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ON BEING A BACHELOR



FIGURING OUT THE EX FACTOR



SPARK ST. JUDE

RECENTLY, THE GUY I'VE been dating and I went to a bar in Buckhead. He headed off in search of beers, while I searched for the friends we were supposed to meet. The next thing I knew, a buddy of the guy I previously dated walked up, and we started chatting. My guy returned a few seconds later, I made the introduction and the friend bid us a warm farewell.

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I then found myself facing an inevitable interrogation in any budding romance when you're still being integrated into the other person's social networks:

"Who was that?"

"Umm, a friend ... of a guy I used to date."

"Oh really? Is he here too?"

"Umm, yes."

"What does he look like?"

"Umm ... tall."

"Wait, and wearing a black fleece? I think I was behind him in the bathroom line."

Just like that, I was smack in the middle of an issue bound to strike any relationship at some point: the Ex Factor. No matter whom you're dating or for how long, the clash of past and present is inevitable, especially in big-yet-small cities like Atlanta, where social circles overlap like Olympic rings. Furthermore, how you handle the Ex Factor can play a major role in whether your current relationship ultimately flourishes or falls into the doomed Ex Files itself.

It's a necessary evil that requires from all parties a tricky combination of truthfulness and tact, self-confidence and reassurance. But I haven't had much success mastering the formula, especially when I'm the current girlfriend meeting another from the past. I'm a Scorpio, and that infamous jealous streak unfortunately rears its nasty green head at mentions or mementos of former flames.

In college I had a disturbing obsession with my long-term boyfriend's previous girlfriend. They were still friends after dating for years, and despite his patient, constant assertions that I was the one he wanted to be with, I never could erase images of them, happily coupled, from my mind. I remember scouring his desk drawers for photos, love letters or any tangible indication that he still had feelings for her. All I ended up discovering was that he couldn't maintain the tiring task of reassuring me, and it was a major sticking point in our relationship.

I've grown up a lot since then, but I still have trouble with exes. Interestingly

enough, the aforementioned Buckhead bar situation eerily echoed one a while ago that involved me, this particular ex and *his* ex. In a frightening "Melrose Place" kind of way, my then-current guy's ex was—and still is—dating a good friend of mine (still following?). I knew it was only a matter of time before we'd all run into each other, but when it finally happened one night I still wasn't fully prepared. His ex and my friend, the still-current couple, walked in, he talked with her briefly, and that was that. But from then on, things took a turn for the worse for us. Whether it was my own insecurities, or that he really wasn't over her or other issues entirely, I'm not quite sure. All I know is that night was the beginning of the end.

While staying friends with an ex involves its own set of complications, one of the trickiest components of the Ex Factor is that initial face-to-face contact with your significant other's former love interest. Think of all the powerful emotions that can bubble up when we first attach a face and a live presence to the person who once stood in our shoes: relief ("I'm much better-looking than he/she is"); anxiety ("He/she is much better looking than I am"); confusion ("We're polar opposites—how in the hell could he/she date people so different?").

Furthermore, in that instant, an ex transforms from a blurry vision to a tangible, breathing being—and one who used to bump uglies with the very person we're holding hands with. Show me a person who's 100 percent at ease with that realization and I'll show you a child safety group that's promoting Britney Spears as its spokesperson.

Somehow, my guy and I managed to handle the recent bar situation beautifully. I have to admit he and my ex never actually met—forcing that meeting may have been awkward, and thankfully guys don't find the need to chat each other up in bathroom lines like women do. We shared a laugh over the situation and continued looking for our friends.

We never did find them, which could have served as a welcome distraction from any possible friction. It turns out we didn't need one. We lost track of time as we discussed blues music, traveling the world and plans for the next day. Sipping my Stella, I realized that sometimes, seeing someone from your past helps you fully appreciate your present. And when you make that discovery, an ex doesn't have to be much of a factor at all. **SP**

Blane Bachelor is a full-time freelance writer who covers travel, health and lifestyles. E-mail her at blanebachelor@sundaypaper.com.

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