Sally, 52
New York, NY

40, Stage 2A; 42, Stage 4

Dear Sally Joy,

A decade into our ever-evolving, never-ending dance with cancer, I'm realizing that while I'm not sure when we began using our middle name, I do remember why: to remind ourselves that, alongside all the challenge, ache, grief, and longing for "before," there is also so much joy in the now. It's the "both/and" of cancer, and of any challenge, when we open ourselves to the opportunities beside the obstacles.

Even when the obstacles feel so damn big.

And when we did everything to avoid them.

Having grown up the daughter of a breast cancer survivor, we believed the messaging breast cancer so often receives: If you're vigilant you catch it early. And if you catch it early, you'll be cured.

So we were vigilant since 32 with mammograms and sonograms. And when we were diagnosed eight years later, we did all the things we were told would make this a temporary detour, not a path we'd navigate forever. A double mastectomy, IV chemo (the same type Mom had!), hormone suppression (also just like Mom took!).

They even told us we were cured.

Until we weren't.

The hip pain began almost immediately, and despite our vigilance, it eluded scans until two years later, when a local recurrence led to another full body evaluation. And just like that, on that April day in 2018, the hip bone biopsy changed our vocabulary:

Metastatic. Stage IV. Incurable.

That last word felt impossibly hard to wrap our head and heart around. In a world so focused on cures, what did it mean to be incurable?

Especially when we're taught there are only two possible outcomes from cancer: cured or dead.

But in these seven and a half years, I've learned there is something in between: a place I've come to call "the third lane". A vibrant, beautiful place of fragility and strength, where we are not only alive and surviving but also thriving. Still on our first line of defense. NED. Knocking a LOT of wood.

But here. And optimistic we will be for a long time.

With this good fortune comes both a responsibility and a gift. It's a gift to spread hope I didn't see when I was first diagnosed. It's also a responsibility to advocate for those who haven't been as fortunate. Friends like Gina, Melissa, Tatianna, Sheila, and Amanda. And so many more. Friends who deserved this same good fortune. So we speak up because we've seen our privilege, and we have found a voice in championing access, trial inclusion, and health equity for all.

So we keep showing up, and speaking up. For ourselves. For those we love. For those no longer here. And as we do, we have grown increasingly comfortable in this third lane. A space we never expected to call our own and yet, now, can trust we are meant to call home.

Love always,
Me

NOVARTIS