A peanut allergy seems like a trivial thing to those who have never dealt with it.

‘Don’t worry so much, just don’t eat peanuts dude.’ my friends will tell me on a regular basis.

But it’s more than that; just ‘not eating peanuts’ isn’t enough.

I have to read the label on everything I eat. One mistake, one careless moment and I’m as good as dead.
At every restaurant I go to, I have to ask whether or not they use peanut oil to cook with. Most of the time the person I ask won’t know, and needs to go ask the cook. After an awkward moment of holding up the line they’ll return, usually with a hesitant ‘we use vegetable oil.’ The rest of the customers in line or waiting to be seated manage to control their minor frustration but I still feel as if I ruined their day.

It’s embarrassing and annoying.

If peanuts were to get into my mouth the result would be a reaction called anaphylactic shock, a deadly chain reaction that renders victims totally helpless. It’s not like a milk allergy or lactose intolerance; it does more than just make someone itchy and give them bad gas. First the immune system mistakes the foreign substance (in this case, a peanut) for a pathogen that can cause a disease. The sudden appearance of ‘pathogens’ in such a high concentration has a Pearl Harbor effect on the body; to respond to the attack every system goes into turbo-mobilization mode in a desperate attempt to save the body from the full-on war that would ensue if the peanut were actually something threatening.

But the reaction is so sudden and so drastic that it is self-destructive. The throat closes up, and oxygen can’t reach the lungs. The skin bubbles and swells to disgusting proportions. Veins and arteries constrict, and blood stops flowing. It’s a scary and painful way to die. The only way to survive is to jab yourself in the thigh at full force with a giant steroid-filled needle called an Epi-Pen to slow down the effects, and then call the paramedics to get you to the hospital.

The fear of that happening to me is constantly looming over my head any time I eat something.

If I haven’t read the label or asked the cook about it, I can’t eat it.

If it’s been processed on machinery that’s handled peanuts in the past, I can’t eat it.

My diet is seriously limited by this.

Every Halloween as a child I had to give almost all of my candy to my friends; I’ve never tasted a Snicker’s bar or Reese’s cup. I can’t have cookies or crackerjacks, nor can I eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Everything that people get all reminiscent about once they reach adulthood, I had to stay away from.

My lifestyle is not that much different than everyone else’s; I still go out to eat with friends on special occasions, and I guiltily enjoy junk food. A peanut allergy isn’t so much a life-altering disability as much as it is a life-limiting one that takes some opportunities away from your grasp and waves them just out of arm’s reach to taunt you.

Yet somehow the worst part of a peanut allergy isn’t the anxiety and paranoia when eating something new, but the feeling that I’m holding people back. Many of my friends love Five Guys and eat there religiously; yet when we’re deciding where to eat I’m always the lone voice of dissent that says, “Hey, how about we just stay here and have sandwiches or something?” No one wants to stay back and make a ham sandwich but what choice do they have? They don’t want me to die after all, so we stay home.

If someone does have peanuts, I have to ask them to wash their hands afterwards. Sure, that way I stay safe but I feel as if I’m making everyone change their plans in order to suit my needs and I hate that feeling more than anything.

I believe that everything about a person shapes who they are – both their talents and their deficiencies are important parts of their story. Just as I would not get rid of the things I’m good at, if I had the option to remove an aspect of myself that I don’t like, I flat out refuse in most cases. It’s obvious to people who have met me that I am well under the average height for a male my age. But being short is part of the person I am today and shaped the way I perceived the world as I grew up; I would never change my height.

But my peanut allergy is another story. It didn’t help turn me into the person I am today, it just bothers me. If a cheap cure for an anaphylactic allergy was to come along that let me eat peanuts, you can be sure I’d take it. No more “do you use peanut oil?” and no more “oh that’s just my epi-pen”. I’d walk to any restaurant to buy as many fries as I could, and stuff my face with them. Finally I would exact my salty and crunchy revenge on genetics.

Until that day however, I’m stuck inside the boundaries of a peanut allergy; a set of limits that taunts me constantly while remaining invisible to anyone else.