

THE STORM BEFORE THE STORM

What Happened Right
Before Diabetes?

“Look back at the last few years before you found out you had diabetes. There may have been some devastating event that led up to the symptoms.”

How did you find out you had diabetes? People have asked me that question. I tell them my eyes got blurry, so I went to the clinic. Simple story. Maybe this is similar to what you say. Maybe you had vision problems, or you had to go to the bathroom a lot, or you were drinking lots of water.

We go to the clinic complaining of vision problems, and they tell us we have diabetes. But vision problems, going to the bathroom, and being thirsty, do not tell the complete story.



Many times, these symptoms are only the final events that send us to the clinic.

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Many of us who walk through that clinic door to learn we have diabetes carry with us not a small purse filled with a vision problem. We are wheeling in a huge luggage cart, bulging at the sides, suitcases strapped down with bungee cords. I don't mean to be saying "Boo hoo! I'm such a sad Native person. I have a bunch of baggage and diabetes." But I am saying we should take a serious look at where we are standing when we begin our life with diabetes.

THE BEGINNING OF THE REAL STORY

What happened immediately before the vision problems, or the bathroom trips, or the thirst? Most likely, something traumatic happened. I've talked to many people who say that just before they found out they had diabetes, someone in their family died, or went to jail, or had an accident. Or the person was getting divorced or lost their job.

Let me tell you the story behind my blurry eyes. The story begins with my father. His name was Alvin C. Bowman. The "C" stood for Chief, his Navajo name before boarding school took it away. He always signed his name with a C because he never forgot who he was.

My father was a cowboy, tall and slender, always wearing a white cowboy hat and denim shirt. Those Navajo cowboys! Watch out for those "raisin' Navajo eyes." They say Navajo men are fatal for women because of those eyes.

When I say my father was a cowboy, I mean a real cowboy. He rode bulls and bucking horses in rodeos. I remember hiding out under the rodeo bleachers. I was afraid to watch, afraid he would get hurt.

Rodeo was in his blood. It was his dream to compete and be a rodeo champion. He wanted all of his children to be rodeo riders. But one after the other, his babies turned out to be girls.

That didn't stop my father. He gave us all boy nicknames. He called me Bobby. He called one of my sisters Peter. He put us on a barrel contraption in the front yard. Tied to the front of the barrel was a rope. Father said, "Bobby! Hold on!"

I obeyed. Then he yanked on the rope, which set the barrel to rocking wildly. In no time, I would be bucked off by the wild barrel. Often I would land on my knee, usually my right knee. (I still have the scars.) I'd scream and howl. No matter.

"Bobby! Get back on the barrel!"

I obeyed.



MY FATHER'S GIFT

My father was a good rodeo rider, with dreams of being great. He could have followed the rodeo circuit, chasing his dream. Instead he knew we were hungry and needed him. He traded the glory of eight seconds on an ornery bull for a job working construction. My father held signs to direct traffic at construction sites. He drove dump trucks. He could have had a different life. He chose to stay and put food on the table.

What he gave us was his time and a role model of integrity. He wasn't the type of father you could run to, jump on, and hug. He was "Navajo formal." When he wasn't calling me Bobby he addressed me as, "Daughter Barbara." When I was working at the library, he would call and say, "This is Alvin Bowman. May I speak to my Beautiful Daughter Barbara?" He called all of us, "Beautiful," as if it were part of our names. He called my mother, "My Beautiful."



*He called all of us, "Beautiful,"
as if it were part of our names.
He called my mother,
"My Beautiful."*



THEIR LOVE STORY

He met my mother when he was working for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). My father and his brothers worked on projects in Oregon and California. They saved up their money and bought a huge Ford sedan and a motorcycle. These tall Navajo brothers wore cowboy hats when they drove

the Ford and motorcycle into Bishop, California, in the early 1940s. The roads were dirt, so they created quite a dust cloud. The Bishop Indians were in awe at this unusual spectacle.

I live on TuSu Lane, the road that my father, his brothers and other CCC workers built. You can still see the remains of the house where my mother lived when she was growing up. She was just a teenager when she got her first glimpse of my father. He saw her standing outside the small house. He waved. She giggled. He came back, waved some more. After several months of waving and giggling, they progressed to driving a huge truck up the mountains to get gravel. (There was no hanky panky. I am sure of this.)

He asked her father for her hand in marriage. A year later, permission was granted. They married. He was 18. She was 14.

In the Navajo way, my father brought his saddle and placed it on my mother's porch. It was his pledge to be with her. The saddle was a symbol of everything he owned, how he was bringing to her all his possessions, depending on her, promising to be with her in her house.

THE BIGGEST HEARTBREAK

Memories of my father bring forth a feeling of great tenderness. He spoke with a Navajo accent. English was his second language. When my mother's kidneys were failing, we went to the doctor, and my father told him that my mother was having trouble with her *kittens*. My sisters and I looked at each other, trying to figure out where the kittens came from. My mother was having problems with her *kidneys*.

I loved my father tenderly and with utmost respect. He was an image of integrity and devotion. He tried in vain to save my

mother from diabetes, and when she died, his life ended. He never smiled again. We had to remind him to eat. A year after her death, my father was hit by a truck and died.

We had two funerals, one in Bishop and one on the Navajo Reservation. I had hopes for the Navajo funeral. I so much wanted to pay my respects to my father on his Navajo homeland in the Navajo way.

Our family traveled there. The funeral was very difficult, full of trauma and sadness. I felt something inside of me shift. I felt like I was out of my mind with grief, conflict, despair.

As we were driving home, I wondered why it was so foggy. "Where is this fog coming from?" I asked Bob. "It isn't foggy," he said. The next day I went to the clinic and found out I had diabetes.

THE PERSON I WAS WHEN I FOUND OUT

There. That's the complete story of how I found out I had diabetes. I might say, "My vision got blurry, so I went to the clinic and found out I had diabetes." But the true story is this: Along with other family members, I put my life on hold for ten years to take care of my beloved mother who died because of diabetes. Then I helped take care of my father until he died of a broken heart. Then I witnessed the saddest funeral, the biggest disappointment, the crumbling of all my last-chance hopes for my father. And, by the way, my vision got blurry. That's how I found out I had diabetes.

That's who I was sitting in the clinic room. That was the point where I began my journey with diabetes.

THE KEY QUESTION

The doctor says, "What is going on?" And I say, "My vision is blurry." He asks me questions. "Are you going to the bathroom a lot? Are you feeling tired?" He doesn't ask the key question: "Are you experiencing unbearable grief?"

He tells me I have diabetes. Other clinic staff are very upbeat. Test your blood sugar! Change your eating habits! Walk! You will be okay! They are concerned and smiling and busy and matter-of-fact. Barbara had blurry vision. Barbara has diabetes. Barbara needs a glucometer.

Wait a minute! Barbara is out of her mind with grief! Her heart is broken, in pieces on the ground. Where do we go from here?

*Wait a minute! Barbara is out
of her mind with grief!
Her heart is broken, in pieces
on the ground...*

A NEW LIFE, BUT NO CEREMONY

These days, when a young woman begins her moon, we may give her a Pamprin. In the old days, we removed her from her duties. Our communities recognized that she was delicate and in need of care. She went to a special place where she did not have to make decisions, be responsible, or be busy. She was given special soups to drink. Rocks were heated and placed on her abdomen to ease the pain. Her feet were rubbed. No one said, "You have to go here. You have to go there." The only thing she had to do was receive.

Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

When we get diabetes, we also get a whole new body. We become a new person. But there is no right-of-passage, no ceremony. There is no relieving of duties. There is no recognition of how years of grief and devotion and putting our needs last may have led to diabetes.

For almost a dozen years, I gladly put my life on hold for my parents. There were no trips to the gym. There was no carefully washing spinach for my lunchtime salad. I spent every moment taking care of people I loved, and in between moments, I ate sandwiches made of Spam and white bread.

If diabetes is the badge I must wear because of my devotion to those I love, a ceremony sure would be nice!



4: The Storm Before the Storm

HONORING THE PERSON WITH DIABETES

Someday there may be just such a ceremony. In the meantime, let's know where we start our journeys with diabetes. Often we have just weathered a devastating storm. We were not leisurely shopping and going to work and cooking well-planned meals. We were not leading predictable, almost boring, lives. Often our lives were in chaos. Then we get diabetes.

So let's treat ourselves tenderly. I can feel tenderness for my father. I can feel the same tenderness for myself. My father gave up his rodeo dreams to fulfill the pledge he made to my mother and to us, his children. I carry my father's blood. In the same way, I gave up my dreams to take care of the people I loved. I suffered a broken heart and cried many tears. But, like my father, I stayed. My integrity is intact. I have diabetes.

I hear the voice of my father, mingled with the Creator's:

*Beautiful Daughter!
You have loved deeply.
You have sacrificed for your loved ones.
You did not run away,
and now you have diabetes.
Stop going here and there. Rest.
Feel the warmth of the hot rocks.
Let the rocks and the soup
and the people who love you
ease your worries and
take away your pain.*



Wit & Wisdom

I asked myself:

**What happened during
the last few years before
getting diabetes?**

**Do I blame myself for not
taking care of myself
during those years?
Who was I taking care of?
Did I do it out of
love and devotion?**

**How can I give
myself a break?
How can I recognize
my struggles and
my devotion to others?
Is there a prayer I can say,
or a ceremony I can do,
to honor the path I walked
that led me to diabetes?**

