



The Story of  
**Jennifer  
Gloria  
Lowpez** of  
Waswanipi

*\*Names and details in this story have been changed to protect identities.*

Told Jennifer Gloria Lowpez  
Written Ruth DyckFehderau

<sup>1</sup>In 2007 or so, things at Jennifer Gloria Lowpez's home were not going so great. One night she slugged back some pills, lots of pills, and went out to a bar where she drank some beer and then some wine and then some rum and then some vodka. Then she grabbed an empty beer bottle, broke it against the bar, and cut herself right across a vein. She crumpled in a heap and her spirit lifted and left her body that was still bleeding out on the grimy pub floor.

Someone was saying into her ear, "Stay Jennifer, your kids need you." But kids or no kids, it was time to go. Finally, it was time to go.

Jennifer woke up in the Chibougamau hospital. Someone, probably that person who spoke in her ear, had called an ambulance. Her boyfriend, who had told her that no one could ever love someone as fat and ugly as Jennifer, sat in the chair by the bed. She turned over on her side and faced away from him.

If only the suicide had worked.

In January 2010, the doctor told Jennifer she had diabetes.

She cried and cried and cried. What was diabetes anyways? Didn't people with diabetes go blind and get infections and then amputation after amputation until they didn't have any arms or legs left? Jennifer's heels were always cracked: if anyone's foot was gonna get infected and have to be sawed off, it'd be hers. And then it'd be her other foot and then one arm and then the other and soon she wouldn't have any limbs and would die a horrible pus-filled death.

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<sup>1</sup> We are very grateful to the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay for the permission to reproduce this story here.

The nutritionist who talked to Jennifer about diabetes kept handing her Kleenex for her tears but didn't really explain much. Still, Jennifer started taking diabetes pills because she was supposed to. They made her lose a few pounds, but not many. She still felt like a Christmas tree. A terrified Christmas tree.

The good thing was that comfort was available every single day. Three meals plus two chocolate bars a day, plus snacks of cookies and poutine between meals, plus a big Costco bag of chips and dip along with a couple of bottles of Pepsi with her kids every night, plus a six-pack of beer and a glass or two of wine gradually emptied over dinner and through the evening after the kids had gone to bed. And then, every ten days or so, Jennifer would binge-drink to get good and wasted for two solid days. The bingeing bugged her kids, but Jennifer needed comfort, escape. Oh, and cocaine. Cocaine definitely made her feel better. It made her feel better about seven or eight times a week.

A few months after her diabetes diagnosis, in spring of 2011, Jennifer went with her family to Marineland and stood in line with them to go on a ride. Her boyfriend was standing in front of her, joking with the kids in line, and Jennifer was looking him over and thinking. He was gone at work half the time and he was hot. Even after eighteen years of being together on and off, he was hot. It was his blue eyes that did it.

But something weird was going on. These days he was acting even more moody and strange and secretive than usual: he had accused Jennifer of cheating on him which was the most ridiculous thing in the world because, as he sometimes pointed out, no one would ever want her—so, you know, how could she cheat? And their daughter was acting strange and secretive too. Everything was awkward and uncomfortable all around. Something was up.

Their turn at the ride came and Jennifer stepped into the enclosure to sit in her seat—but the ride gate couldn't latch behind her. It just banged into her

Christmas tree ass which was, for everyone there to see, obviously too fat for the ride.

“I’m sorry ma’am,” the ride operator said gently. “The safety regulations won’t allow us to take you on this ride. But if you walk up there,” and he pointed to where the ride ended, “you can meet your family when they step off.”

He was polite and spoke softly. Jennifer nodded, stepped down from the enclosure, and headed up to where she would meet her family. She wanted to disappear.

Sure, she had a hard time moving her body – just looking at a hill and thinking about walking up would make her cry. Sure, she was a big girl – she joked about her Christmas tree ass louder than anyone in the room. A big ass is what happens when you start having kids at 18 and keep on having them until there are four of ‘em, and then you get a job at a grocery store to help pay the bills and you’re surrounded by junk food all the time, and you eat it because you’re so friggin’ exhausted from chasing after your kids and you need energy to keep chasing after them. Okay okay, she was 300 lbs and that was really big. But too big for an amusement park ride? She really wished her kids hadn’t seen that.

When they got home from their Marineland vacation from hell, she found out her handsome boyfriend and father of her four kids was leaving her. And then she found out that he – who had accused her of cheating – had been seeing another woman for a year already. That through the whole family vacation at Marineland he had been telling his girlfriend he had already left Jennifer and the kids. And that he, who had always said he didn’t want more kids, had gotten that other girl pregnant. And, worst of all, that he had made their daughter lie to Jennifer to help cover up his affair.

Her handsome blue-eyed boyfriend was kind of an asshole.

It was a lot to take in.

It was *a lot* to take in and it kind of got under Jennifer's skin. She reached for some chocolate-bar comfort—and stopped. Food wasn't really what she wanted. She went to her cupboard and reached instead for the vodka bottle, but she didn't really want that either. Maybe some blow? That always made her feel amazing. She picked up the phone to call her dealer and set it back down on the cradle. Cocaine wasn't it either.

What she wanted, what she really really wanted, was to go for a walk. And that was as big a surprise as her boyfriend cheating on her.

Jennifer tied on her most comfortable shoes and walked to the track and began to go around. She was a big girl and she couldn't walk effortlessly like her kids did. She had to shift her weight to the one side, swing her leg around to take a step, and then shift it to the other side for the next step. By the end of the first lap, she was sweating. By the end of the fifth lap, she was exhausted. By the end of the tenth, she was half dead. Still, she kept walking until she had gone around that friggin' track twenty friggin' times.

And the next day, she did it again.

*You know what*, she thought to herself as she walked, *this walking thing sucks. I'm gonna do more of it. Twenty laps a day, every day, for one month. And then I'll quit.*

While she walked, she thought about her boyfriend. Sure, he was Mr. Blue Eyes and a whole lot of women wanted him, but handsome isn't everything. Now that he was gone, his blue eyes were gone too, but she sure

didn't miss hearing all that fat-and-ugly shit he hurled at her every now and then. The sound waves in her house were a whole lot happier without all that. She actually didn't miss him at all. Money was gonna be a problem now – she and her kids would have to go on welfare until she found other ways to make ends meet. That was stressful. Thinking about it made her cry.

Remembering all the ways he had been mean to her made her cry.

The good thing was that even with the crying, walking was getting easier and sucking less. So she started walking to work every day too, and anywhere she needed to go that was in walking distance, always avoiding shortcuts – if a path cut across a yard, she walked around to collect twenty extra steps.

By the end of the month, she thought she might like to keep walking. It gave her time to think. Cleared her head. Felt okay.

Walking made Jennifer hungry, so, naturally, she started thinking about junk food.

Okay, when she really thought about it, she had to admit she ate more of it than most people. Maybe she could cut back, a little less of it every day.

Or she could try one month without it—Ohhh man.

*That* was not gonna be easy. One month of walking and sweating seemed a whole lot easier than one month without chocolate bars and cookies and chips and pop.

But she was gonna have to try.

The first month of walking had been a challenge. The first month of no junk food was friggin' brutal. She started inventing tricks to get through the

month. She froze water and crushed the ice into a slurpee so that she could still go through the motions of drinking pop, even if there was no pop there. But, without all the sugar she was used to, she got the shakes every afternoon. She would shake so badly that she couldn't still her hands enough to hold a pen or type. She had to ease up on herself then and have a Pepsi. Immediately the shakes would subside.

This was full-on addiction withdrawal. This was what heroin junkies went through when they went off smack. Worse, because heroin detox lasted a few days, a week at most and, after three weeks then four weeks, Jennifer's detox symptoms were still coming on strong. When the first month was up, she still really wanted junk food, so she had some. Then she figured she had come this far, might as well keep goin'. Once a month she would have a junk food night with her kids so that she wouldn't feel deprived, but the other nights she might as well keep on eating healthy. What did she have to lose? Jennifer's detox symptoms, though, lasted beyond that first month and the next and the next. They lasted for *six friggin' months*.

She thought about that as she walked. Did other folks around here know that sugar was a nasty ol' addiction? Had she missed that class in school? Was she the only one who had always thought junk food was, you know, *food*? Was she the only one who had never known?

One morning, a while after she had quit junk food, Jennifer woke with a bad-ass hangover. Headache, puking, dry mouth, the works.

She hung over the toilet, heaving out the dregs of her unhappy gut, and thinking.

She sure had had plenty of hangovers in her day. She had been drinking at the same level, the teenager-trying-to-get-good-and-wasted level, for twenty

years, since she had been 18 years old. Two or three times a month for twenty years plus a few extra-intense years along the way—Over *a thousand* hangovers.

She was sick of hangovers. And of how her drinking upset her kids. When she went out drinking, she would leave the younger kids in the care of the eldest, who was old enough to babysit, but the younger ones resented having the oldest be the boss of them, and the oldest hated being in that difficult position with younger kids who wouldn't listen. It was hard for everybody, all around.

*That's it*, Jennifer thought, looking into the toilet bowl. *No more*.

Now she knew what to do. She could do one month without booze. Well, maybe not totally without – this wasn't AA. She would savor a glass of something every week or so, sip it slowly, but for a month there would be no more getting wasted, and no more sixpack of beer every evening.

Besides, she didn't need it so much. Now that she didn't have to listen to her ex hurling insults at her, now that her body didn't feel sick all the time, she didn't need escape. Her life was beginning to feel like something worth living, something worth sticking around for.

Cutting out most drinking wasn't exactly easy – she had heavy liquor cravings for a month, and light cravings for a few months after that – but it was manageable. And wouldn't you know, at the end of a month without a single hangover, she liked how she felt and didn't want to get wasted again.

She wasn't *quitting* – she didn't like that word because *quitting* sounded like she might begin again, like the folks who quit smoking for a couple of weeks and then took it up again. She was *stopping*. Full *stop*. Done. No more.

Not another binge or hangover in her entire life.



Soon after the end of booze, Jennifer went to the clinic for her diabetes follow-up. The nutritionist went on and on again. There were some Science words and then Jennifer was supposed to do this and not supposed to do that and she was doing this wrong and that wrong and she should eat more of this and less of that and blah blah blah blah blah blah blah.

She walked home from the clinic and thought about it.

Really, it was just all negativity and confusion, and it wasn't helping at all. She didn't want someone else telling her what she was doing wrong or what to eat or that she was too fat – she'd had enough of all that with ol' Blue Eyes.

*That's it*, she thought, *No more nutritionist, no more diabetes appointments*. She would keep on doing stuff that made her feel better and would keep on not doing stuff that made her feel worse. She'd check in with the doctor every now and again, like she always had, for general check-ups. But not for diabetes appointments.

Quitting the clinic was easy. She wasn't gonna need a month to wean herself off of that. She could do it in one day.

There was just one more habit to get under control. Beautiful, beautiful blow. Jennifer was still using every day and she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to quit. Not because she feared withdrawal – she didn't – but because cocaine felt amazing. Even after all these years it felt amazing. When she had started walking and had stopped junk food and then drinking, she had always eventually felt better for it. But she was pretty sure that she felt a whole lot better high on blow than she ever would feel if she were clean.

Still, she could try it for a month. She'd probably sleep better. It'd be good for the kids, too, to see her try. To see her not be good at something and then try to get better at it.

And maybe she could still do a line every few weeks or so.

The first couple of days brought some intense cravings. Not as bad as the sugar cravings had been when she cut out junk food, but still, pretty bad. Jennifer went through the motions. She went to work and looked after her kids and hung out with her friends, but, through it all, she thought about sniffing back lines of white powder and that electric buzz when it hit your brain, when you knew that for a few minutes everything would be all right. And for the first week or so, she was so cranky that any little thing would set her off.

Sometimes, in the evenings, she smoked a bit of weed to take the edge off. It did the trick and didn't make her heart race nor her eyes look weird.

After a few weeks, she snorted a line of blow. Surprisingly, the high wasn't really all that great. She still craved it, of course – it was cocaine – but she didn't really need it. It wasn't worth what it took out of her. She was done with it. Without rehab or treatment or AA or even talking with an elder about it, she had brought her cocaine addiction under control.

And stopping blow had been easier than stopping junk food.

That was something to think about too.

Jennifer found work eventually. Financially things levelled out at home. She kept walking and thinking.

Half the time, she was thinking about the toilet. She felt so much better now, but her body was still getting used to all the changes she had made and it had become anemic – she had had to go on iron pills and they plugged her up like a drain full of hair. So, at work, when everybody else was thinking about a drink and a barbeque after work, Jennifer was thinking about the toilet. And

when she walked around the track, she thought about it more: *When I go to the toilet, is it actually gonna come?* The doctor said that would fix itself eventually. And it did.

The other half the time, she was thinking about other things. Her cousin, who had been one of her favourite people, had committed suicide and there were a few things about that whole situation that just didn't make sense.

She thought about her kids too. "Mom, you're killin' me!" her son would say when dinner would again be something healthy with lots of vegetables, but he would eat it anyways. She was a better mom now that she was healthier. She liked her kids more and had more patience with the ways they were kids.

Sometimes she still thought about her ex-boyfriend. He was gone, moved to another community to be with his new family. Jennifer was much smaller than she had once been. People kept asking her if she was starving herself. (She wasn't.) Even her doctor had had to pick up his jaw from the floor when she walked into his office. But she hadn't lost the weight for ol' Blue Eyes. She had done the work for herself to feel good in her own body. She would never have been able to do it if he had been around.

On one of those walks, half thinking about the toilet and half thinking about her new life, she realized that she wouldn't take Blue Eyes back. She had seen him across the crowd at a recent community event and he couldn't stop staring at her, at how she looked now. If he left his other family and came to her and begged, she would never ever take him back.

Jennifer is about half the weight she was on that trip to Marineland a couple of years ago. She doesn't take any diabetes medication now. She still fights sugar cravings, and, when a craving gets out of hand, she takes a bite or two of a chocolate bar, chews reeeaaaalllllyy slowly, and throws the rest away.

Of all her old addictions that might come back, she's most afraid of the junk food addiction. Most afraid that one junk food meal will lead to another and then another and all that weight and unhealthiness will pile back on.

But most of the time she knows – she is in charge of her life. And it's so much better now, so much better, she ain't *never* goin' back to that way of living.

She'd like to see junk food restricted in Eeyou Istchee for everyone. Folks oughta know it isn't actually food.

Next up, she thinks, she might stop smoking. That'll probably be another tough one. And maybe she'll take up some other kinds of exercise. Like some of those weight or resistance exercises that sculpt your arms and ass. Years ago, she had a Christmas tree ass and everyone knew. It'd be good to have a famous ass again. A healthy, well-shaped, look-how-strong-I-am, famous ass.

**If you would like to be tested for diabetes, contact the clinic in your community:**

Whapmagoostui (819) 929-3307  
Oujé-Bougoumou (418) 745-3901  
Waskaganish (819) 895-8833  
Waswanipi (819) 753-2511  
Nemaska (819) 673-2511

Wemindji (819) 978-0225  
Chisasibi (819) 855-9011  
Mistissini (418) 923-3376  
Eastmain (819) 977-0241



This story is taken from the book *The Sweet Bloods of Eeyou Istchee: Stories of Diabetes and the James Bay Cree*. The book is free to Indigenous people living on Canadian reserves and traditional territories. (Postage fees may apply.)  
Contact: Paul Linton (418) 923-3355      [www.sweetbloods.org](http://www.sweetbloods.org)

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