

Episode 237: Mariela's pregnancy got complicated

There's really something pretty amazing about giving birth.

I mean, you are actually using your body to grow a whole new human, and then this new person comes into the world, and your whole life changes. For many people, being pregnant is a time filled with happy anticipation. You've probably heard people talk about this thing called the "pregnancy glow", and it's a real thing.

In spite of the discomfort, and nausea, and unusual food cravings and everything else that sometimes comes with having a baby inside you, the thought of holding that brand new human in your arms – your child – that's often the thing that can help you get through it.

Mariela was pregnant. She and her husband, Stephen, were excited about growing their family.

Then, partway through the pregnancy, things got complicated.

Scott

When I met you in person at the listener meetup in Dallas, I noticed something about you immediately. Your hair is all dark except, right in front, you have a lock of hair that's in complete contrast - it's like shock white - and I of course asked you about it right up front because my initial thought was, "Interesting. She just dyed that one part," which honestly, I kind of admired because I like people who do things that are outside the norm. But then you said it was just naturally like that. Have you had that your whole life?

Mariela

Yes, from the minute I was born. When they took my baby picture at the hospital, they actually attached the little bow to the white forelock - because, back in the eighties, you got a little bow if you were a little girl - and your birth picture. Yep. Ever since that point, I had it.

Scott

Wow. It kind of sets you apart from everyone else in the world. I know there's other people probably that have that but, yeah, it's your unique little signature, sort of.

Mariela

For sure, yes.

Scott

At the time, you were married to your husband, Stephen, and we're talking today about you being pregnant, but this wasn't your first time being pregnant. You already had your one son, Zacarias. Tell us about him.

Mariela

I had him in 2010. He was colicky and I had a really difficult time with postpartum depression. As a first time mom, I was trying to do it all myself, so I set myself up for a difficult time in the beginning. So I was a little traumatized, so to speak, and I decided one and done. My intention was just to stop with him.

Scott

And how old was Zac when you found out you were pregnant again?

Mariela

He was 9 years old.

Scott

Nine years, okay. Why so much time in between? Because you just decided no more?

Mariela

Yes, I had decided no more and I was using different birth controls. I would jump around, I would sometimes use the daily birth control pill over the counter stuff. I would do that calendar. I was just jumping around and everything seemed to work at that point. I think what made it to where it suddenly didn't work was I had been taking care of myself, doing exercise. So I had a larger weight loss and I even remember my gynecologist saying, "Let's switch this blood pressure pill you're taking to this one, because people who lose a lot of weight tend to have a higher chance of becoming pregnant." I didn't even think about it too much because, at this point, Zach is so much older and what we've been doing has always worked.

Scott

So this second pregnancy was not planned then.

Mariela

At all. It was a big old surprise.

Scott

Tell us about finding out you were pregnant.

Mariela

It was December and I was starting to have my suspicions. It's different for every woman of course but, specifically for me, I have a lot of breast tenderness when I first get pregnant, and it was

something so obvious and unusual to me that I immediately went to go buy pregnancy tests and, before the time was up, it showed up positive and , basically just let my husband know, “Yep, looks like we're pregnant.” The second one, I told my brother and we were all hush about it because I wanted to go see my OB-GYN before I announced it to everyone, just to be sure.

Scott

How old were you at that time?

Mariela

35.

Scott

Okay, so you went to see your doctor.

Mariela

I went to my doctor and the first thing they do before you reach a certain gestational age is just take a pregnancy test, like a blood pregnancy test, just to be sure that, “Yeah, we agree you're pregnant.”

Scott

And those are just more accurate than the one you get at the drug store?

Mariela

Yeah, pretty much. When my mother saw me later that day, she asked how my doctor's appointment went, not knowing the reason I went, and I was like, “Oh, it went like this.” I showed her a picture of a positive pregnancy test and the first words out of her mouth was, “You bitch.”

Scott

Why was that her reaction?

Mariela

Oh, she said it in English and she speaks Spanish. I just completely took her off guard. To this day, she's like, “No, I didn't say that.” I'm like, “Oh, you did. I will never forget that.” That's hilarious.

Scott

That's funny. She blocks it out from her memory.

Mariela

Well, I don't think you plan on looking at a pregnancy test and saying, “You bitch.” But yeah, it's because, at that point, Zach was 9 years old, so everyone started taking me seriously when I said, “Oh, no, one and done.”

Scott

Okay. Later on, you went to another doctor's visit and you had the first sonogram?

Mariela

Yes. In fact, I had told my husband because— I mean this is our second run, so I was like, “Stay at work. Don't skip work. There's not going to be anything to see. They're going to just make sure the baby's there and everything looks good.” And that's it. I mean, I won't be able to tell gender or anything. It's still too early. So he stayed at work and I went down to my appointment. There was, like, this little recline seat, pulled out the jelly and everything in there. The sonographer is running over my stomach and she's like, “Did you know there's two in here?” And I said, “I'm sorry. WHAT?” Literally, the first thought in my head was, “It's a joke. Somebody's playing a trick on me.” But I started crying happily. She got emotional too because she told me, at discretion of course, that the patient before her had gotten not so great news. So, to see me so happy and so emotional at the idea of having two babies moved her. So I just had big smiles. They did a sonogram first then, after, you see the doctor. At that moment, I called my husband and I said, “Sit down. I'm not playing” because we're big pranksters with each other.

Scott

Oh, so you have to have that big disclaimer up front then.

Mariela

Yes. It's like, “I'm dead serious. It's two.” And he was kind of stunned. I heard it on the phone like— I had just had a cousin who had a set of twins and everyone kept saying, “Ah, your turn. You're going to be the next one of twins.” I'm like, “Oh God, oh my God, no.” Because I mean, one baby is a lot of work. Two babies is a lot of work. So I was just kind of scoffing at it and now it did hit us. Lightning did strike. We have twins. Everything was great. Everything looked good. On the way out, the receptionist was like, “Congratulations, that'll be another \$80” because with twins, you pay twice. I'm like, “Okay, that's kind of rude. Not even a discount? Because, literally, you move the wand to one side over and look at the other baby. Do we really have to charge the same amount for both? Not a buy one, get one half off?” Nope. I was like, “Well, thank you.” But yeah.

I immediately went to my husband's work and showed him the pictures and we were just all thrilled. When I got home, I ran into my father and he's like, “Oh.” Because he's also a big joker. I get it from him. He said, “Oh, how many babies are in there? Three? Two?” And then I showed him the sonogram. I'm like, “No, just two.” And his mouth fell open like a cartoon. Everyone was just chalked. I had the luxury of being able to tell my parents, and they took care of telling everybody else.

Scott

Did you ever think this was a possibility?

Mariela

Not really. I mean, my grandmother had 18 children.

Scott

18 children?!

Mariela

Yes. All at home. It's the whole Catholic thing where you have to keep having another child. She had two sets of twins, so I knew it ran in the family. But of all those siblings, only one of her daughters had a set of twins. And of all those cousins, only my cousin had a set of twins and I was the second person to have a set of twins in my generation. So it definitely is something that can happen in our family, but it's not very usual.

Scott

So you saw this as a good thing. You and Stephen were happy about it?

Mariela

Oh, we were thrilled. I mean, we're not oblivious. We've already run through it first, but I had originally always wanted a bigger family until I had my son and got a little shock. I mean, I had always cared for children, helped my sister raise hers, so I thought I was old hat, like, "Real easy. I know what I'm doing. Yeah, I totally do this." But when I had my son, I was so focused on him, and then everything was so difficult with his colic and I wasn't able to breastfeed, so it drained a lot out of me. So I was like, "Oh, okay, maybe I don't want so many kids." So at this point, the idea that, bam, I was going to be a mom of three was great. It was great.

Scott

I would imagine it would feel a little bit overwhelming though, knowing what you've already gone through and going through it again, but with more.

Mariela

Yes. I've always been more of an optimistic person.

Scott

That helps.

Mariela

Yes. And in my mind, it's okay, there's nothing that worrying about it is going to do now. So, we'll cross that bridge when we get there.

Scott

I love that practical approach.

Mariela

You can easily fall apart at a lot of things if you really pull it apart. You know what I mean? So it's just better to be like, "Okay, big picture, what's going on here?" And then I was like, "Well, okay, I'm mom for the second time." So I've learned a few things and I felt that, "Okay, we'll figure it out when we get there."

Scott

At this point, you still didn't know if you were having boys or girls or one of each or anything. Did you pick out names ahead of time?

Mariela

Yes, actually. Whenever I was pregnant with my son again, I still had the idea that I was going to have multiple children. My husband and I butted heads at names when I was a high school kid and I had my little list of names. What I'll name my first girl, first boy. For whatever reason, I always had that daydream. I decided I was going to name my firstborn son, Xavier, and my first born daughter, Magdalena. My husband has always been like, "Yeah." When we were dating, he was very agreeable to the idea of it. But once I did get pregnant and it was going to be a boy, he's like, "I hate Xavier, no." So we spent a month of making lists and fighting back and forth because he wanted the children to have Hebrew names. He was raised Jewish, but we're both Mexican Hispanic heritage. I said, "That's kind of silly," but since it's a bigger part of, like, their genetics, we should really kind of embrace this part of them. So after a long conversation, we named him Zacarias Ariel. So it's a Hebrew middle name.

After that big old month that we argued back and forth, we decided to pick out names for other children. While we were picking them out, I was like, "Well, what if we have twins?" So we picked up two names of two boys, two names of two girls just as a just-in-case. So it felt a little, "Whoa, we called that 10 years before." That was when I was pregnant with Zach. That's what blows my mind, holy crap. And because I was considered a high risk pregnancy. At 35, you're considered geriatric. I'm like, "35?? Rude. Okay. Dusty old uterus." Apparently they sent me immediately to maternal fetal medicine (MFM). Those are high risk doctors and they just took a closer look at you during your pregnancy and I saw her right around 17 weeks and they took a picture of everything and they said everything looked perfect, and they did a blood test and they were able to tell me right away that it was two girls.

Scott

The pregnancy was going pretty much as expected.

Mariela

Oh, perfect. Yes. They were pleased with everything. They were seeing blood work and everything.

Scott

What happened at 23 weeks?

Mariela

I had been applying moisturizer to my face and I took it down my neck and down to my décolletage. On the way down, I felt a lump. I was stunned because it hadn't been there. So, I was like, "Whoa." But I was like, "Okay, it'll disappear." I was trying to talk myself down of what it could be. I was like, "Okay, this is unusual, but I'll just bring it up to my doctor the next time I see her."

Scott

Are you one who does regular self exams?

Mariela

Not as much as I should have. I mean, I knew that you don't ever pay enough attention to this upper part of your body whenever. I was going down, applying the moisturizer and that's when I felt it right here, and that's pretty low— like, it's pretty high on my chest. So I don't know if I would've immediately been checking there. I probably would've focused more on my breast because it was like right here above it.

Scott

How would you describe this lump?

Mariela

It was hard. It didn't hurt. It was maybe pecan size when I first felt it. It was sizable, but I think that's what scared me the most - that it was so firm and large, but also it didn't hurt. So I was like, "Oh, it's probably nothing. It's probably some cyst. There's so many changes with your breasts when you're pregnant." So I immediately talked myself down the ledge to the point that, whenever I did go see my doctor, I almost didn't mention it until I was about to leave and I said, "Oh wait, I should say—"

Scott

Was that deliberate and you just kind of forgot about it, or were you kind of avoiding the subject with your doctor?

Mariela

I didn't want to be a warrior, especially at my age. I mean, who even thinks about something like that during pregnancy? I was just, "Oh, it's probably nothing, but I did feel this." And she was like, "Whoa, okay, yeah. Let's go ahead and schedule a sonogram, check it out." And that was kind of it. I was very passive. It's all going to be good. I think I had it, like, a week or two after, maybe. I walked in. I was really lighthearted. The woman who was helping take my sonogram was actually a twin herself, so we were chatting about it. She was really friendly. We were just talking really happily and the doctor who was doing the sonogram suddenly looked at me and he had a very— I don't know. I read it in his face. He's like, "You're going to need a biopsy." That kind of startled me because, at that point, I had been telling myself it's nothing. Why would it be anything?

Scott

Because of being an optimist.

Mariela

Yeah, of course. I mean, why? Literally, I talked myself down the whole time. So when I saw his face, it suddenly hit me that it could be that worst case scenario. At that point, I had only told my husband and nobody else. The way out after I had scheduled my biopsy— because the next step was to take a biopsy to see what it was. I told my brother like, “Oh my gosh, they're going to do a biopsy.” And he is, “Oh, it's going to be nothing.” Just like me being very optimistic, “Oh, don't worry about it. We'll have pizza night or whatever after you have the great good results.” We're just all planning for it. And I got my biopsy done...

Scott

When they did the biopsy, was it just a needle or an incision?

Mariela

It was a needle. It was a pretty large needle. They brought in the needle and they took two sections of my lump and two different parts just to check the cells. While I was even scheduling the biopsy, I felt like everyone was so casual. At that point, mentally, I was having a harder time talking myself down because, like I said, I read it on his face even though he didn't say anything. I was like, “This is serious.” I tried not to think about it too much. I was expecting maybe a call on a Wednesday or the week after. Like, I was expecting at least a week to wait because those kinds of things take a second and, all of a sudden, that Monday morning, I got a call at 8 o'clock in the morning and I was kind of surprised because, 8 AM, Monday, right after Sunday Easter, that was like, “Oh, I wasn't expecting this.” The nurse who called me is like, “We don't normally do this over the phone, but it's cancer.” And she gave me the information very quickly. At the time, I don't even remember what she said, but they had diagnosed me as invasive ductal carcinoma, grade 3, stage 2B.

Scott

What does grade 3 and stage 2B mean?

Mariela

Okay. We'll start with invasive ductal carcinoma. That means that the cancer had grown outside of my breast ducts. It was spreading. It wasn't staying put in that little place. It was spreading. Grade 3 cancer is divided into 3 stages, and stage 1 being the weaker and stage 3 being the most aggressive cancer. So I was like that. It's nice to know what's on the inside, thankfully, but that day I had no idea. Stage 2B being— the breast cancer stages or the cancer stages are broken up— so maybe younger, you and I would remember being stage 1, stage 2, stage 3, stage 4. Now, each stage has sections to show how much closer you're to moving to the next stage.

So I was right about at the cusp of jumping into stage three. So I was stage 2B. It hadn't spread to my lymph nodes yet. Once you get into other organs, it's metastatic, it's stage four. That moment she called me, I remember I took the call in front of my son and I was trying to get his attention. I walked

away from him to the kitchen. He was in the living room and she told me, "We need to act fast. I have you scheduled with—" She named a few doctors and "You're going to be making the appointment here in a second very quickly." She asked me if I had any questions and, because the whole time I'm going, "Okay, okay," That was all I kept saying - like, "Okay." I was blank. I was so stunned. I was trying to be, I guess, optimistic, brave. She asked me, "Do you have any questions?" And I was like, "I want all three of us to survive." And she told me, "That's what we're going to do, honey. That's what we're going to try."

At that point, my brother just passively texted me, asked if I'd heard anything from the doctor yet, and I didn't want to bother him at work, so I texted him it's cancer. I remember he immediately tried calling me back because he was just, "Are you serious? Are you sure?" I mean, everyone hears cancer and they always hear it almost like a death sentence. It's pretty serious. Right? I called my husband and I told him what they told me. I just kept apologizing. I'm like, "I'm so sorry." I guess I felt like I had failed something, like my body did something so wrong.

As I'm trying to tell my brother, tell my husband, right away, I was getting phone calls to schedule doctor's appointments, doctors that I'd never met or heard of before immediately that were like, "We want to see you this Wednesday or this Tuesday— what time can you see us? We have this appointment available." All of that also kind of stunned me because, whenever you see specialists like that, the appointments don't come so fast and they're literally wanting to see me the next day.

Scott

And how far along in the pregnancy were you at this time?

Mariela

Oh goodness, it would've been— I was definitely past my first trimester and I was in the middle of my second trimester.

Scott

How was your optimistic outlook at this point?

Mariela

When I first got the news, it wasn't— because I told my husband, I told my brother, I didn't say anything to anyone else— I took my son to his dental appointment, big smile on my face, pushed everything down, and they asked me to schedule his dental appointment 6 months out. I was writing it and, the whole time I was scheduling, I'm like, "Who's going to take him? Am I still going to be here to take him in 6 months?" And so that was very difficult.

Scott

Yeah. Something almost so trivial - scheduling a six month appointment - but you're thinking bigger things at that moment.

Mariela

Yeah. I mean, so many things. Because when I'm like, "Who's going to be here?" And then I realized that my husband's never taken him to a dental appointment. It's always been me. I was a stay-at-home mom to be available for all those things. So I'm like, "I don't think my husband even knows his pediatrician's first name." I've always been the one to take him to everything. I ended up getting a phone call from— my husband knows me. So Stephen, he listened. He tried to comfort me, but he also was waiting for me to tell him what to do in the sense like, he wasn't going to rush home or anything like that because I'm like, "We're just going to stare at each other while I'm sad? That sounds terrible, doesn't it?" I was like, "Don't comfort me."

Scott

It's back thinking practically. That's how your mind works, right?

Mariela

Yeah. I'm very practical. My brother had called me right about the time I finished a dental appointment. He's like, "I couldn't stay at work. I'm going home." I'm like, "Okay, I'll meet you there." I went to his house and we were sitting in the living room. My son was off playing in his room - my brother Javier's room - and I was crying and telling him, "I don't know how I'm going to leave my children without a mother." I just kept trying to figure out what that would look like because, oh gosh, it was very sad.

I remember he was really emotional. He's like, "If there was any way I could take this from you and be the one with cancer," and I'm like, "No, don't say that." It just kind of stuck with me at that moment that he was also very distressed with it. I guess that's weird to say that way. It was just one of those, "Okay, I need to pull back. I can't think these thoughts out loud with him" because it's too hard for him to hear. But he did me the favor of going to my parents' house with me. I called ahead and I was like, "Hey, kid, can you all be in the dining room? I wanted to talk to you." I got there and, the moment I sat down, I said, "Okay, let me start off with the babies are okay. They're great. They're safe. I found a lump in my breast and it's cancer." And I started crying and my father didn't. Again, I guess we get our tough upper lip from him. My mother stood up. She's like, "No, no..." And I just broke down crying and my mother came to hug me. Oh God. I felt so bad for hurting them. Is that weird to say? I didn't want to crush them, but I was still trying to digest all the feelings I was feeling.

My mother told my sister for me. She was the one who told other people. My sister immediately came over, of course. My sister, Vanessa and my nieces, we all sat around the living room stunned, and we were all so serious. Every time my nieces looked at me, I could tell that they were horrified. Everyone just looked at me. It was a lot because it was just a lot. I know I said earlier that I felt like I was at my own wake. Everyone was so somber and I was just sitting there. I couldn't even crack a joke. It just felt so serious and I had no answers to give anybody. I didn't know what anything meant.

Scott

That seems like the most difficult part. You get this diagnosis and you don't know what the future holds at that point.

Mariela

No. There was a lot. They were worried, of course, for me, but these two little girls that everyone was so excited to meet– I remember that night when my head hit the pillow, I was out, I was asleep, I was so drained from the day. I had an appointment the next morning with my MFM and it just so happened that day that my regular doctor couldn't see me.

I saw one of her associates, and she also happened to be a cancer survivor. She had the same cancer. I had hormone positive breast cancer. What that means is that the hormones I was having during pregnancy were feeding the cancer and causing it to grow quickly, which is a nightmare to think about. She told me, "I'm a survivor." She comforted me and she was saying things like, "I was having sonograms regularly like I was supposed to and I had a clear sonogram one month and then, two months later, suddenly I have a breast cancer lump and I had nothing—" It was her way of saying, "There's nothing more you could have done to be more careful. You did everything you could do. So don't blame yourself."

And she said that my babies were beautiful. They were perfect. I was at the correct gestational age to start therapy and I was okay to do chemotherapy while I was pregnant with them. I saw them on the sonogram and I was just– I mean, there was still so much going on but, at that moment, it's okay, she's telling me I can do this. So she's the first doctor I saw that was able to say, "Don't give up yet. There's things we can do."

The second doctor I saw that day was my surgical oncologist. After he saw me, he sat my husband, Stephen and I in a room. He had this wipe board, and he was explaining to me what exactly was going on. So he was telling me, "This is what this part of your diagnosis means, this is what this part means. So yes, grade 3, very aggressive. But also, because it grows so quickly, it's more unstable." So he's like, "Okay, yes, it's bad that it's growing fast, but we're able to attack it and it should respond well to chemotherapy because it was hormone positive." He felt that the best approach was to do chemo first, so he could visually see that it was responding well to chemo. Then, after the girls were born, have surgery. That was comforting because yes, he gave me so much information, but it was all like, "We have a game plan. This is what we're going to do. You're not my first pregnant woman with cancer."

He scheduled a surgery for a port place. And what it is is this little device that is placed above your heart. So part of it'll be at the surface of your skin or to the surface of your skin but underneath your skin, and the other parts of the device go into your heart, like your aorta and such. What that was going to do, it was going to be able to give my chemo straight into the larger veins of my heart and, from there, it would be dispersed to my body. So on top of everything, all of this coming at me that same day, I also have this doctor telling me, "We're going to have surgery, we're going to do this." This was all that same day, the same week.

I did see my regular oncologist later that week. At this point, I was starting to be better at plastering that smile on my face, like, "Yes, okay, we have something, we're going to do it." I remember when I

did talk to her, she was a little more to the point because she gave me the news as it was. I finally got a real picture of how scary this cancer could be. I mean, if it spreads, if it goes to my lymph nodes, if it goes to my organs— I walked out and I felt sad again. It was just so much harder for me to pretend like nothing was wrong. Whenever I heard these terrible things about cancer, I felt very scared.

Scott

Of course, yeah.

Mariela

It was very terrifying. And the whole time, I was like, “If it's between me and my children, I'll lay down my life. I want my girls to be okay.”

Scott

For me, I'm trying to put myself in your position and chemotherapy. I mean, they tell you during pregnancy, “Don't smoke, don't drink, be careful.” And they're literally putting a port in you to inject poison into your body while you are pregnant. I mean, was that a worry at all on your part? Did they tell you, “No, don't worry. That's not going to go to the babies. It's just going to go to the right place”? How did they explain that?

Mariela

It was terrifying because, immediately, when you think about all those things, you can't even take Advil while you're pregnant. They said that the way it works, once it goes through my body, it's weaker and when it gets to the placenta, that'll be filtered. So it's not going to affect the babies. That's one of the reasons that they avoid chemo before the second trimester because, when you get to the second trimester, your babies are fully formed and you're just growing in size at that point. The only side effects that could possibly occur with a baby during chemo are possibly some heart issues - that's something that they would monitor - and smaller size. Those are the two worries, but specifically the smaller size of the babies.

Scott

Did you ever consider not doing chemotherapy? It seems like that was the obvious choice to treat—

Mariela

It was my only option and, mentally, I chose to trust my doctor. My surgical oncologist was so positive and factual. It's like, “This is what we can do. This is why this will work the best.” So he told me, “We can do this.” I went to the cancer center where I was going to start my infusion and they gave me this calendar. On this calendar, they had infusion schedules, certain medications I had to take before and after my infusion and the day after my infusion. So I had this calendar that this really pretty little nurse handed to me - real positive - and she's like, “Okay, your infusion would happen this day. This would happen this day. Take these pills. If you're nauseous, we're going to give you this pill and here's your list of medications. We want you to take it to your high risk pregnancy doctor and have them okay all of the medication on this list. And I'm just like, “Cool.” I had to almost laugh at myself. I was like,

"Thank you for making me feel like this is still safe for my babies as you send me to go off." The doctor was like, "Yes, everything's fine."

And she really pushed to me how important water was. She's like, "You're going to need to drink this. It's going to do its job, but you also want it out of your system. You don't want it to stay there. It'll make you sick." She sent me off and, on my part, it was my job to call my insurance to make sure they approved the chemo because we had everything scheduled, but the approval hadn't come in yet. I had already gotten my port placed at this point, and the doctor's like, "Yes, it's healing, but you could use it now. The only thing we're waiting on is your insurance approval." I found out quickly that me calling the doctors and asking and pushing makes things happen faster. So I just kept nagging them until finally I got the okay. That Friday before, I had my scheduled first chemo infusion.

Scott

That's when the insurance approved it?

Mariela

Yes. The Friday before that Monday. I texted my brother, I was like, "Yay, I'm getting my poison." Like bravo!" He had demanded - not decided, not offered, he demanded - that he was going to be with me every single infusion - Javier, my brother - and he went in with me. They gave me a patch that was going to be for nausea and I got all my medications ready for that point.

They had educated me, saying that the cancer was going to attack all fast-growing cells, which is the tumor, but that also included the lining of my stomach, my mouth intestines, my skin, my hair, my nail - all were going to be attacked - and that's part of the reason that people lose their hair during chemo. There's that part where I felt grief at the idea of going bald because, ever since I was a baby, people have always told me how beautiful my hair was, and I've never dyed it. I've always had this hair, or I've always had my hair with a white forelock and it's curly. I even remember my oncologist - bless her heart - she didn't think about it, but she was like, "Oh, your hair's so pretty." I'm like, "Thank you. Thank you for adding to that. Yes, I know." It's a very striking part of me. So everyone's like, "Oh, your hair." And I'm like, "Yes, I know. My hair."

They gave me the patch for ongoing nausea - that would keep it on the whole week. I was also given ongoing nausea medication in case I experienced any. I was told that I needed to suck and chew on ice to numb my mouth to avoid any mouth sores. So at that point, I made it, like, my quest to - when I was getting my infusion - focus on ice, and I had decided to drink a gallon of water a day. And before I realized that, that was not enough.

Scott

Wow.

Mariela

I know. I mean, you saw me. I'm tall. I'm definitely not a tiny little thin thing. So I already needed more water with my mass and my pregnancy plus the chemo. I ended up moving to two gallons of water a day.

Scott

Man, you must have been going to the bathroom every 10 minutes.

Mariela

You already are, as a pregnant woman, so yeah. And no, no more so than usual, I guess.

Scott

And was your brother there with you the whole time?

Mariela

Yep. He sat on the floor right next to me and we just spent the whole time being goofy and cackling. Yes, we always make each other laugh. We're one of those people. We can have conversations just by eye contact. He would pull out the Sudoku book and I would try to answer over his shoulder. We would crack up, honestly, the whole time. Every time a nurse came over to check on us, "You all sound like you're having too much fun." It was that kind of cackle. It usually takes about four hours to get my infusion and being dropped in.

Scott

How much time had gone by from the time you were diagnosed to the first chemo treatment?

Mariela

It wasn't very long. Literally, it was the first appointment my port was placed and then I jumped in on chemo.

Scott

Pretty quick - because they wanted it to be quick. Could you feel the lump had changed in size at all during that time?

Mariela

Yes. Because it was growing so quickly, it went from what I could feel to what I could see.

Scott

Oh, you could see a bump on your skin.

Mariela

Yeah, just in those three weeks. It was insane. So it was very aggressive. It was very quick-growing. It's terrifying to see it grow so quickly. I just remember looking at my doctor like, "I can see it's bigger." And she was like, "Probably." They see cancer all the time.

Scott

For them, it's just part of their day.

Mariela

Yeah. And it was just so passive. The whole time I was numb, I was just like, "God, please." But I tried not to think about it. I told myself, "Okay, if I die, my family will take care of my girls." I try to think that way - that's the worst case scenario - or I'm going to do whatever I can. We're going to get these girls healthy. That was almost more important to me. I mean, yes, I wanted to be there for them. In every appointment, "How are they looking? How are they growing? Everything looks good?" I focused on that, and I think that's one of the reasons I became such a good girl about my water - because it was the only thing I could really control.

Scott

Yeah, you could do that on your own.

Mariela

Oh, I could do that. I drank the fuck out of that water, dude. So much water. I walked around with a half gallon of water half the time. It was insane.

Scott

You can tell people, "I drink heavily during my pregnancy."

Mariela

Very heavily.

Scott

But it's just water though. As I'm hearing this, I feel bad for you because pregnancy is supposed to be a happy, fun anticipation of the babies that are coming. Were you feeling any joy during this time, or was it always just kind of a shadow over each day?

Mariela

It really changed the way I felt about it. It took all of the happiness away from it. I didn't get to enjoy my pregnancy. My sister Vanessa kind of took it on herself to make sure I was still getting all of the things that normal women would get for pregnancy. She planned my baby shower. She scheduled early enough to where I still had a little bit of hair and I was able to camouflage it and make it look like I had my hair. I just added on a fake hair piece.

She had called April Pinto, that photographer, and she had tried to get her to see me because she was so booked. So she's like, "My sister has breast cancer. She's pregnant with twins. I'd really like to be able to get a photo session with you." And April was so moved, she just gifted it all to me. So I went and I had these gorgeous pictures taken of me right before my hair started falling. It was really sweet of her because I was starting to feel ugly and she was able to preserve some of that joy I should have been able to enjoy. My pregnancy right before everything started really going crazy, so I really feel a lot of thankfulness to her because I still have those pictures. I have pictures of how bad it was, but I have those pictures of when it was still sweet.

Scott

How long was the chemotherapy scheduled to last? Was it going to be done before your due date?

Mariela

Originally, no. Originally, I was going to be taking doses every two weeks. Once I got to those four infusions that they normally give you, they switched to something else. With my treatment, they switched to Taxol and that was going to be a single dose instead of double dose like every other week, but I did so well on ANC that my doctor decided to also give me Taxol doses. So I got my heavy heading drugs doubled up to get as much done as possible. Just as the cancer grew quickly, it also shrunk really quickly.

Scott

That's good. So you were seeing results?

Mariela

Oh yeah. Even after the first infusion, I saw my lumps get smaller. I could visually see it. I tried to prepare myself for bad news, so I was very cautious about the good news. I didn't want the heartbreaking moment of getting a cancer diagnosis to happen all over again, so I was very guarded and I did share the good news, but I tried not to make too much of a big thing out of it. Because I didn't want to get another heartbreaking disappointment, I stayed really numb to everything and I tried to have a big happy face because, after that first day of telling my family the diagnosis, I didn't want to relive that again. So I spent a lot of time being optimistic and trying to make everyone else be okay with it around me.

Funny story. I told my son about everything going on as much as I could for him to understand because he's smart. He's going to notice something is wrong and it was super serious. Then, I remember, because you deal with so many things and so many side effects and one of the things that I experienced during chemo, because it dries you out a lot, just the way it affects you, you just feel drier, I ended up having a yeast infection. So I'm calling the doctor being like, "Hey, this is going on. What should I do?" Oh, go get an over-the-counter thing for seven days. The whole time, my son's in the background. So, later, when I was talking to him, I'm like, "Did you talk to your teacher? Have you had any conversations about what's going on?" Because I'm trying to figure out how to balance everything so that everyone's aware and he's hearing all the right things at the right times. I was like,

"Did you talk to your teacher at all?" He's like, "What about the yeast infection?" And I'm like, "Let's go back to the cancer, not yeast infection. Cancer. Don't tell your teacher I have a yeast infection." So innocent, oh my gosh.

Scott

Kids hear everything, right?

Mariela

They hear everything. It was good to still have those funny moments, the regular life moments. Right? I mean, don't get me wrong, it was still hard because I remember, at some point, my son woke up from a nightmare and he said he had a nightmare that I had died, and he's like, "I don't want you to die, mommy." And I was just telling him, like, "Oh baby, God won't let that happen." because I felt like I had to give him a very big answer or comfort. So he would just take that out of his brain. I didn't even want him to consider that I would die.

Scott

No kid should have to worry about that.

Mariela

No. I mean, there's nothing promised, right? Nobody's safe when it comes to cancer. I was like, even if this makes me a liar, I need to comfort him. They had already discussed it. In case nothing happens that would cause the girls to come earlier, let's go ahead and schedule a C-section for 37 weeks full term.

Scott

Can you just describe the C-section? How did you feel mentally and physically?

Mariela

Oh gosh. I was exhausted at that point. I had gone through 7 of my 8 scheduled infusions. Although Taxol doesn't normally have the side effects like vomiting and diarrhea, it made me dry more so than even the ANC. I had to buy eye drops for my eyes. They were so dried out. At this point, I had next to no hair, so I was walking around a baseball cap all the time. I was moisturizing, I was using chapstick, I was drinking tons of water and the Taxol tends to give you joint pain and I couldn't take the regular Aleve or whatever that they recommended because I was pregnant. So, I ended up taking Claritin, and that helps with swelling, that helps with my joint pain. I mean, at this point, twins are hard on the body, so I was having a hard time getting deep breaths. I was sitting down every two feet. I was so done. I was tired. I was like, "Please, God, I'm ready. I'm ready to be my own body again."

That day, I was so ready to meet them. I had a C-section with my son, so I didn't feel nervous about that. I had my mother and my husband there. They cut me open and, immediately, I heard Serafina screaming, just cry-screaming. She's Baby A and her name means fire. So I was like, "That's appropriate, just fiery, a little temper." She looked good. Then, Magdalena was born - Baby B. She

didn't cry right away. I remember my mother getting choked up. "I don't hear her. I don't hear her." She had gotten fluid in her lungs so, immediately, they cleared her up and she started crying, but that just meant immediately straight to the NICU because they had to care for her. So I didn't get to hold her right away.

I got Serafina, straightened my arms— I felt so sad because, I mean, I just had chemo the Thursday before that C-section and that was on Wednesday. So I very much had chemo in my system, still, and Serafina started pecking and searching for breasts and I couldn't give her anything. So I had to immediately ask for a bottle because she was a hungry little girl. She was like this baby bird searching and she wanted it. So I just felt a lot of guilt that I couldn't do that part of it, but I was able to give her milk. Straight to formula. She chugged that down. She did so good. I have a really big soft swab for her. I was able to really bond with her in a way that I didn't get to experience with my other two children. It's such a weird thing to say and some people will feel guilty admitting that. It's just so weird. With my son, it took a day or so to bond. With Serafina, I bonded immediately that moment I was holding her and with Magdalena because I didn't even to really even touch her till the next day and she had to stay a week in the NICU. And with everything happening at the same time, I felt like I didn't properly bond with her for nearly three months, and I held a lot of guilt about it, so much guilt to the point that I'd catch myself— whenever I divvied up things, I'd give her the better bottle, the prettier colors. I was trying to prove to myself that I didn't think less of her. It was so hard. It was really hard.

Scott

Yeah. And I'm sure that was unexpected too, right? You didn't expect to feel that way?

Mariela

No. But I mean, everything was happening so fast because, after they were born, it didn't cost more than a hiccup in my treatment. So immediately the next week right after they were born, I was going to go see my plastic surgeon to talk about what my choice was after was liposuction. And because of everything— I mean, at this point, I'm bald, I'm huge, I'm swollen. Don't take my breasts away completely. I need something. So we decided to go straight to implant because some women will choose to try breastfeeding for a little bit. What that does is they'll let the chemo work out of a system and then try breastfeeding. It doesn't always work, especially with the way chemo affects the body. A lot of women who try breastfeeding during chemo will have a hard time even producing, so I just chose to skip it all together. I was like, "I've already dedicated my body to my girls. This is my trend now. Let's be aggressive. Let's do everything." So I was able to schedule my— they were born August 14 and I was able to schedule my bilateral mastectomy for October 1.

Scott

Was mastectomy the plan all along?

Mariela

I chose to have it be all along because I could have chosen a single breast removal, but my surgical oncologist said, "You're young. I recommend you get rid of them both." And that made sense to me. That would be less concerning than always worrying if the other one had breast cancer too.

Scott

I just don't understand how this works. I would think, if you're going to have a full mastectomy, why do the chemotherapy to start with? I mean, isn't the surgery going to get rid of everything anyway?

Mariela

The cancer's always trying to spread. So just because you don't see a lump doesn't mean it hasn't traveled, and this makes sure to kill it all off, even if you don't see any.

Scott

So you are dealing with having two new babies. You have no hair and now you're about to lose your breasts. It seems like a lot of these things are just so closely connected to your identity as a woman.

Mariela

Yeah, it is.

Scott

What were you thinking during all this time?

Mariela

Oh, I grieved my femininity a lot. I felt like a lump. Even after all that, it took me a long time to feel like a woman again. But also, even though I'm experiencing all this sadness, I have newborn babies, twins. I'm still getting up every hour or two hours or whatever – night feedings, diaper changes, C-section – be damned. I didn't have time to worry about myself. I ended up having my mother take care of the twins while I was recovering from my bilateral mastectomy, and my husband would care for me and the twins. He'd jump back and forth because, when I had my surgery, I didn't realize it would be so painful.

For the first couple weeks, I was not able to hold twins at all. I had a hard time even turning on the lights. I couldn't stretch out my hands to change the radio. It was very excruciating. I had to take a Vicodin to take a bath, to go to my doctor, and they had me on scheduled painkillers every four hours or so, and I had to take them. At first, I had tried to pull away from him because I didn't like the idea of being so drugged up, but it was too painful to even sit. It was sad not to have the twins. I had almost this moment like, "Oh my gosh, are they going to forget me because I can't even touch them?" I had my husband and my mom bring them to me and I would put a pillow across my lap and I would lay them on my lap or where my mom would, and I would kind of rock my knees to kind of rock them, but I couldn't use my hands. So that was the only time I got to be really close to them. It wasn't till after the two weeks that my drains were removed from my surgeries that I was able to pick them up for the first time.

Scott

That must have been a happy day.

Mariela

They were only a month and a half old whenever I had my surgery. I mean, I was desperate to get my tumor off of me, but it was so dumb of me to do the C-section and the bilateral mastectomy so close together because I had the injury in my middle and I had the injury up top, so I couldn't use my stomach muscles to pull myself up to a higher sitting position. I had to rely a lot on my husband to help me move around without injuring myself. So it was a lot of healing to deal with all at once. But once the four weeks passed by, I jumped right into going back to taking care of the babies full time because everyone had to work. So I didn't really have the ability to have somebody help me. And if I was able to care for them, that's what I was going to do.

Scott

That's the mom in you.

Mariela

That's the mom in me. After I healed somewhat from that, I went to start seeing a doctor for radiation. I was going to be aggressive for the treatment the whole way through. So if they gave me the option I was going to treat it, I just wanted to be sure to take it, to catch it all. That's what radiation does - it makes sure to kill any cancer around the area. I had to get 23 treatments. What happens is, during the weekdays, I would go up there for about maybe 30 minutes and I would lie down and they would put lasers aimed at my area that had cancer. They're setting me up and then immediately the nurses close the door and go behind this giant wall, and I'm getting radiated right here, and I'm like, "That's nice. That feels very safe."

Scott

Of course, yeah. It's like when you're at the dentist and you have the big lead thing on, but the people can't be in the room when they take that x-ray, it's too dangerous. But there you are right in the target area.

Mariela

Yep. Right there. And it burns you whenever you first get radiation treatment. It's different for everybody, but it's almost like you've been out in the sun all day. Your body just really gets sapped of energy. So, I felt bad for my husband. Stephen had to do all the night feedings because I would sleep hard after radiation. So, usually, he was the one waking up first and he did what he could. If he could handle it, he did it all.

Scott

How old are the twins now?

Mariela

They're six. They just turned six last August.

Scott

Have you ever had a moment where you felt like you could kind of breathe a sigh of relief, "Wow. Okay. I'm good to go now"?

Mariela

It took a long time to get there. Whenever you have cancer treatments, once you get to a certain point, they start pushing you— because you get seen every three months and then you graduate after a year to every whatever amount of months. Sorry, it's been a minute, so I don't remember how the schedule works out, but I just recently graduated to, "Every year, I get a checkup with my oncologist to make sure nothing looks funny." It hasn't shown up in my organs or anything, so that's a sign that, okay, they did get it because my cancer was hormone fed. Whenever I was first starting radiation on the oncology side, my doctor put me on hormone blockers and I started getting an injection every month to turn my ovaries off. So I was immediately put into menopause, which, my God, to go from pregnancy where you're full hormones, have them born, and then immediately go into menopause, it was a lot for my body and I felt a huge physical depression from it, just losing all those hormones at once, and that was insane, but there was no other way around it. This is what I had to do to survive.

Scott

Right. You have been through so much and you got through all of it because you're a badass. Do you feel that way?

Mariela

No. You hear that a lot as a cancer patient, like you're a survivor, you're a fighter, you're so brave, but it's not necessarily that. You're put in a moment where you show your strength. You know what I mean? It doesn't make you stronger. You get a chance to really show off what you're capable of. I mean, people don't really understand that because we have to carry our trauma with us, but when people ask you, "How are you doing?", you always kind of lie and say, "It's great. Everything's perfect." I don't know. It's a little frustrating because - especially me with my situation - I didn't feel like I could tell people, "Oh my God, I don't feel like a woman anymore. I lost all my sex organs. I don't get to have my estrogen anymore. I'm exhausted. I don't have hair, I don't have eyelashes. Oh my gosh, I don't have eyelashes." That's one that you don't ever think about this stuff although, you know what? I lost all of my hair. I want you to think about that. Nose, hair, eyelashes, the hair on my head. The hair on my arms and my effing sideburns did not fall off. I'm just like, "How much more Mexican can I be?" I literally had to take a buzzer and shave my sideburns off.

Scott

Well, when you were going through all this, did you know that your hair would grow back or did they tell you any kind of probability that it would come back?

Mariela

That I would have hair, yes, but the chemo damages your skin, your hair cells, so I didn't know what to expect to grow back because someone will go in blonde hair and end up with curly dark hair. I didn't know what to expect. It could really change your hair texture, the color of your hair, all that stuff.

Scott

I didn't realize that. But your hair all came back and you've got that white forelock like you always had.

Mariela

Yes.

Scott

You must have been happy about that.

Mariela

Oh yes. Even when it was the tiny little short hairs, I would kind of, like, finger curling them to show them off again. I was very happy once I had even a little bit of hair. I felt more like myself.

Scott

Going through this, you found some comfort in, of all places, Facebook. What groups did you find that you joined that helped?

Mariela

I joined a group of young women going through cancer. That's something that I didn't realize how important it was because you walk into a cancer building and it's all older people. Normally, people don't get cancer until they're in their 60s, and I didn't have a genetic reason for having cancer.

Scott

So you found these other people—

Mariela

Who are similar to me - literally, usually, most of them are the healthiest people. One of them was even, like, a nutritionist, super hard working out. None of us smoked. We all did the right things and somehow we ended up with cancer. So we got to sit together, talk about our little children, and how they were dealing and how we were dealing. So that was very comforting. It was too late, but I did find a group of pregnant-with-cancer women, and they helped normalize a lot of my symptoms that I experienced because, just even my hair falling off slower, that's something that I experienced that a lot of the women in the group didn't because they weren't pregnant. But then, with the pregnancy support group, they're like, "Oh yeah, my hair fell down slower." So I was able to compare all my symptoms and be like, "Okay, this is normal." And whenever you're around people facing the same things you

are, it takes a little bit of the fear away. It normalizes it like you have somebody you can laugh with and that's a lot of comfort.

Scott

Well, I'm not the only one in the world going through this.

Mariela

It is. It is so important. They were born right before COVID, so they were August, 2019. So by the time we did the lockdown, they were 6 months old and I was basically existing in a dark room with them and it was very bad for my mental health. I had to do the long distance or whatever it's called— the distance learning over zoom call with my son, so I had him at home. I had the twins and I spent a lot of time trying to get everything done, and I didn't get to enjoy anything. It just felt like a lot. I felt like such a complainer, almost, to say it that way, but damn, can I get anything abnormal this time? You know what I mean? I mean, I've been to support groups with older women, and we have nothing in common. They get to heal, they get to have their family come over and take care of them, but I have to take care of other people. I don't get to sit down and enjoy myself or do yoga or really self-care the way some cancer patients do, because I'm needed. I didn't get a chance to really sit down and relax. I had to do everything that needed to get done, and I had these three little people relying on me.

Scott

You got to do what you got to do. Another group on Facebook that you're in is the What Was That Like listener Facebook group.

Mariela

Yes.

Scott

So if anyone wants to contact you, all they have to do is join that group and they may have questions that they would like to ask that I didn't think to ask today. And thanks for coming and sharing your story.

Mariela

Thank you for listening. I know it's a lot, but I could be the voice to somebody who's in the middle of this and they could be scared and it's nice to be able to look at them and be like, "No, it's okay. You can make it. It can be okay."

Scott

I think Mariela is just awesome. You can see pictures of her, as well as her kids, her husband and her brother, in the episode notes at <https://WhatWasThatLike.com/237>.

Last month, October, was National Fire Prevention Month and we had 3 episodes that month that all had guests that had a story of what happened when their house was on fire. And these were three very different stories. I absolutely love that people have told me those stories kind of were the nudge they needed to make their home safer in case of a fire. Including this listener who left a voice mail -

Voice Mail

Hey Scott, longtime listener, long time fan. I have been listening to your fire prevention once lately and I realized how unprepared I am. In fact, I can't see. I was pretty much blind since I was 11 years old. Anyway, I was going into my oven to put something in without my glasses on and the little plastic bag from the super pretzels of all things fell into the thing. I thought to myself, gosh, that could have been bad if I didn't notice that. And right as I said that, I looked down and there's a pair of my eyeglasses in the bottom of the oven melted into the bottom. I'm not kidding you. I was like, "Holy shit. How did I not know this?" They were melted. I pulled them out, cleaned out the oven and immediately went and ordered a fire extinguisher because I didn't have one in this apartment.

It just made me think, this is serious stuff and what a moron— like how I was just looking for those glasses the other day. Anyway, keep doing what you're doing and I appreciate you and every episode you do, and it's important for all of us to hear about other people's things that go on with them because it's not embarrassing. This is life, man. So thank you so much. And like I said, keep it on. Love You.

Scott

And if you heard those episodes and took some kind of action, I'd love to hear about it – just leave a quick message on the Podcast Voicemail Line, anytime night or day – 727-386-9468.

Our Facebook question this past Tuesday was "What did you get in trouble for at school?" Does hearing that question bring up a memory or two from you? It does for a lot of people. Come on over and share what you did that got you in some hot water – and maybe you don't even regret it! We're waiting for your story over at WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And if you want to get a What Was That Like t-shirt, you can - at WhatWasThatLike.com/merch.

And here we are once again, about to hear this week's Listener Story. Every main episode ends with an audio story that was sent in by a listener just like you. Everyone has a story – in fact, most people have LOTS of stories. Think about something that has happened to you, record a 5-10 minute story on your phone, and email it to me at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

This week's story is from today's guest, Mariela, telling about something that happened with her son Zac at school.

Stay safe, and we'll see you next time.

(Listener story)

When my son, Zach was in first grade, he had this little female friend that I'm going to call S. They were super sweet together. They played with each other. They followed each other around. I think there was a little bit of a crash going on, but it was so sweet, innocent, definitely nothing concerning.

Well, one day, when I was in line at the school pickup, his teacher brought Zach to the car and opened the door for him. While he's getting settled in and buckling himself up, she leans in to whisper to me. She says, "I've been having issues with Zach today. I caught him running his hand up S's thigh. I asked him to stop, but every time I would turn around, I would catch him again running his little hand up her thigh, and he was getting pretty high up there." At this point, I'm blushing and she proceeds to say, "Sometimes, children see mom and dad do things and they want to emulate them. If you could talk to him, I would really appreciate it so we could discourage it from happening." At this point, I am mortified. She thinks that Zach has picked this up from watching my husband and I— oh my God, I could not get away from there fast enough.

Cut to later that night when we finally all settled down to have done homework, I pulled Zach aside and I started the conversation carefully. "Zach, I heard today that you kept being asked to stop touching S's leg. I wanted to talk to you about it." Suddenly, Zach beams and he starts telling me that S has really, really soft pants and they feel so good, and she was showing them to him. I was a little confused by it, but I went ahead and let him know that it's impolite to get into somebody's personal space and it's a better idea not to pet our friends.

The next day, I'm at school and I happen to run into S's mom. I don't know if she knows about what happened yesterday, but I brace myself in case the conversation comes up and she starts talking to me about how she had gotten herself and S a bunch of new clothing and how S was really excited about them. It turns out she had gotten S LuLaRoe leggings, which are advertised as being buttery soft. So in fact, Zach was just innocently feeling the softness of the leggings, not realizing that where he was touching was an inappropriate place. Thanks to those damned leggings though, now his first grade teacher probably thinks that my husband can't keep his hands off of me and he's feeling me up around Zach.