

FIND YOUR WAY BACK

by Javacia Harris Bowser

- from “How Does a Feminist Fight Cancer?”

I was in my early twenties when I started calling myself a feminist—long before Beyoncé’s song “***Flawless” made feminism cool. It was in my early twenties that I finally learned that—despite popular opinion—feminism had nothing to do with hating makeup, marriage, or men.

In the song “***Flawless” from Queen Bey’s 2013 self-titled album, we’re given a clear-cut definition of what being a feminist means courtesy of a snippet from Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk, “We Should All Be Feminists.”¹ Feminist: the person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. Merriam-Webster also defines feminism as “organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests.”²

But for me, those definitions only scratch the surface. Yes, I call myself a feminist because I believe in women’s rights and the equality of the sexes. But I also call myself a feminist because simply put, I’m obsessed with women, and I’m obsessed with being a woman. That’s why as a freelance journalist, I mostly write stories for and about women. That’s why in 2011, I started a website and online community for women who write and blog called See Jane Write. And that’s why I believe in sisterhood—for real.

I feel an inexplicable kinship to nearly every woman on the planet, regardless of her age, race, or religion. It doesn’t matter if she’s a CEO of a company on the Fortune 500 list or a cashier at my local supermarket struggling to make ends meet. Whether she’s a princess or a pole dancer, in my mind, we are inextricably linked.

But after being diagnosed with breast cancer in January of 2020, I found myself wondering if being a woman was as wonderful as I’d always thought it to be. My oncologist told me early on that after chemotherapy and radiation treatments, I would have to take the drug Tamoxifen for five to ten

years. The tumor found in and removed from my left breast turned out to be “ER-positive.” That means the cancer cells grow in response to the hormone estrogen.

When explaining why I needed medication that would essentially push me into early menopause, my doctor said, “Estrogen tried to kill you.” Those words stunned me more than, “You have cancer.”

Learning that the thing that makes me a woman—biologically, at least— was the very thing threatening to end my life caused the earth beneath me to shift. As an ally to the trans community, I understand intellectually that gender is much more than biology. But emotionally, I felt betrayed by my body and by my womanhood.

Despite the sexism that women can face at work, home, church, and even while walking down the street, I have never seen being a woman as a cross to bear. Of course, I was aware of the horrific oppression faced by women and girls in some countries—including the United States. But these stories and statistics only made me more fiercely feminist. I wanted every woman to feel like womanhood was a blessing. But now, all of a sudden, it felt like a curse.

For months I tried to keep my diagnosis a secret, only telling a few close family members and friends about the lumpectomy I had in February of 2020. But as I got closer to my first day of chemotherapy, I knew I’d soon have to share the news with more people because soon I’d be bald.

There was no chance I’d run into friends at a networking event or at my favorite restaurant or wine bar. The COVID-19 pandemic had us all confined to our homes. But because of See Jane Write, I do live broadcasts on Facebook, and I post pictures and videos to Instagram often. I knew eyebrows would raise once people noticed I no longer had any. I knew I would have to go public with this fight against cancer, and I knew I would have to fight like a feminist.

But how does a feminist fight cancer? First, she makes a playlist because every battle needs a fight song. Of course, Destiny Child’s “Survivor” is at the top of my list.

But just as there’s no one way to be a woman, there’s no single way to be a feminist. And likewise, every cancer warrior must fight in their own way. Being a writer, I decided I would fight with words. As a friend of mine, who’s also a writer, once said, “I fight with my fingertips.” That mindset shifted how I approached every aspect of my battle with cancer.

During cancer treatments, I wrote from my body and for my body. I wrote as if the sentences could replace the locks of hair that fell into the shower after my curls became a casualty of chemo. I

wrote as if the syllables could dry my tear-stained face. I wrote and pretended the dark spots on my tongue, fingernails, palms, and the bottoms of my feet were splotches of ink.

I wrote as if adjectives could restore my taste buds, allow me to know spicy, savory, and sweet once again. I wrote as if vowels and consonants could calm my constantly queasy belly. I wrote even when hand-foot syndrome made it nearly impossible to hold a pen or touch my fingertips to a keyboard.

When facing a disease like cancer, fighting for your life isn't simply about fighting to stay alive. You're not only trying to keep your heart beating from one day to the next. When you feel like cancer is taking away every goal and every dream, you're fighting to remember who you are.

So, I write. With Beyoncé's "Find Your Way Back" playing in my ears, I write in journals, essays, poetry, blog posts, and even in the Notes app of my phone.

I write my way back to myself, and I share my words with my sisters so that they—no matter what battle they're fighting—can write their way home too.