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{COLUMNIST} DANIEL BARNES

Daniel Barnes has a day job as a philosopher and art critic, but his social life is a one-man mission to explore the depths and excesses of 21st-century gay life. This column offers a glimpse into his misadventures, such as **The Time I Was Best Man...**



I was recently honoured to be best man for my friend Anna. Since she is a wild child of Soviet Russia and her wife is a cool Californian girl, so the wedding was a riot of precision-engineered shenanigans. But I was an emotional wreck throughout, partly overwhelmed by the occasion and partly owing to the presence of my Main Ex.

I call him my Main Ex because he makes the other exes pale into insignificance. It all began a decade ago in Nottingham, where I met him and Anna, and indeed all of my best friends. He meant more to me than the universe and sometimes I still wonder if it could have lasted a lifetime if all the stars had aligned differently. The end of the relationship was brutal: I just walked out one summer night and we never talked about it, accepting that it was never going to work, even after seven years of trying. We haven't spoken for three years.

I had begged my hairdresser to be my date, but he pointed out that replacing one Middle Eastern boy with another is a sure sign of not being over the first one. So I went solo to the ceremony at Chelsea Old Town Hall and my friend Anika joined me off a plane from Croatia, only a few minutes late. The whole Nottingham crowd was reunited, a motley crew of characters gathered to celebrate the marriage of Anna and her Californian belle. It was heartbreakingly beautiful from start to finish.

It was fantastic to see everyone and I hardly gave a second thought to the Main Ex, who was keeping out of my way as studiously as I was keeping out of his. Then, at the reception on the Hackney Riviera, it dawned on me that his guest was his boyfriend. I had assumed that our traumatic experience and his enduring

love for me would ensure he'd never have another boyfriend again. A toxic mixture of indignation and prosecco overturned my self-imposed ban on talking to him, and I resolved to say hello to them.

Since they sat opposite Anika and I at dinner, I thought that would be the moment when all the bitterness would dissolve and two adults would reconnect. But after a minute or two, the Main Ex and his boyfriend moved tables. Although it hurt just a tiny bit, it was probably for the best since his ghastly tie would have undoubtedly added another layer of complexity to my attempts to talk to him. Then, as if on cue to distract me, the barman who I'd been ruthlessly flirting with led me into the toilets. In hushed tones, he explained that as best man it was my duty to rescue a puking girl I'd never met, which was not at all what I had been hoping for.

As I was delivering my speech a while later, I'm sure I caught the Main Ex

gazing at me with some affection. So, since I was outside smoking when they left, I thought I'd say goodbye, but they blanked me. And as they did so, the Main Ex took his boyfriend's hand and off they sauntered into the sunset. I couldn't help thinking that in all those years he never once held my hand. Drink in hand, I locked myself in the toilet to come to terms with the fact that someone else had the very thing I fought so hard for and ultimately lost forever.

The reception descended into hedonism, with tequilas all round and Anika, as usual, offering a bounty on the DJ's head. Before we were thrown out, we ransacked the bar for an after party that lasted into the early hours. We danced and drank until I fell into a stranger's bed and realised that it didn't really matter that the Main Ex ignored me. It's a shame he was unable to bury the past, but I acted with dignity, emerging unscathed as the best man of all. ■



Illustration: Paul Tuller