

Flicking through the ex file

By Ruth Ostrow

THE phone rings one rainy afternoon. "You don't remember me, do you?" says a deep, male voice.

"Tell me your name and I'll tell you if I remember you," I say, not wanting to play telephone games.

"Sam Smith [not his real name]."

"I'm sorry, I don't know who you are."

"We went out in the late 80s."

"Oh my God! Sam Smith, Sam Smith!" I say, turning the colour of beetroot. My mind suddenly races backwards at breakneck speed. Back like a video on rewind, to dinner last night, then back to last summer, then me in labour, then me getting married, and then a host of men I was dating, and then there he is: Sam Smith.

"Sam Smith!" I moan again into the phone, not knowing what else to say, just a foolish girl again, suddenly single, speaking on the phone to a man who was prominent in her life a lifetime ago.

What do you say when someone blows in from the past? An ex-boyfriend? I have never ever known what to do with mine. Marrying late in life, I tend to have accumulated a bit of a collection. And they tend to pop up when you least expect them.

Two recently found me via the Internet. Another dropped by over Christmas and ended up staying a week. Yet another has moved just around the corner. Which has proved most challenging. And here is Sam Smith. Out of the blue.

"Ruth, I'm on holidays here. I met a mutual friend who gave me your number. Is it okay if I drop in?"

"Sam Smith..." I say quietly under my breath before getting a grip and rooting myself in this present dilemma. Or calamity. I'm not sure which.

"I'm married now, with a child," I say in a bid to gauge a reaction.

"Great," he says. "I never married. Still looking for that perfect woman."

"Well, do come over then," I say brightly, before hanging up and going into shock.

The first thing I do is go to the mirror. It is such a female impulse, and I'm angry at myself. But I have to see who I am now. Compared to who I was.

Does it show on my face? The years of sleepless nights devoted to a child. The years of hard work, and hard living. How bad is the damage after 12 years? I try to remember who I was then. Did I wear my hair shorter? Was I slimmer? Fitter?

He never married, and I wonder if that makes for a better defence against ageing. They say married men are healthier than single ones, although I think marriage just fattens men up. Women tend to overfeed them so they have less stamina to go waddling off.

Anyway, the mirror is being kind today. Good hair day. Which is excellent. Mind you, remembering he never had that much, I give up worrying. I go to my husband sheepishly to tell him the news.

"An ex-boyfriend is popping in," I say.

"Oh no. Not another one," he sighs. "Where do they all come from?"

Emerging from one, long, previous marriage, he is confused. I explain that keeping exes as close friends is normal in my peerage: cusp-Generation-Xers. We came of age in the era of free love.

But he also knows I'm a terrible hoarder. It's a real and almost pathological problem I have, keeping junk by the box-load. And, not surprisingly, I hoard people, too. I have never been able to say goodbye, as fragments of my past wedge themselves in my present.

But this isn't just about me. It is an age-old dilemma. What do we do with our exes? With more of us marrying late into our 30s, it isn't as if we haven't had previous important relationships.

Most of the people I know have had at least a handful of meaningful encounters, if not a divorce or two. And once we make deep connections with people in our adult years, what is to be gained by tossing out the friendship with the sexual affair? Just because someone is not "the one" doesn't mean those special hours of conversing, getting to know the family, loving, ever go away.

We treasure our mementos and photos but not the people who are closest to our hearts -- the living witnesses to our life experiences and precious moments.

We obviously have much in common that remains after a break-up. But it gets sacrificed in this impossibly monogamous, possessive world where our current loves get jealous of our old loves, and we get jealous of their old loves.

You can't simply negate 30 years of life. And part of the silliness is that exes would surely share similar interests with current loves. For instance, having recovered from the initial shock, my husband has grown very fond of my exes. Reading over my shoulder, he adds that they are "really interesting, intelligent men" and that several have become his closest friends.

Of course they have. Common interests are the golden thread. Take sex and sexual jealousy out of the equation, by allowing our own and our partners' intimate friendships to thrive, we expand our group of soulmates -- people on this planet with similar life paths and philosophies. Which is actually helpful to a relationship. No one person can satisfy all our needs.

Sam Smith arrives. "Ruth, you haven't aged a day!" he says, and I remember why I liked him. He looks great too, confirming my view on the perils of marriage for men.

My husband sits down and they immediately become embroiled in a conversation about new age religions and ecstatic bliss. I like my men spiritual.

We natter about old times and rediscover the rich tapestry of friendship. As the three of us talk into the late afternoon, I know that we have inherited a new "old friend".

"I'm going to move up here!" he declares finally. "It is paradise."

"Yes," says my husband. "Why not? We'll help you set up!"

As we wave Sam on his way, I squeeze my husband's hand in tenderness. He has no cause for jealousy. We both know that. I'd never trade a rare man who gives me total freedom to be myself.

By removing the shackles, the man I love gives me no reason to want to break free from them. It's a lesson I wish the world would learn.

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