retrieved my phone from my lap, and exited out of any tab that had the words 'carbs in' or 'amount of' in the title. My father asked me what was wrong around a freshly swallowed mouthful of gravy-soaked ham. I told him "Nothing" as it was the only word I could force without breaking into a sob.

I excused myself from the table, locked myself in the playroom turned guest-bedroom, and cried. I cried for what seemed like an eternity, but no one had come to check on me, so I assume it was less than five minutes. When I had finished crying, my stomach ached with hunger, but I was nothing short of resistant to feed it. I didn't want to eat anymore. I didn't want to be left eating alone. I didn't want to be watched as my family sat around the dinner table, bellies full, eyes glazed with pity, as I ate my meal surrounded by empty serving dishes. I could see the made-up future with such clarity that my knees and hands grew cold with fresh anxiety, keeping me wrapped in the tight ball I fell to when I walked in.

The rug beneath me was rough, scratching at my cloth leggings, embedding months-old dog hair throughout the fabric. I had texted my best friend, said that I wished she was there because I knew she would make it better. I can't remember now if she had texted back immediately, or had responded hours later, apologizing because she couldn't take her phone out while seated at the dinner table. I like to remember it as the former.

I decided my pity-party had gone on long enough, that it was time for me to stop crying about something I couldn't fix, stop starving myself out of rejection for the process I now needed to survive. I took a selfie. My eyes were red-rimmed, and tear stains marked my cheeks, but I held up a peace sign and pushed out my lips because my face had never been slimmer, and I still felt pretty, even though I hadn't eaten.

My dinner, when I finally left, was not spent alone. I took my seat in between my cousin and father, brushing off their concerned questions and glances in favor of filling my plate with accounted-for portions of meat, stuffing, potatoes, and gravy. I enjoyed every bite, not thinking of myself as any different than the people surrounding me. All I had to do was make

adjustments. I scarfed down my microwave-heated meal as the rest of my family laughed over the desert I couldn't have eaten anyway.