For Doom, the Bell Tolls

Uh-oh. Love means eventually having me to say you're HIV

May 1, 1997 By River Huston

OK, so I've been dating this guy for a few months now. I think I'm in love. We met while I was tethered to an IV in the hospital and somehow never managed to talk about my status. Then one evening, after he made my favorite dinner of yams, split-pea soup and ice cream sundaes, we sat on the couch gazing at each other. He finally brought it up.

"So tell me, River, what is this mysterious illness you have?"

I hadn't told any lies *yet,* but I had thought up a few. For a moment, I just sat there thinking. Sometimes telling someone you're HIV positive comes out real easy, sometimes it lodges in your throat like a hairball the size of Montana.

We had been getting to know one another for a couple of weeks. He knew I was working on a book about women living with HIV. He knew I had started a foundation to benefit same. But the biggest giveaway of my "mysterious illness'" was if it had been any other disease, I'd just name it.

Still I hesitated. I looked at him and saw something I had been looking for both before and after HIV, something we all need. Acceptance.

So I jumped feet-first. "Honey, it's AIDS."

I felt really calm. He didn't start crying or run to the bathroom. I didn't start crying or begin to explain how we can still have sex and how really normal I am. (Now that's funny.) Instead, he said, "I figured. I guess I just needed you to say it." I waited for the usual--"I'm here for you, I can be a good friend, blah blah blah"--but he took me in his arms and kissed me.

I was surprised but doubtful. It is sometimes hard to distinguish, when someone doesn't run away, whether I'm actually falling in love or I just really like the person. So we dated.

They weren't the most glamorous dates, but just doing something besides having sex was good. It's easy to be abstinent when you are chained to an IV or hemorrhaging on a regular basis, but to be feeling relatively healthy, sitting next to a handsome, willing man is another story. I was bursting with pride over my restraint.

We made dinners together and took walks. I was feeling absolutely virginal. I started to wonder when it was OK to have sex. Then I had a Zen moment: It will happen when it is time.

The right time came a few dates later, after dinner at my house. Holding each other felt natural. Having sex for the first time with an HIV virgin needs some educational direction.

Instruction in the art of erotic safe sex was the foreplay. He got an A. Actually, I don't think I had ever experienced anything quite like it. Yet something was missing, even in the excitement.

We stayed in bed for the next three weeks. I worked from my bed. We made love while I wrote or talked on the phone (Even when my mother called. Is it me, or does everyone perversely enjoy having sex while talking to one's mother?) We ate in bed and occassionally walked the dog. He left only long enough to ride into Brooklyn and go to his seventh-grade social studies class. (Don't worry, he's the teacher.) Then he returned to me as soon as the bell rang.

The sex was great, but the understanding and affection were even better. Still, HIV does not just go away.

He told me he was scared, he had had his doubts. It wasn't about becoming infected; it had more to do with watching me suffer. I am glad he was having these thoughts. I am actually suspicious of anyone who discounts too lightly having a relationship with someone who has HIV. I worry they might be in denial or have a death wish.

I would love to promise him that his fears are unfounded, but the reality is being with someone who is HIV positive can include an awful lot of suffering.

In many ways, I believe we are here to learn how to accept our eventual end. Learning how to die is a great asset to a relationship. I've chosen to walk in a realm that frees me from mundane considerations like if the toilet seat is left up.

I also have learned that life is too short to have resentments. (A resentment is like peeing down your own leg: One of River's little homilies.) So I say what is on my mind. HIV makes life real if you let it. It can also help focus a relationship.

Or I could just be full of shit. I guess I'll have to wait and see.

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