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After weeks of online flirting, Patrick Bardos was en route to meet Anne Marie Cerato for their first date at a coffee shop in downtown Toronto. He texted Cerato to let her know he was only a few blocks away on a packed streetcar crawling through rush-hour traffic. Cerato said she had just passed the same intersection. "Are you wearing blue shoes?" she asked.

Bardos looked down at his lapis-blue sneakers, then up to search for Cerato among the thicket of commuters. He felt a tap on his shoulder. Bardos turned around, and there was Cerato, just like the photo on her dating profile — long dark hair and brown eyes sharpened by angular glasses. Better yet, unlike many of his previous dates, he was taller than her.

"You're short," Bardos blurted out. "But I'm short too. And that's not what I meant.".

Bardos must have said something to redeem himself, because the two kept talking until the coffee shop closed. They decided to grab a bite at a nearby restaurant, and once again shut down the house. It was then Bardos realized that he was late for his own birthday celebration, so he rushed back to his apartment to attend to his peeved party guests, who spent the night listening to him rave about this woman he just met.

As smitten as Cerato, then 33, was with Bardos, she knew she didn't have time to waste on a dead-end relationship. So on their second date, she decided to drop "the bomb.".

'I'm not an alien, but I am a mutant'.

Knowing Bardos was a comic book fan, Cerato tried to soften the blow by appealing to his superhero sensibilities. "I'm not an alien," she said, "but I am a mutant.".

To Bardos' disappointment, Cerato admitted she wasn't a member of the X-Men. However, she had been exposed to her fair share of radiation in treating a form of lung cancer driven by a genetic mutation.

After two years in remission, Cerato had recently learned her cancer had spread, and chances were, she wouldn't be around in five years.

This was Bardos' chance to run for the hills, Cerato said. Bardos took a moment to consider his dilemma: How does one fall in love knowing loss is imminent?.

Cancer as 'litmus test'.

When facing a disease with life-or-death stakes, matters of the heart may seem like a secondary concern. But cancer can serve as a "litmus test" for a relationship — and many fail, said Dr. Robert Rutledge, a Halifax radiation oncologist.

He said it's not uncommon for people to sever ties, even marriages, with partners rather than confront the prospect of losing a loved one to cancer, and by proxy, face their own mortality.

But while some couples collapse under the strain of sickness, Rutledge said, for others, it can heighten emotional connections. The people who stand by their partners when the end seems near tend to be the ones who are worth the time patients have left, he said.

Sitting across from the "mutant" he was falling for, Bardos resolved to be that kind of partner for Cerato.

That was in fall 2011. Seven years later, Bardos and Cerato are married, own a house, have travelled the world and even celebrated their "25th anniversary," adjusting their romantic milestones for love on a condensed timeline.

Before he met Cerato, Bardos said he would waver between ruminating about the past, and fretting about the future. Now, Bardos said he's able to immerse himself in the moment, so he can spend it with her.

"She made me a better person, very quickly, just by being herself," he said.

At 40, Cerato said she has defied survival statistics thanks to recent developments in targeted-gene therapy. But knowing her time is finite, she was forced to decide what she could live without and whom she could not.

"I feel like, in a way, it's a gift that I was able to realize that at 30 and not at 60."

For Morgan McNeely in Edmonton, this realization came a month before she turned 25 when she found out she had terminal stage-4 colon cancer.

After her diagnosis in 2015, McNeely found herself without her studies, her scientific research and her restaurant job, and short a few relationships she thought she could count on.

She suddenly had a lot of free time on her hands, so she and a friend decided to amuse themselves by swiping through Tinder.

I'm not happy I have cancer, but I'm still thankful for what it's brought me. Morgan McNeely.

McNeely turned down a number of propositions, including one lothario who offered to assist her in crossing items off her "sexual bucket list.".

She was expressly not looking for love — the last guy she had dated split because of her "cancer drama" — but one of her Tinder matches proved persistent, and they started dating.

Having lost so much, McNeely was afraid to let her guard down. But he told her, "I see you beyond cancer." And soon, he helped McNeely see that too.

"I feel lucky every day, because of him," she said. "I'm not happy I have cancer, but I'm still thankful for what it's brought me.".

Still, McNeely said disease can complicate a relationship. When she and her boyfriend got a cat together, McNeely said they had to consider whether he could take care of the pet without her. When they discuss the prospect of marriage, she worries about whether debts related to her illness would transfer to him after she dies.

This is the case for many terminal cancer patients: Their greatest concern is not their own death, but the impact it will have on loved ones they leave behind.

Julie Easley is all too familiar with this tension, not only as a social scientist whose research has focused on young people with cancer, but as a survivor who has suffered loss herself.

When Easley met Randy Cable at a bar in Fredericton in 2004, she felt an instant jolt of recognition. At 28, Easley's life had recently been handed back to her after beating stage-2 Hodgkin lymphoma. Cable, then 29, had been diagnosed with colon cancer and told he had three months to live — that day, the clock had run out.

From then on, it was love on borrowed time.

Easley knew the isolation that can come with fighting cancer. She was doing research at the hospital where Cable was being treated, so she started visiting him after work.

There's something about seeing that strength of character and that beauty of the human spirit when you're stripped down to your most vulnerable state. Julie Easley.

One night, Cable was too afraid to fall asleep, having been told he could go into cardiac arrest at any moment. Easley offered to stay over to monitor his breathing. She crawled into bed with him and put her hand over his chest, feeling it rise and fall as they both drifted off. After that, she slept over more often than not, holding hands throughout the night.

At times, it almost felt like they were a "normal" couple. To entertain themselves, they would pretend the reflection in the TV screen revealed another room in their imaginary apartment.

"There's something about seeing that strength of character and that beauty of the human spirit when you're stripped down to your most vulnerable state," she said. "I fell in love with that.".

Easley said it took Cable some time to realize she was more than just the "girl he was sleeping with." When Easley first told Cable she loved him, he fell silent. He had told his mother that his biggest regret was that he had never been in love, according to Easley, but she had proved him wrong. "I love you too," he said, eyes welling up with tears.

In fall 2005, little more than a year after they met, it became clear the end was near. Cable's friends and relatives gathered around his bed, and he asked Easley to climb in with him. This time, instead of her holding him, he cradled her in his arms as he died at 31.

Thirteen years later, Easley continues to honour Cable's memory through her work in the young adult cancer community, and feels grateful for the memories he gave her.

"If you ever truly want to know the value of life, you spend time with someone who's fighting for every scrap of it," said Easley. "I knew it would end. The part I didn't know is the unexpected beauty that happened within that."