

GRIEVING FOR THE FRIENDSHIP

I never wanted TO END



Being spurned by a close friend is the worst kind of rejection, says Emma Laurence, but it's a valuable lesson in relationships, life, and knowing when to quit

You can't always pinpoint the end of a friendship. Mostly, life intervenes and we just drift apart, held together for a while by Facebook reminders and we-must-do-this-more-often – until the last thread wears so thin it simply falls away. But I can tell you the exact moment my friendship with Abby* ended, because it happened in an email, a time-stamped digital missive that's still sitting, ironically, in my 'friends' folder.

I've never been dumped by email before. Call me old-fashioned, but I always thought a proper relationship deserved a proper ending. And this *was* a proper relationship. Okay, we weren't lovers, but for six years we'd laughed together, cried together and, six months ago, walked down the aisle together at my wedding.

Not long after, my new husband's job brought us to Dubai. Sean and I had just weeks to pack up our lives and say our goodbyes. When we shared our last London pint with friends one grey December afternoon, a few days before the move, it was Abby who shed the most tears. I held her tight and she promised to visit in the spring. It didn't feel like goodbye.

The next few weeks were dizzying. We were living out of eight suitcases in a strange, at times deeply

bewildering, place. I was trying to find a job as well as a home for us, while Sean was out at work all day, and I knew no-one. It hurt that my attempts to reach Abby were met with silence but I sensed she was down – as was often the case when one of us went quiet – so I kept the messages light and waited for her to bite.

WHEN SHE FINALLY DID, SHE TOLD ME SHE'D BEEN UPSET WITH ME FOR MONTHS BUT NEVER FOUND THE RIGHT TIME TO MENTION IT. Not on my hen weekend in Ibiza, when we'd danced till our limbs were numb and our hearts full, not when she'd pressed a collage of pictures of us together into my hand before the wedding, and not when we'd clung to each other on that winter's day, already planning her first trip to Dubai.

The email was an ultimatum of sorts – either

“ I ALWAYS THOUGHT a proper relationship deserved a PROPER ENDING. And this was a proper relationship

I apologise for something I couldn't remember doing or, well, there was no 'or'. Somewhere in between all the dancing and delirium of Ibiza, Abby had decided I'd acted 'displeased' with her and embarrassed her in front of the group. I forced myself to reread her words over and over even though they made me feel sick; replayed the whole weekend in my head; implored everyone who'd been there to tell me if I'd thrown a hideous bridezilla strop and somehow erased it from memory, but we all drew a blank.

It was as if, on our way back from the island, we had splintered off on two parallel but miles-apart »



trajectories, *Sliding Doors* style. In my world we were as close as ever but in Abby's, our friendship had unravelled, and when I opened her email the two became one again and my version of us – the only one I knew – disappeared.

Back when Abby and I became friends, we were very much on the same course. We met at work, bonding over a shared hatred of our jobs and a shared history of crappy boyfriends, crazy families and occasional depression. Although our views on everything from sex to politics were wildly different, we sensed in each other a kindred spirit – that rare and precious thing that makes a friend a soulmate.

Fast-forward two years and we both had new jobs, and new men. Mine went on to become my husband; Abby's broke her heart. I was there for her – Sean and I both were – but my happiness hung unwittingly in the air, and I could see that it stung. I knew well the knife twist of yet another friend getting engaged/pregnant/promoted but I was always truly happy for them, even when my own circumstances felt desperately unfair by comparison. After all, our path in life is no-one's responsibility but our own.

Until I asked Abby to be my bridesmaid, though, we rarely quarrelled. She became increasingly prickly about the hen do, in particular, complaining that she'd had to cancel another holiday because she couldn't afford both. I offered to help out – for me, it wasn't about the money – but I think this only made her resent me more.

Resentment, jealousy – it feels so unbearably presumptuous however you say it, but I can't find another explanation that fits. I thought our friendship was strong enough to withstand anything, but perhaps I just wanted that to be true. Or perhaps we'd come to the end of our story and I'd been so busy, so content, I hadn't noticed. We had gravitated towards each other in a darker time, and now she couldn't reconcile my happy ending with her work in progress.

I TRIED TO REASON WITH HER OVER EMAIL EVEN THOUGH I ALREADY KNEW IT WAS OVER; she never even bothered to reply. It was devastating, but in some ways it was also a relief. I no longer have to feel guilty for getting on with my life, and if she needs to pin the demise of our relationship on me, that's fine. This isn't my first experience of a friendship fading.

Abby is the fourth friend who's broken up with me in adult life, though the first time it was technically me that did the dumping. My friend had experienced unbearable loss and I bore the brunt of her pain. We needed a cooling-off period; today, she's one of my most

treasured friends. The second time involved being squared up to in a club for reasons I still don't fully understand – I blame hormones and tequila. This one took longer to heal but we've made our peace now, too. Number three was like a holiday romance: we fell hard and fast, our lust fuelled by endless, intoxicating nights and duvet days, but fizzled out when I (shock horror) got a boyfriend. It took me years to realise she'd actually already ended it but didn't know how to tell me.

WHY IS IT THAT WHEN A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP GOES WRONG, AT SOME POINT WE ALWAYS KNOW WHEN TO QUIT, but when a friendship isn't working

any more we skirt around the issue? Maybe it's because relationships demand a physical break – there's property to return, financial ties to sever, mutual friends to claim. But the things that bind friendships together are less tangible – so when they come undone, someone has to actually call it. And none of us wants to admit we've

“ I thought our friendship was STRONG enough to withstand ANYTHING but perhaps I just wanted that to be true

failed at something so basic toddlers can do it. At school I was bullied pretty much constantly. A swot with fat knees and tears that came too easily, I made an obvious target. Since then, the emotional tendencies and the studiousness have served me well (and I've learned to live with the knees). I care about things, and about

people; about doing a good job and being a good friend. Which is why I'm letting Abby go. I have always loved generously and unconditionally, and expected the same in return. I've been disappointed often. But like all relationships, a friendship must be nurtured, and if the other person won't meet you halfway, it can only survive so long.

After the sixth or seventh round of bullying, I remember my mum, exasperated, saying something like, “All these people can't have it in for you – have you ever thought *you* might be the problem?” I might well have been, insofar as I was weak: too trusting; too sensitive; desperate, by that point, just to be liked. But the bullies and, later, the failed friends made me strong. I'm proud of the fact that my friendships now are as few as they are fabulous. Life is too short and too wonderful to spend a second of it on people who don't want to be in your gang.

They say that people come into your life for a reason, a season or a lifetime, and the last six months have proved beyond question who the lifers are. As for Abby, I believe that we were absolutely meant to meet when we did, and I hope she feels the same way. Maybe we'll be friends again someday, maybe we won't, but whatever happens I hope that the seasons are kind to her, as they have been to me. I have six years of summers to thank her for. ■

For more friendship stories, visit REDONLINE.CO.UK