

Together, at last

Pottkotter, Wellman found their way back to each other after two years apart



The Commercial Review/Bailey Cline

By BAILEY CLINE

The Commercial Review

Grant Pottkotter always knew Danielle Wellman was the one.

But for about two years after meeting, they went separate ways.

Now they're planning a wedding.

Danielle and Grant, both 27, met at a Pizza Hut in 2017 while spending time with friends and family. Danielle's sister, Lindsey, was engaged to Eric Lamm of Fort Recovery at the time. Grant, also from the village, had a mutual friend in Lamm.

Soon after, Danielle and Grant joined Danielle's sister and fiancé on a double date to El Camino Real, The Greazy Pickle and Brick Street Tavern. The next weekend, they visited Muncie for their first date alone.

"So after that, we were supposed to hang out the next day," Danielle said in an interview while seated next to Grant. "But I

couldn't. And after that, he actually told me that he wasn't interested anymore."

Grant broke the news through text — Danielle teases him about it now.

"Wait, you said it was fine I did that," he defended himself, smiling.

They weren't officially dating at the time. Still, Grant regretted sending the message soon after.

"When did you come to your senses, though?" Danielle asked.

"About 10 minutes after the text four years ago," Grant admitted.

And, despite separat-

ing, Danielle remembers telling her friends afterward their first date was her "perfect first date."

He was Catholic and easy to talk with, he opened doors for her and

he wanted to meet her parents, she explained. Even while in her next relationship, she still referred to their first date as the best one.

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Grant Pottkotter, Fort Recovery, and Danielle Wellman, Portland, are getting married on June 12. They've known each other for about four years, but the couple didn't start dating seriously until about two years ago. Pictured, Grant and Danielle stand in their barn outside Fort Recovery.

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Pandemic realization

Coronavirus showed couple they were to marry

By ASHLEY FETTERS
The Washington Post

Two weeks into quarantining during the coronavirus pandemic, it dawned on 31-year-old Stephen Miller that it was time.

Living with his girlfriend of three years, Joanna Illing, at their apartment in San Francisco was going better than he expected — spending so much time together felt like a treat, not a chore — and a journaling project he'd begun as a staying-sane activity revealed something he hadn't foreseen. Miller, the vice president of engineering at a tech start-up, had been writing about his most meaningful experiences before the pandemic.

"Travel; past relationships that didn't work out; big, grand moments in my life," he said. "It started to feel like all of those big memories that had seemed so monumental weren't that exciting to write about anymore. I kind of felt like I was turning a corner, where I realized that my life today is so much happier."

Miller wanted to surprise Illing, 29, with a proposal but didn't want to buy a ring without her input. So he typed "cos-

tume diamond ring" into a search engine and ordered three sizes. He chose the one that looked like it would fit Illing's finger — gold plastic with a fake diamond in a halo setting. And on the evening of April 25, Miller had their neighbor's 11-year-old Maltipoo, who the couple sometimes dog-sits, trot into their apartment with the ring in a bag around its neck. (A few weeks later they ordered Illing's real ring, an oval diamond with baguette side stones.)

Half a century from now, in 2071 or 2072, Americans may find themselves fielding a flurry of invitations to grandparents' and grand-relatives' 50th wedding anniversary parties. Another pandemic engagement, invitees might say as they click to open another lavishly rendered hologram notification, or whatever the fancy correspondence du jour may be. Another marriage spurred into existence all those years ago by the great coronavirus outbreak of 2020, forged in the long months of either sheltering in place together or pining for each other while quarantining apart.

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The Washington Post/Jason Henry

To propose to Joanna Illing, Stephen Miller had their neighbor's 11-year-old Maltipoo trot into their apartment with the ring in a bag around its neck.

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Stories of survival

By LINAH MOHAMMAD
The Washington Post

This is how the day was supposed to go: Israa Seblani and Hanaa Fanous in long white dresses, Ahmad Sbeih and Amin Shamly in bow ties and black suits. Family, friends, plenty of good food.

And two wedding ceremonies both couples had dreamed of for years, even as Lebanon's economic crisis and the novel coronavirus pandemic seemed to conspire to keep the couples apart.

Aug. 4 was going perfectly until around 6 p.m. local time in Beirut, when the

Couples made it through devastation in Beirut

couples — both posing for photos in the same downtown neighborhood — felt the ground shake.

"One thing came into my mind, which is 'Israa: Now you are going to die,'" Seblani, 29, a doctor based in Troy, Michigan, said in an interview after the blast.

"My dreams and the things we wanted to do together were flying as the shattered glass was flying.

"I asked God for one thing," she said. "If I can have a moment or a second to hold my parents' hands and tell them goodbye."

See **Survival** page 4B



Make the Moment Last Forever



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Weddings keep their sheen

By NIHA MASIH

The Washington Post

NEW DELHI — The wedding that Liza Maria had carefully planned was not one but two ceremonies: one at a church and one in a Sikh temple, a nod to her interfaith love story. The revelries would span days. There would be elaborate choreographed dances, music recitals — and 300 guests.

Instead, Maria got married on Dec. 2 in a small and intimate ceremony at a Sikh temple with 25 people in attendance. As she walked around the sanctum in a shimmering pink Indian wedding dress, dozens of relatives — from the United States to Australia — watched on Zoom. Everyone present wore masks that they slipped off for photos. There were few hugs and lots of fist bumps.

A typical big, fat Indian wedding can last for days with multiple events. In addition to singing and dancing, there are functions for ritual turmeric baths and to apply henna on the hands of the bride, as well as sit-down dinners — and then there's the traditional wedding ceremony. The guest list with extended families, friends and co-workers can run into the hundreds or even thousands.

These affairs disappeared overnight when the country went into a lockdown in late March. Even when most restrictions were lifted nearly three months later, several limitations remained, including a cap on the number of wedding guests.

"This feels like a birthday party, not a wedding," said Maria, a 34-year-old investment adviser at the British High Commission in Delhi. "Covid has been a dampener. But we thought, 'What the hell, let's have fun.'"

With more than 9.8 million coronavirus cases, India is the world's second-most-afflicted country after the United States, though the rate of increase in cases has dropped in recent months.

Most state governments have instituted stringent rules for weddings. In Delhi, wedding guest lists have to be capped at 50 people. Bhopal, a large city in central India, has advised against hugs, group photos and loud laughs at weddings. In the western state of Gujarat, a former legislator was arrested last week after a viral video of thousands of people dancing at the engagement of his granddaughter.

Weddings hold a sacred place in largely conservative Indian society, regardless of class and demograph-

ics. They are marked as an extraordinary once-in-a-lifetime celebration, and families save for their children's weddings for years. Borrowing to throw a bash is not uncommon, even among the poor.

For the country's elite, weddings are a grand show of wealth. In 2018, Beyoncé flew to India to perform at the multimillion-dollar wedding of Isha Ambani, the daughter of India's richest man. When Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra married singer Nick Jonas at an Indian palace, she wore a traditional red outfit that took more than 3,700 hours to make. India's cricket team captain Virat Kohli tied the knot with Bollywood actress Anushka Sharma at an exclusive Tuscan resort where the Obamas and Kennedys have vacationed.

Twenty-nine-year-old fashion director Gopalika Virmani spent six months planning a dreamy wedding to be held in April at Lake Como in Italy. Bags were being packed, and tickets were booked. Then the lockdown struck, and months later the situation had not improved.

Virmani finally married her fiancé at the end of November at a five-star hotel in Agra with sweeping views of the Taj Mahal, India's iconic monument to love.

"We were really stressed, and so we took many precautions," Virmani said. Her father devised an elaborate, 16-point standard operating procedure for the guests and the hotel. Among other requirements, every guest was asked to quarantine for 10 days before the wedding and test negative for the coronavirus. The family booked the entire hotel for the wedding, and every hotel staffer was tested at its request.

"We wanted it to be very, very safe. So that the time you wanted to take your mask off, you could do it without stress," Virmani said.

The \$50 billion wedding services industry in India is adapting to the pandemic. Taj Hotels, the oldest five-star chain in the country, has deployed marshals trained in coronavirus safety precautions. At the start of any event, marshals will request that guests wear masks and practice social distancing.

"It is not easy to ask guests to wear masks," said Arun Sundararaj, executive chef at Taj Mahal Delhi. "We have to be very kind but keep informing them or offer a mask."

For high-end wedding planners, constantly changing rules governing

wedding events, particularly the number of guests allowed, have been a challenge.

But while the guest list may have shrunk, the sheen has not faded.

Celebrity wedding planner Devika Narain in November turned an ancient temple spread over 43,000 square feet into a stunning wedding venue lit by 12,000 earthen lamps, even though the original guest list of a few thousand had diminished significantly.

The pandemic-induced "wedding evolution," she said, will require us to question "the very things that felt normal till a hundred days ago." Narain said this will lead to "craft- and art-centric weddings that celebrate the spirit of India."

Nitin Mathur, the chief executive of the Wedding Design Company, said his firm's focus was on making weddings more personal and experiential during this era. For a wedding in October, Mathur's team learned the names, likes and dislikes of each of the 50 guests. "Before asking, you should get what you want," Mathur said. "Then, my job is done."

Sociologist Parul Bhandari, who researches Indian marriages and weddings, wrote that the elite Indian wedding is "not simply an ostentatious celebration" but a "show of strength, a glamorized return to tradition, and a celebration of social conservatism."

This will be an era of "mindful weddings," Narain said. "The worst thing about what I call 'janta' [public] weddings is that the bride and groom don't even know half the number of people invited." Now with only close family and friends, "it's a bunch of people you truly love."

Maria, the bride in Delhi, said she and her husband had always been in favor of a small wedding but had planned the large celebrations to accommodate the wishes of families and friends. The disappointment for her was not being able to have her siblings living abroad by her side. "But we will definitely celebrate again when we meet," she said.

Virmani, whose Italian wedding was canceled, said that beside initial uncertainty, they were not upset at downsizing. From the initial 300-odd guests on their list, they had only 50.

"At this point, you just want to be with your family and be able to spend time with everyone," she said. "That's what we did. That was the beauty of our wedding."

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Survival ...

Continued from page 2B
The explosion that ripped through Beirut last week disrupted nearly every aspect of normal life in the Lebanese capital, including the two wedding photo sessions. Videographers hired to capture the occasion instead wound up documenting the most terrifying moments of the couples' lives, as they ran for cover from crumbling buildings and gusts of shattered glass.

The couples did not know one another, but had noticed each other across the busy square shortly before the explosion, when Shamly, 28, called out to Sbeih, 34, a joke about how they were no longer bachelors. The next time they saw each other was online, when two eerily similar videos, showing the interruption of their wedding photo shoots went viral, linking the couples to forever by a shared experience that became emblematic of the city's devastation. The explosion left more than 170 people dead and injured thousands. The blast has since been linked to a warehouse where 2,750 metric tons of ammonium nitrate was stored improperly for years.

As the shock wave swept through the city, Seblani and Sbeih ran to a nearby restaurant, where Seblani's instincts as a doctor kicked in, and she began to tend to the wounded.

"I didn't think about myself or my parents or how we can get out of this place or anything," Seblani said. "The lab coat is white. My dress is white. It's just... the style is different."

Her mind drifted back to the other woman in a white dress she had seen just a few minutes before.

"One of the first thoughts that crossed my mind when I went into the restaurant and started helping people, was 'What happened to the other couple?'" she said.



Israa Seblani

Ahmad Sbeih and Israa Seblani pose for a photo on April 28, 2019. The couple's wedding photo session was disrupted on Aug. 4, 2020, when an explosion ripped through Beirut.

Shamly — his hair and back speckled with shards of glass — carried his shocked fiancée part of the way away from the scene, her dress now filthy and ripped, covered in dust and debris. "Everything was destroyed, injured people were on ground," Fanous, 27, said. "It was a horrible situation."

Neither bride nor groom was seriously injured. But for both couples, the powerful blast was just the latest obstacle on their long journeys to marriage.

Fanous and Shamly met in 2011 at work in a Beirut hotel, the same place they planned to celebrate their wedding reception nearly a decade later. It took awhile for Fanous to warm up to Shamly, but in his small kindnesses — defending her in a work dispute, taking her to the hospital after an accident — she saw a potential partner, and soon fell in love. They supported each other through univer-

sity and career changes, and in 2015, Fanous started planning their wedding.

"I had all these elaborate plans, and I wanted to look beautiful like a princess and have all eyes be on me," she said.

Seblani and Sbeih met in November 2016 at a Starbucks in Beirut where Seblani, then a medical student, used to hole up to study — sometimes many hours at a time. Sbeih walked in with a friend and caught a glimpse of her writing in the corner. He was immediately overcome with the need to introduce himself.

"I felt that I fell in love," he said. "Something told me in my mind, go and talk with her... she is the one who you are looking for."

Seblani was initially taken aback by his candor — and even shot him a dirty look. But she ultimately agreed to share her phone number.

"Then our story start-

ed," she said.

Seblani moved to the United States in 2017 but visa troubles kept Sbeih, who owns two clothing shops in Beirut, from joining her. Their love prevailed, but street protests in Lebanon and the travel restrictions and lockdowns put in place due to the pandemic kept delaying their wedding plans.

When Seblani finally landed in Beirut in July, Lebanon's economic crisis was worsening, and the pandemic was picking up speed across the globe. "It was as if we were challenging the entire world," Seblani said.

But the couple had agreed early on: "No matter what's going to happen we're going to get married," she said. "We're going to make it."

The pandemic and economic crisis also pushed Fanous and Shamly's wedding date back again and again, before they settled on Aug. 4.

So it was by chance that the two couples — both eagerly anticipating their wedding ceremonies and the parties awaiting them at hotels — ended up in the same place that evening.

"Surely the same way that I have been dreaming about this day all my life, she has been dreaming about this day," Fanous said of Seblani. "She wanted to celebrate, and she also wanted her family to be happy for her because this night only happens once in your life."

"We now have this common story — a connection that'll always be there," Seblani said.

Both hotels were damaged, and both parties were canceled. There was no cake and no dancing. But both couples — grateful their families survived the chaos — chose to go through with their ceremonies anyway. They were tired of waiting.



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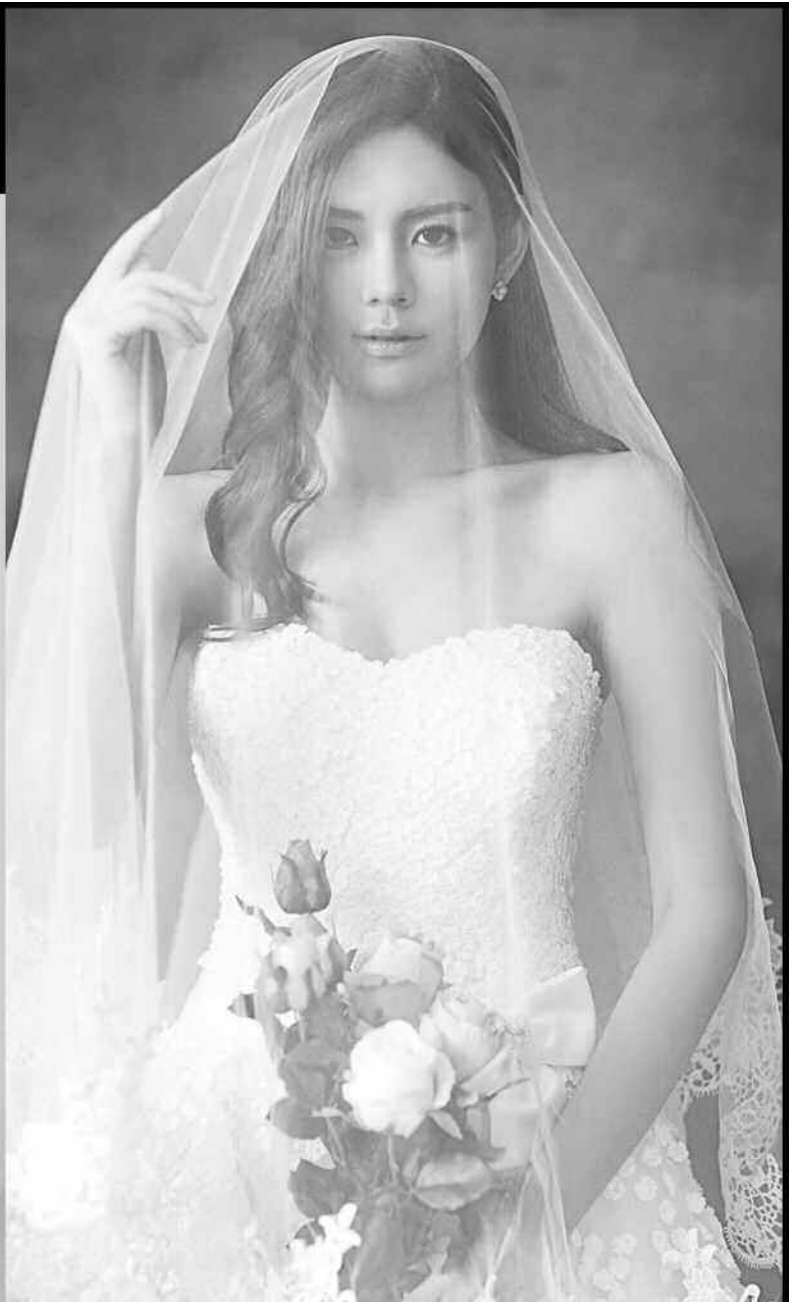
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Together ...

Continued from page 1B

"Anytime (my friends) asked about relationship advice, I was brought back to that," she said, looking at Grant. "I was kind of stuck on you."

At the time, though, neither had a clue about the other's feelings. She started nursing classes at Ball State University, and Grant continued work for his father, Joe, at Pottkotter Construction.

They didn't reconnect until two years later, after Danielle ended her relationship and started her final semester of nursing school in 2019.

Grant texted Danielle asking if she wanted to go on another date.

At the time, Danielle had schoolwork to focus on and didn't want to put much effort into texting with Grant. (And she says Grant wasn't great at communicating via text either.)

But that summer, they met again at Lindsey and Eric Lamm's house on a Friday night after a softball game. They stayed up until almost 4 a.m. talking. The next weekend, they finally went on another date.

"And it's been history since then," Danielle said.

Grant recalled the night he asked Danielle to be his girlfriend as one of his favorite

'I always say he's like an 80-year-old. Just his thought process and the way he acts ... I don't feel like younger people do that.'

—Danielle Wellman

memories with his future wife. They visited County Concert, a three-day music festival in Fort Loramie, Ohio, and watched Kid Rock perform. They've since decided their song is "Blue Jeans and a Rosary" by the same artist.

Danielle, though, is still stuck on their first date.

"I always say he's like an 80-year-old," she joked, talking about how he acts like a gentleman and spends time with older farmers, such as his uncles, at Pottkotter Poultry. "Just his thought process and the way he acts ... I don't feel like younger people do that."

The couple plans to get mar-

ried at St. Joseph Catholic Church in the summer, almost a week from the one-year anniversary (June 12) of when Grant popped the question outside of their home in Fort Recovery.

Danielle remarked that if they had not been living together by the time the coronavirus pandemic hit the states, they would've struggled to see each other regularly because their schedules clash. At the time, she worked at IU Health Ball Memorial Hospital in Muncie on the night shift, and she recently started working as a registered nurse at Mercer Health in Coldwater, Ohio. Grant worked first shift at the family business (he

started working at the utilities department in St. Henry, Ohio, near the end of last year).

If the pandemic worsens before June, the couple plan to invite less people to attend the ceremony and will hold the reception at their house.

Thinking back to why Grant wanted to be with Danielle, he remarked that he "just knew." Their time apart helped solidify his thinking.

"Every time I saw her when I wasn't with her, I just knew she was the one," he said. "I just knew you were it."

"Oh, yeah?" Danielle teased. "Still sent that text."

They both smiled.

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Last Civil War bride dies

O'FALLON, Mo. (AP) — Helen Viola Jackson's 1936 marriage to James Bolin was unusual to say the least: He was 93 and in declining health, and she was a 17-year-old schoolgirl.

Bolin was also a Civil War veteran who fought for the Union in the border state of Missouri. Jackson was almost certainly the last remaining widow of a Civil War soldier when she died Dec. 16 at a nursing home in Marshfield, Missouri. She was 101.

Several Civil War heritage organizations have recognized Jackson's quiet role in history, one that she hid for all but the final

three years of her life, said Nicholas Inman, her pastor and longtime friend. Yet in those final years, Inman said, Jackson embraced the recognition that included a spot on the Missouri Walk of Fame and countless cards and letters from well-wishers.

"It was sort of a healing process for Helen: that something she thought would be kind of a scarlet letter would be celebrated in her later years," Inman said.

Jackson grew up one of 10 children in the tiny southwestern Missouri town of Niangua, near Marshfield. Bolin, a widow-

er who had served as a private in the 14th Missouri Cavalry during the Civil War seven decades earlier, lived nearby.

Jackson's father volunteered his teenage daughter to stop by Bolin's home each day to provide care and help with chores. To pay back her kindness, Bolin offered to marry Jackson, which would allow her to receive his soldier's pension after his death, a compelling offer in the context of the Great Depression.

Jackson agreed in large part because "she felt her daily care was prolonging his life," Inman said.



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Realization ...

Continued from page 2B

Although annual statistics for engagements are virtually nonexistent, there's evidence to suggest the pandemic has produced a bumper crop. At the Grand Canyon, one of the world's most popular proposal spots, inquiries about proposal packages and bookings have doubled since last year, according to Grand Canyon Wedding Packages. Jamie L. Singleton, the president of the Kay, Zales and Peoples jewelry retailers, said that in the third quarter of the year, the three brands saw "double-digit" percentage growth in engagement-ring sales as compared to the same period in 2019. She expects the traditional "engagement season" — between Thanksgiving and Dec. 31, when Singleton said one-half of annual proposals usually take place — will also bring bigger sales than usual. "What we're learning is that the people that we quarantine with, for the most part, have become the nucleus of [our] lives," she said.

"There's something hopeful about getting engaged," said James Schultz, the co-founder and head of customer experience for the online retailer James Allen, which specializes in bridal jewelry and experienced a 26% increase in sales this fall over fall 2019 (though that could in part be from sales shifting from brick-and-mortar stores to online). "You know, it's not just the moment of the proposal, it's about looking forward to a post-pandemic future."

Like Miller and Illing, some couples who committed for life this year did so largely because the pandemic afforded them more time together. Early in the year, in Martinsburg, West Virginia, voice actor and special-needs behavior assistant C.R. Hess, 36, matched with real estate administrator Stacy

McNaught, 35, on Facebook Dating. In March, after the pair had been texting for a few weeks, Hess mustered the courage to ask out McNaught for coffee, but then coffee suddenly ceased to be a possibility.

After a week more of talking remotely, though, Hess invited McNaught to come over after his two children had gone to bed; neither Hess nor McNaught had been going to work or even to the grocery store, so they risked it. The two stayed up talking until the sun was almost up, and McNaught came over again the next night. Soon, on nights when they couldn't be together, they were video-chatting.

This fall, they moved into a new place together, with room for both of Hess's children and McNaught's son. Hess proposed in November with a painting he made (two silhouettes against a night sky, one giving the other a flower) and a ring (morganite and diamonds set in rose gold).

"I wish that covid wasn't a thing. But it offered opportunities to be in the right place at the right time to meet her," Hess said. The pandemic forced them "to be at home for weeks and weeks and weeks, to just talk and talk and talk," he added. "We just wouldn't have worked out any other way."

For others it wasn't the extra time together but the time apart that nudged them toward commitment. Lydia Bullock, 23, and her now-fiancee Marisa Clardy, 26, experienced extreme togetherness and extreme apartness during the pandemic: After hunkering down together early in the year in Austin, Texas, Bullock moved to Ireland to start on her undergraduate degree while Clardy stayed behind.

"I don't recommend moving to a new country by yourself during a pandemic," Bullock said. "One of

the most lonely things that's ever happened to me."

When Clardy visited Bullock in October, Bullock spontaneously proposed to her at home in bed; Clardy declined initially, saying she wanted to wait until Bullock finished school. Then Clardy proposed right back a few weeks later in the Latin Quarter of Galway, Ireland, with a custom-made pink sapphire ring.

They now face the additional daunting challenge of planning a wedding during a global health crisis that may end soon or may not. But "we've been through a pandemic," Bullock said. "I'm sure we'll figure it out down the line."

There are numerous other couples who reportedly found clarity in their romantic lives amid the pandemic's chaos. The nurse in Brooklyn who quarantined away from her partner while treating COVID-19 patients and then proposed when they reunited. The Long Island couple who lived together for four years before getting engaged during an outdoor guitar lesson. The coming year's weddings and 2021's anniversary parties will celebrate a cohort of people who didn't have many places to wear their fancy new jewelry at first and didn't get to have traditional engagement parties. But they will begin their marriages having already learned the value of a reliable partner's company in a frightening time.

Illing, a software developer, had known for a while she wanted to be with Miller forever, even before the pandemic arrived. She wouldn't have moved in with him if she hadn't, she said. But being with Miller in their apartment 24 hours a day, every day, while the world outside battled a deadly virus "definitely cemented that," she said. "I think it's just proven to me how solid we are."

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