

THE EX FACTOR

Photo: Graef

Adam Beresford EXPLORES THE STORIES OF FOUR COUPLES WHO MADE THE LEAP FROM RELATIONSHIP TO FRIENDSHIP. HE STARTS WITH HIS OWN STORY

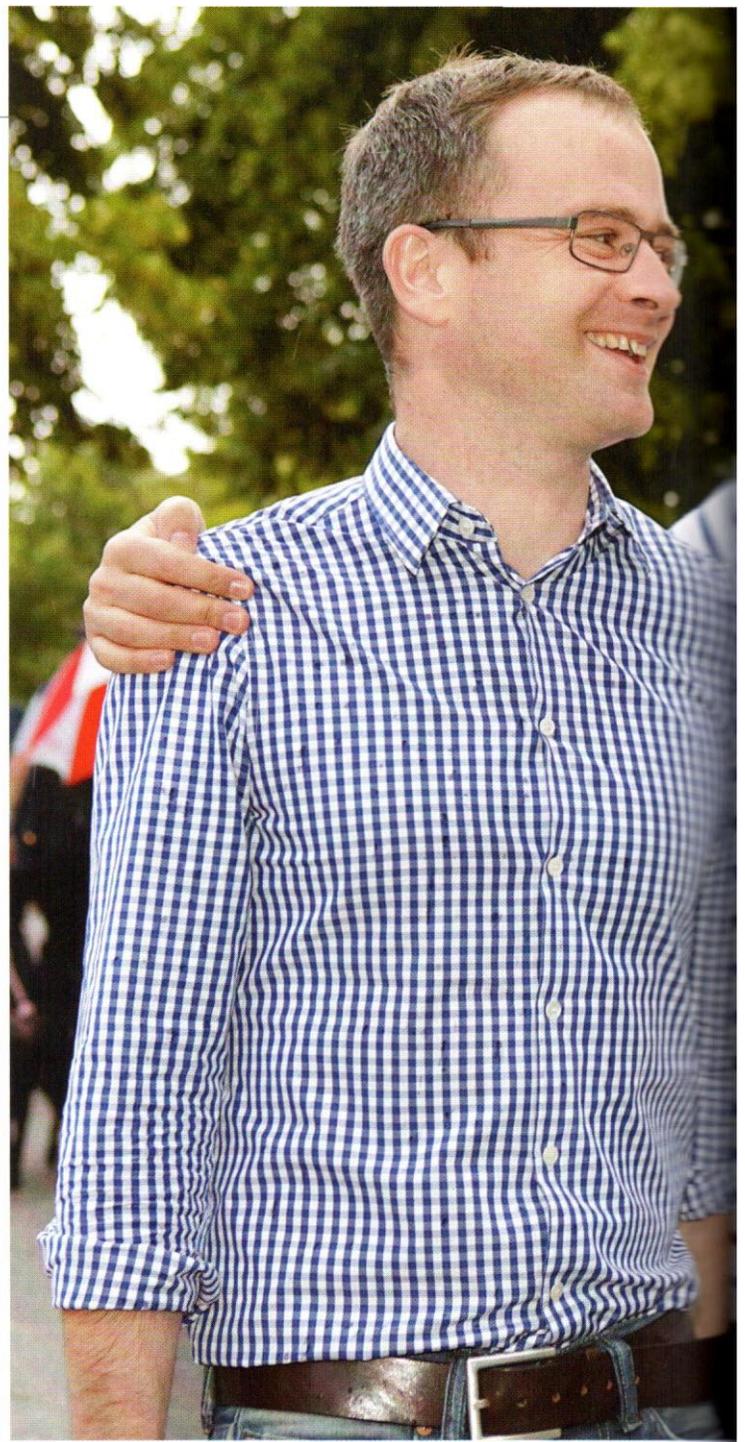
Andy Gordon and Adam Beresford, both 35, London
Matt Tilley, 42, Perth, Western Australia

The Bad Idea Bears are, on the surface, just two adorable little teddy bears. Princeton, the main character in the 'Sesame Street for grown-ups' musical *Avenue Q*, soon discovers that they are there to lead him on. Receiving some money from his parents, the male bear encourages him to 'Have another beer!' while the female one wails, 'I'm gonna cry!'

I watched *Avenue Q* for the first time a couple of years ago, along with my own personal Bad Idea Bears. They definitely have my best interests at heart, but when Andy, my partner of 10 years, and Matt, my first boyfriend, get together, a 'quiet coffee' usually ends with me drunkenly whimpering that it's way past bedtime and can we please go home now?

I was 20 and living in Perth, Western Australia, in 1996, when I met then 22-year-old psychology student Matt. An instant attraction was evident, and a tumultuous and passionate relationship ensued. Perth's only gay nightclub was the location of our first meeting. It would also play host to tears and tantrums over the next couple of years as we played a game of on again/off again.

Matt recalls, 'I was probably further along because I'd had one long-term relationship and I was older. But I was also very 'party-



orientated'. Developmentally I think we were at a similar stage.'

It's fair to say that following my non-experimental teenage years, I experienced a second adolescence from around 19 to 23, especially where boys were concerned. I remind Matt that he used to call me Princess Rubberneck. He replies, 'I just remember calling you Princess, period!'

After leaving Perth on my own for the UK in 1998, I returned in early January 2000. Matt and I rekindled our relationship, but in April I headed off to Melbourne for more than a year. We had a holiday there and broke up for the last time. He couldn't really speak to me for months afterward - he needed that distance.

Matt says, 'Post-break-up, with something that had so much emotion, the distance was important. That was a defining moment for me, we'd been on and off for so long. There's also an element of when somebody doesn't want what you want, you want it more.'



DR. JOE KORT SAYS

How do you respect an ex when he tells you he needs a period of no contact with you? Says Dr. Joe, 'By complying! It is normal to need, and take, time away from each other. Research shows that this allows the brain to detach from your ex and find new neuro pathways to resolve the hurt and anger. I highly recommend time with no contact, especially when the break-up is very emotionally painful.'

In July 2001 I returned to London, and in November of that year I met Andy. Matt and I didn't have a great deal of contact for a couple of years, and I believe that this time and distance (along with us both meeting new partners) was essential to us establishing a new friendship.

When I took Andy to Australia for the first time in 2004, it was clear to Matt that I had 'grown up'. What soon became clear to me was that Matt and Andy had several similar personality traits. Scarily so! What was great - when they weren't ganging up or taking the piss out of me - was how well they got along. Luckily, I have also bonded with Cipri, Matt's partner of eight years.

Andy agrees. 'We're three people who really enjoy spending time together. We have a blast and have quite in-depth conversations and we do everything together. I'd count Matt as one of my closest friends even though he's in Australia.'

Matt's work as a sexology lecturer has meant that he has been in Europe to attend conferences on an annual basis for the past three years. During this time, the three of us have visited my home town, Blackpool, where I finally got to introduce Matt to my grandparents, and this summer we spent three nights in Barcelona.

I'm very fortunate still to be great friends with the first man I fell in love with. At times in the distant past that may have seemed impossible. But our shared world views and values, plus some of the characteristics that initially made us 'click', have seen us through.

I ask Matt what he considers vital to making the leap from relationship to friendship. 'Forgiveness and humility. You can't hold on to the hurt. There are two parties involved in the relationship. Both will be at fault for the relationship ending, at some level. You need to own what belongs to you, and not hold on to a grudge or feel hard done by, and recognise what was valuable in the relationship.'



Douglas Chambers, 27, and Andrew Mould, 28 Glasgow

When meeting these two Scotsmen, you immediately notice that they are tall, dark and handsome. And it's the height aspect (both are 6ft 2in) that proved a strong draw on their first meeting. 'Everybody in Glasgow's Sft 8in, so it was nice to meet somebody who was also tall,' says Douglas.

A Gaydar-arranged meet for a drink over the festive period a couple of years ago led to a series of dates. 'It was casual dating more than boyfriends,' elaborates Douglas. 'But all my friends knew I was seeing someone. We hit it off quickly, there was a similar sense of humour. It's all about the banter.'

After a couple of months, Douglas says the pair thought, 'Hmmm, maybe not. That spark that was just missing. One of the strange things was that, on paper, everything made sense, but there wasn't that something extra.'

After a mutual decision to call time on their fledgling relationship, a two-month period of not seeing each other followed. Andrew credits technology with helping them maintain contact. 'Twitter probably rescued the friendship. I was having a rubbish time, had lost my job. It's soul destroying when you're applying for jobs, but he'd take me out for coffee and invite me out for drinks to take my mind off it. Real-life problems got us over the break-up awkwardness.'

Douglas adds, 'I'm happy that Andrew's in my life. It helped that we had a bit of time initially to have space and then when we were both OK with it to come back together. That made a difference. You can't go straight from one to the other.'

Andrew agrees 'Douglas is a good person ... you want to keep people like that in your life.'

Reaction from friends has been positive but inquisitive - 'So, what, are you having sex?' being a popular question. When asked if friends wondered if one of them was still holding a torch for the other, Douglas firmly replies with, 'We weren't'.

A summer holiday to Lanzarote fuelled speculation again, says Andrew. 'I think the holiday was a big thing for everybody, they were like "Oh did anything happen on the holiday?" It didn't. We went to a wedding together recently. I'd have no hesitation in asking Douglas to do the same for me. He knows he has to come to the next wedding that I'm invited to!'

While both guys are comfortable with their status as 'friends who briefly dated', it can still cause the odd awkward moment. Douglas recently dated someone and took his new bloke to meet Andrew.

'Douglas told me his name was Chris and he was a doctor, and I was like, "Right, I have slept with a Dr Chris before, but it's not gonna be him. He's another 6ft 2in dark-haired guy." It turned out to be the same guy.'

'I texted Douglas later because if it was going anywhere I needed to say what had happened. Honesty is the best policy.'

Douglas's Dr Chris 'didn't mention it', apparently.

Andrew adds, 'Everybody knows everybody in Glasgow, it's a total six degrees of separation.'

'It's not even six,' deadpans Douglas, 'it's two-and-a-half.'

DR JOE KORT SAYS

What if you have 'overlapped' and find you have slept with an ex-boyfriend's new love interest?

Dr Joe says, 'I have had some clients in this very position. I think the best thing to do is to come clean and tell your ex that you have a history with his new love interest so that if it comes out later it is not a shock or surprise and he won't feel betrayed.'



Ian Barrett, 39, Frank Abbott, 31, and Andrew Pratt, 44 Harrogate, North 'Y'orkshire

ne of Frank Abbott's favourite photos was taken last year, on a driving holiday in the US. At Atlantic City's famous slot machines are three men, smiling away and clearly having a ball. Yet the path to New Jersey's gambling mecca began for Frank over a decade earlier, and took some twists en route.

'Andrew and I met in 1998. I was working at the Bradford Hilton. I'd spotted him before, he's very tall, blond and striking. I met him in a nightclub once and it went from there.'

After four months, Frank moved to nearby Harrogate to live with Andrew in a flat above his hairdressing salon. 'It was a very zood time of my life, I was young and I grew up with Andrew. He taught me a lot. He lived quite an extravagant life, a lot of travelling, socialising, he knew a heck of a lot of people.'

Five years later tragedy intervened when Andrew's best friend died. 'It was a really bad time for me. And then Frank asked me to marry him about two weeks later, on the London Eye. And I hate the damn thing! He asked me at the top of that, and I felt quite ill already. It was all a bit of a shock, so I said yes and this wedding sort of took over. It did help with my grieving, it was exciting.'

A grand wedding at Allerton Castle followed and a honeymoon in the Maldives. Frank and Andrew took the whole thing very seriously, but did not refer to each other as husbands.

However, within a year Frank decided to end things. Says Andrew, 'Obviously we did split up, which sounds ridiculous. But when I'd thought about what I wanted, this wasn't it. There was an age gap and his immaturity got on my wick. I just wanted to be on my own at that time.' It would be three years before they spoke again.

ine months after the break-up Frank met new partner Ian on

Gaydar. 'We ended up moving in about four months later,' he says.

Meanwhile Frank's sister Gemma, who had long since become Andrew's best friend, became single and moved in with him. 'Frank's parents would come over too,' says Andrew. 'I love his mum and dad, so that helped, that support.'

After three years of Gemma having to ensure Andrew and Frank didn't cross paths, one night it just happened. Says Frank, 'I just went straight up to Andrew and said "Hi, how you doing?" It was a bit awkward but we both said, "Why haven't we spoken in such a long time?" It was all very friendly, we got chatting. It was funny how quickly we settled into becoming friends.'

Dinner at Ian and Frank's soon after helped establish a new friendship. 'Ian thought Andrew was a nice guy,' says Frank. 'I'd made it clear that if Ian found it uncomfortable ... but he was fine.'

While some friends found it strange that the exes were friends again, and that Andrew and Ian got along so well, the trio were having too much fun to care. 'Some people found it weird, like it was a threesome situation, but it isn't,' says Andrew.

While Frank and Andrew are clearly delighted to have moved on to a rewarding friendship, Ian (who has been with Frank eight years now) is also pleased with the situation. 'It's worked out great. I've gained a new friend,' he says. He and Andrew are now colleagues, too, as they work at the same hairdresser's.

DR JOE KORT SAYS

For those who live in a small town and are worried about bumping into an ex, Dr Joe advises, 'If the ex is reasonable it might be good to set up boundaries together about how to handle future contact with each other. If the ex is not willing or able to do this, then a simple bello in passing is best. No drama. No games. Just a simple bello like you would give an assistant the same courtesy in a sbop.'

JOE KORT

POINTERS ON HOW TO KEEP CALM AFTER A BREAK-UP AND CARRY ON, IF YOU WANT TO

Is it soorb trying to be friends with all your exes?

Yes, because if you can work things out so that you can remain friends, it makes it more likely that whatever contributed to the break-up won't be brought into the next relationship. If you carry bitterness, anger and unresolved issues from your past relationship you will very likely bring them into the next one.

Is something wrong with me if I can't/won't be friends with my exes?

Not necessarily. There are some exes with whom is isn't worth trying to remain friends. It can also be that being friends is too painful, and keeping the relationship at a distance may be the best thing to do for your own personal recovery. It is good, however, to assess within yourself why you don't want to be friends with your ex. Lesbians are excellent examples regarding remaining friends with their exes. As women, they value the friendship formed deeply long after the romance has died. Men have a lot to learn from this.

When is it best to cut them loose (ie, if they baee hurt you" messed you around)?

If they lack accountability and blame you for all the problems in the relationship and cannot see their own contribution to its downfall. Or if there was infidelity and they won't accept that what they did was wrong, or offer an a~empt at understanding why they did it.

How do you avoid looking on their Facebook/ Twitter?

I recommend blocking them on Facebook for a while. Defriending them doesn't work well as your friends may post something on their wall, tag them in a picture, or your ex may do the same, and then you end up seeing it, causing the hurt to surface all over again. Terminating your connection on Twitter is also a good idea for a while.

Mikev East, 26, and Dan Stanley, 23 Brighton

'I think we're shining examples!' says Dan Stanley at the end of our interview. This quip, along with DJ Dan's assertion that he changed Mikey's taste in music 'for the better' after they met in early 2007,



suggests that these two exes have just laughed their way to a stronz friendship. But there's a deeper bond here.

'I was born with cystic fibrosis and was quite ill for the first 10 years of my life,' says Mikey. 'I've also got diabetes and weak bones so am still in and out of hospital to some degree. Every morning I do some physio to clear my chest and take handfuls of drugs. Dan needed to do the physio on my chest. We almost didn't get together because my life expectancy at the time was so short.'

The longest period Mikey spent in hospital during his two-year relationship with Dan was five months. Happily, his health has greatly improved, which he partly credits to Dan. 'He told me a couple oftimes that I needed to look after myself. I stopped drinkin just after I met Dan.'



DR JOE KORT SAYS

Jealousy is very normal when a new boyfriend arrives. Says Dr Joe, 'In my office the most common concern I bear is that the new boyfriend will get a better version of their ex. In other words, the concern is that the ex might have learned how to be a better partner - the type they wanted him to be for them - and so the fear is that he is giving the better self to the new partner and not to them.'

... Mikey had found it hard to meet someone on the gay scene who could cope with his health issues. Dan tells him, 'It just really upset me that you were in this position. It wasn't so much that I thought I couldn't handle it, it's just the whole idea of it really, really upset me. But then we chatted about it.'

I think that made us closer: agrees Mikey. 'He visited me in hospital, did my physio. No one had been given the chance to look after me when I was ill, and he did.'

The boys enjoyed a 'passionate relationship', says Dan, who liked the fact that Mikey was a 'wind-up merchant'. Mikey says, 'I like chubby guys and piercings generally. He didn't have all of them -

I ended up buying him half the piercings.' Dan dramatically responds, 'You've got your mark on me - for ever!'

They are vague on the reasons for their split. But of the aftermath, Mikey says, 'There were a few months when we didn't see each other. Brighton's such a small town and we have so many mutual friends that it was really hard not to see each other. We had to get over it or neither of us was going to be able to have a social life.'

They then slept together for six months without getting back together, and then just stopped. Friends were pleased that the two were still mates, as it meant they didn't have to see them separately.

When Dan began seeing a new boy (they've since split up), it was Dan's arguing with Mikey like they were still together that freaked the new boyfriend out. Dan adds, 'He hated Mikey but now they're good friends. He was pissed off when Mikey bought me a Fred Perry shirt. He saw it as him marking his territory. He was livid.'

It's clear that Mikey and Dan have a bond they value. Mikey says, 'I can talk to him about stuff that I wouldn't even tell my mother. I think Dan knows me better than anyone on this planet, and the fact I can still talk to him like that keeps us close.'