

The most wonderful time of the year? Not always. These five women triumphed over tragedy—and learned valuable lessons about resilience and faith.

THE HOLIDAY I'LL NEVER FORGET

“I FACED DOWN A TERRIBLE ILLNESS.”

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LESS THAN 5 PERCENT. Those were Alyssa's odds of survival. It had been one piece of bad news after another: She was in stage 4 of large-cell neuroendocrine cervical cancer—one of the rarest, most aggressive forms of the disease—and most likely had no more than two years to live. “The finality of it all stunned me,” she says. It was May 2008, and Alyssa was only 31.

Two weeks earlier, Alyssa had thought she had a vaginal infection. During the exam, her gynecologist found a cervical mass, which was biopsied. Lab tests came back with the frightening diagnosis.

No one could believe it. An avid athlete, Alyssa ran every morning before heading to the hospital where she worked as a surgical physician assistant. She hadn't called in sick in six years. “It can't be this bad,” her husband, Neil, kept insisting. Her parents simply broke down. In 1997 one of Alyssa's two sisters, Lauren, 18, had died after contracting bacterial meningitis. “I couldn't bear the thought of their going through that grief again,” says Alyssa. Doctors told her that they were uncertain how effective treatment would be. “But what choice did I have?” says Alyssa. “I could do nothing or go all in.”

Just six days after the diagnosis, Alyssa underwent a hysterectomy. She and Neil had been trying to have a baby, but there wasn't time to harvest and freeze her eggs. “It was devastating. But I didn't have the luxury of dwelling on it,” says Alyssa. In just one week, the tumor had quadrupled in size. More tumors were found in her liver.

A week later, Alyssa began a regimen of aggressive chemotherapy, followed by two grueling bone-marrow transplants. Still, she willed herself to stay positive. Using the same determination she had tapped into to run half-marathons, Alyssa meditated, prayed, and watched comedies like *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (it had been Lauren's favorite) to make herself laugh. She loaded her iPhone with

uplifting podcasts and listened to them while power walking on the treadmill of the bone-marrow unit, implanted with a catheter.

Christmas Day 2008 threatened to be Alyssa's lowest point. Since the chemo had decimated her immune system, she needed to stay in the hospital's isolation unit to avoid contracting an infection: “I was nauseous and exhausted, and the inside of my mouth felt scalded,” she says. Her eyebrows, eyelashes, and hair were gone. When a friend came to visit that morning, she didn't recognize Alyssa and backed out of the room. Alyssa tried not to succumb to despair. “So many patients on the unit were like the walking dead, with no hope in their eyes,” she says. “I didn't want that to happen to me.”

When Neil and her parents arrived that afternoon, Alyssa teased them about how ridiculous they looked in the gowns, booties, and gloves the hospital required them to wear. She challenged the group in Yahtzee and toasted everyone with a nutrition shake. “I talked nonstop about the Christmases we'd share in the future,” she says. “That was, after all, why I was fighting the disease.”

Alyssa finished her last treatment at the end of December and spent the next few months recovering at home. Incredibly, today she is cancer-free. “I was given a second chance,” Alyssa says. “My sister never had that. So I'm grateful every day.”

Alyssa chose not to go back to work. Instead, she has focused on writing and staying healthy—and, yes, she's back to running. She and Neil still want to be parents, something they'll pursue down the road. Meanwhile, they spend time volunteering. Last Christmas they served dinner and passed out gifts at a women's shelter. They plan to do it again this year. “When you've known suffering and turned it around, it just feels right to reach out to others,” says Alyssa.



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