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CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

This article misspelled the last name of Bob Winkelmann.

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Our Cells, Ourselves, and a Lifesaving Bond

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The first things I noticed about Kerry Lutz were her bright, red, curly hair and her relaxed, tomboyish attitude. I liked her instantly. We have a lot in common, I realized. We're both 28, single and talkative. *I'm you and you're me*, I thought as we stood face to face. She's in the Peace Corps in Nicaragua, and I'm a reporter interning at The Post. But she asks a lot of questions, and I love peace and travel.

Kerry and I also represent two sides of the same coin. I was 26 when I received lifesaving stem cells. She was 26 when she gave her stem cells to save a life.

Disease, like disability, is one of those flukes. Somebody contracts AIDS after a single passionate fling; somebody else gets hit by a car and is instantly paralyzed. And me? Two years ago I was given a diagnosis of acute myelogenous leukemia, a malignancy of the bone marrow, and I was saved by the stem cells of a stranger. Kerry was the stranger who saved someone else's life.

I got to know Kerry last month. Two years after donating her stem cells, she had learned that they had been given to 67-year-old Bob Winkleman, a personal trainer who had acute myelogenous leukemia. Now she'd flown back to the States to meet him.

As the three of us sat on the patio overlooking the pond in Bob's back yard in a suburb of Chicago, I asked questions like a reporter trying to get a feel for their situation, as if I did not already have an intimate knowledge of going through a transplant, at least from my side of the coin.

Kerry explained her side: She had joined the national bone marrow registry on a whim while at a blood drive in college. All she knew about Bob when she was identified as his potential match was that he was a man dying from leukemia. She was told there was an emergency and was asked to come in to a medical center in Fairfax the next day for further testing. Soon after, she started a series of injections, one shot a day for four days, to stimulate her bone marrow to produce stem cells and release them into her blood. Kerry said she felt tingling around the injection sites, but no other side effects.

Within a week, all of Kerry's blood was removed through an IV in her left arm, passed through a machine that separated out the blood-forming cells, and then returned to her body through an IV in her right arm. She said the process took five hours, during which time she watched a DVD of the film "Memento" and talked finances with her father, who had come to the hospital to help her pass the time.

Kerry described the filtering as a "circle" of blood.

The process had been a circle for me, too. As a nurse hung the pale pink bag of stem cells above me, I held hands with my parents, brother and sister-in-law, a friend who had flown in for the day, my oncologist and the Buddhist chaplain at the hospital in Boston. We formed a circle around the cells, donated by a stranger, and said a prayer. Then my brother put on Mahalia Jackson's "God Put a Rainbow in the Sky," and I bounced along to the rhythm in bed while my guests chatted as if they were at a party and not squeezed into an isolation room. Before the song was over, I looked up at the bag and everything but it went fuzzy.

It held my fate.

As gracefully as I could, I shuffled everyone but the nurse out of my room, then I grabbed the pink bucket beside my bed and vomited. I began to shake uncontrollably.

"What is happening to me?" I asked the nurse.

She injected something into my IV, then sat on my bed and held me. She said I was having an anxiety attack. I had had panic attacks while in the hospital, but nothing had come even close to this. I asked for my brother, and two hours later when I woke, he was sitting at my bedside, holding my hand.

* * *

Bob Winkleman's experience was different. When Bob received Kerry's stem cells, he was focused on the gratitude he felt toward his anonymous donor. He actually filmed the whole thing and created a six-minute DVD for his donor. It starts with a framed picture of Bob surrounded by 23 members of his family and ends with Bob saying "a very big thanks from all of our family." The video shows the red ice cooler that housed Kerry's stem cells. Bob's wife says, "Looks like tomato sauce!" as Bob holds the bag in both hands, blesses it and prays that "this precious life-giving fluid will give me another chance at life." After the infusion is finished, he declares, "The mission is accomplished!" Kerry cried when she saw it.

Bob calls Kerry his "stem niece," but at various times during the day I spent with them he said she reminded him of his kids, his wife and himself.

"It's probably right that I got her blood," Bob said while driving us in his silver convertible with the "Wink Too" vanity plate. We were on our way to have a celebratory drink, and Kerry adorned herself with a swimming cap and goggles -- to protect herself from the wind.

Bob told us he wants to write a book called "Finding Kerry."

"Like 'Finding Nemo,' " Kerry said from the back seat. "I kind of look like a fish right now."

Spending the day with Kerry and Bob was like spending a day in an echo chamber, or a hall of mirrors. We reflected one another in expected and unexpected ways. Bob and I had survived the same disease, and we both suffer from side effects of transplantation, including chronic dry eyes. Bob suggested I try the eye drops he uses, but I told him I was on a clinical trial and using the study drug to treat my eyes. We discussed the pains of tapering off steroids, which he no longer needs though I do. I complained about how they make my legs and feet swell.

"It's like we blow up," he explained to Kerry, and I showed her how I can push my finger into my feet and form a crater.

"I call them my marshmallow feet," I told her.

"It feels like gak," she said touching them.

Kerry lounged on the couch, and Bob's wife asked if the two of us had bonded.

Indeed, we had. We are at similar stages in life: two assertive women in our late 20s, eventually wanting a family but waiting for the right partner. Because of the full-body radiation I underwent before the transplant, I will not be able to bear children. Kerry, who presumably can bear children, said she likes the idea of adoption.

"Making children isn't as important as having children," she said. "Love is transferable."

Kerry was not my donor, but she could have been. In fact, my donor could have been any one of the 12 million people worldwide who are registered to donate stem cells or bone marrow. All I know about my donor is that he's a middle-aged European man.

There is something I like about knowing that my donor's gift had nothing to do with me personally. I did not have to win him over with charm or impress him with a résumé. I might fit the profile of his worst enemy. But that did not matter to him.

All that mattered was that a fellow human being, a stranger somewhere in the world, was in need, and he had the power to save her. I am the recipient of an all-encompassing gift of love.

And so I say with all my heart, which pumps a stranger's blood:

Thank you, Strangers.

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