

INSPIRATION. SURVIVAL. MIRACLE.

How one woman turned a less than one percent chance of survival into a beautiful new beginning.

By Alyssa Phillips

I have to be honest, I really just didn't see it coming. You never think it's going to be you anyway, right? You never think that the impossible things of life, the ones that only happen to "other" people, can happen to you—that is, until suddenly it does.

I've now had the "impossible" arrive on my doorstep—twice. The first time it arrived the day my younger sister Lauren died suddenly from bacterial meningitis while we were in college together. Healthy and vibrant one day, then gone the next, her absence rocked me to my very core, literally bringing me to my knees. The aftershocks of the void she left behind echoed through the years. But happiness and joy eventually returned, slowly seeping back into the hollow places and time marched on, as it tends to. I chose to move forward with it, taking her with me by stitching her sweet presence into the very fabric of my being so she would be with me wherever I went.

I graduated from college, finished my Physician Assistant training, landed my first job and got married. Life was back on track. Things were good—really, really good and I chose to be better for what I'd been through. But then the unthinkable happened again. Just over a decade after my younger sister's death, I was suddenly facing the "impossible" again as I was forced to confront my own mortality. In May of 2008, just weeks after running my best time in a half-marathon, I was told I was in Stage IV of one of the rarest and most aggressive types of cancer known and given a less than one percent chance of survival. I was 31 years old and had never felt better. What came next arrived in a blur of bad news, each test result and recommendation worse than the last, compounding the horribleness of it all. "Less than thirty documented cases..." "metastatic disease..." "poor prognosis..." "few survivors, if any..." "emergency radical hysterectomy..." "never going to be able to have any children of your own..." "high dose chemo..." "two back-to-back bone marrow transplants..." "nine months of mandatory house isolation..." "then hope for the best..." "we just don't know..." "we just don't know..." "we just don't know..."



If my sister's death was soul shaking, my diagnosis was soul shattering. In the blink of an eye I'd been catapulted from the prime of my life into the fight of my life. In an instant I was leaning out over the edge of life with the weight of such staggering odds threatening to push me over from behind as I frantically tried to backpedal. A long-time runner and "health nut," a Physician Assistant with a nutrition degree, a dream life finally unfolding again, and suddenly I was watching helplessly as it all crumbled before me and began to slip away. They were going to strip me down to my elemental beginnings and press the restart button—twice— and I felt a restart button deep within me being pressed as well.

Without warning, something quite profound happened, a sudden clarity amidst the chaos and devastation swirling around me, I heard a voice from within calling me to do the unthinkable—to leap out into the unknown and trust. Sizing up my options, I realized I couldn't go back. There was nothing to go back to. I couldn't run away. It had already caught up to me. As I looked at the heavy shoulders and brokenness in the eyes of my husband and parents fearful of possibly losing me, I decided something. They will not know this. I didn't have a crystal ball, I didn't know how everything would turn out but I did know one thing for certain, I still had a chance, no matter how small that

sliver was. Just the fact that I was still here meant I still had a shot and I was going to take it. I realized I couldn't control a lot of things but I could control my heart and my mind. I would fight but I would not fight cancer—I would fight to live. With all my being, I summoned up all the courage I never knew I had, took a deep breath and jumped out into the unknown on faith and faith alone, trusting that all I needed—to navigate this vast ocean I'd been called to cross—would come.

I won't tell you that my journey was easy. It was not. But I will tell you that it was worth it. I wouldn't wish what I went through on anyone but I am who I am today because of what I've been through. And you know what? I'm proud of who I am and what I've learned. I'm different in a lot of ways now because of this experience, in fact it actually feels as though I'm different in every way, with one small exception, I know that my essence, that is tested in times of trials and stress, is much the same, if not better. I know myself more now. I know what I'm about and what I'm really made of, I play more, I take more risks, I care less about what other people think and more about what feels right for me. I do things that make me happy because, well, that's reason enough. My grasp is looser, not tighter, on the things I love because I now understand love in a completely different way. I listen to myself and look inside when I need answers, using the outside only as my gauge as to how I'm doing. I know now that miracles can and do happen, that how we choose to look at things can change everything and that all true healing happens within. Most importantly, I know now that the challenges, and even the tragedies, of our lives are veiled lessons and gifts that dare us to be more than we ever imagined and inspire us to become the people we were always meant to be—if we let them. That's why I know that, no matter what it looks like, Something beautiful is happening™.

Alyssa lives in Atlanta, Georgia with her husband. After beating overwhelming odds, Alyssa has traveled extensively and reinvented herself with one mission in mind—to *LIVE & GIVE*. She is currently writing her first book, a memoir about her inspiring cancer journey and the pivotal inner shift that occurred in its wake. She regularly shares the story of how she turned a less than one percent chance of survival into a beautiful new beginning to inspire others to view the challenges of their own lives in bold new ways.

To learn more about Alyssa, her upcoming book, photos of her journey & subsequent trips and more, please visit her at her website, www.alyssaphillipsinc.com or connect with Alyssa on her Facebook & Twitter pages.

