
June 4, 2006

Coveting Thy Neighbor's Ex

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LOS ANGELES

EVEN for a celebrity, Denise Richards seemed to have crossed a line.

"Why would anyone ever do that?" one reader wrote to [usmagazine.com](#) about the actress.

"Sick and twisted," wrote another. "The ultimate betrayal," said yet another.

No, Ms. Richards did not illegally wiretap Charlie Sheen's phone to bolster her current divorce case against him, or even run off with a co-star.

Rather, she did something far worse in the eyes of many: She went out with her friend's ex.

In romancing her close friend Heather Locklear's estranged husband, the Bon Jovi guitarist Richie Sambora, Ms. Richards broke a cardinal rule of friendship, putting her in the company of cads and backstabbers, some relationship experts contend. (It didn't help that the two, seen cavorting on the Amalfi coast in Italy after Ms. Richards joined Mr. Sambora on tour with Bon Jovi in Europe, seemed to be flaunting their newfound happiness.)

Even a new beer commercial, of all things, flirts briefly with the idea that pursuing a friend's former flame violates an unspoken rule. "Your best friend gets dumped by a girl. How long is she off limits?" a man in a cowboy hat asks a group of men sitting around a table drinking Miller Lite.

The answer, delivered by Burt Reynolds, is "forever," until someone asks, "What if she's drop-dead gorgeous?"

"O.K.," Mr. Reynolds concedes. "Six months."

The banter illustrates the almost reflexive distaste for recycling love partners among friends, but it also exposes an ugly truth: Psychotherapists, love coaches and other relationship experts say hooking up with a friend's former partner is common, even almost unavoidable in some social circles, no matter how unseemly and objectionable it might look from the outside.

A harmonious friendship, after all, doesn't keep the bed warm.

"If you feel this could be a soul mate and that's why you're pursuing it, then all is fair in love and war," said Nancy Slotnick, a relationship coach in New York. "I tend to be biased toward having a happy love life."

But if love trumps friendship, why the stigma?

Dating a friend's ex-lover or former spouse is technically not really so bad — not in the same category as

say, adultery, or making a pass at a current partner. But those who have been there say it provokes strong reactions on all sides, even self-loathing, because friendship is held as a sacred bond. Breaking that bond not only is disloyal, some maintain, but ignores emotional realities like the certain sense of ownership that people feel toward their exes.

"Heather Locklear is going through this terrible divorce, and out of all the men in the world, Denise Richards chooses to date her husband," said Hilary Black, editor in chief of *Tango*, a women's magazine focused on love and relationships. "It violates the code of female friendship." (Ms. Locklear, it should be noted, is not exactly sitting home crying into the Kleenex, and has been spotted hanging out with the actor David Spade.)

Matthew Hiltzik, a publicist for Ms. Richards, declined to talk about the specifics of her relationship with Mr. Sambora, but said that although she and Ms. Locklear had been good friends for several years, they had "a falling out" last January over an unrelated matter. He said Ms. Richards and Mr. Sambora started dating last March, after Ms. Locklear had already filed for divorce.

"Had they still been friends, this likely wouldn't have happened," Mr. Hiltzik said.

"It's not as if she pursued it," he said of the relationship. "It just happened."

Aymii Couzelis, 33, of Norwalk, Conn., said she couldn't help feeling "a little bit sneaky, guilty" when she decided to flirt back with someone a good friend had dated and was still pursuing. She went for it, she said, because "I'm at a point in my life where I want to be in a relationship."

"It's such a priority in my life," Ms. Couzelis said.

First, she asked the man point-blank if he was interested in her friend. The answer was no.

"If there was a chance of a relationship between them, I wouldn't have gone after him," said Ms. Couzelis, chief information officer with a software development company.

After the couple's first weekend together, she called her friend, made sure it was a good time to talk, then dropped the bombshell as tactfully as she could.

"I told her: 'What I have with him is something I feel very deeply about. I didn't expect I'd feel this way,'" Ms. Couzelis said. On the other end, silence. Ms. Couzelis said that eventually, her friend said she was disappointed, but joked that she now expected Ms. Couzelis to look out for her and let her know if the new boyfriend had any "cute friends."

Despite the levity, though, the two hardly see each other anymore, and their weekly phone conversations have stopped. "There's definitely been a pulling back," said Ms. Couzelis, who is still seeing the man.

Jan Yager, a sociologist and the author of "When Friendship Hurts: How to Deal With Friends Who Betray, Abandon or Wound You," said this kind of triangle is one of the harder perceived betrayals to deal with among both men and women because "outside the nuclear family, friends and romantic partners are the strongest relationships anyone has."

The feeling that a friend is switching alliances is often at the heart of why such friendships break apart, say divorce lawyers and relationship experts, but there is also a more primal explanation.

"It's icky," said Sharyn T. Sooho, a divorce lawyer and a founder of a Web site for people going through divorce, divorcenet.com. "It's another question about your own judgment. 'The person I thought to be my best friend and I thought was there for me was there for him.' "

A 66-year-old Massachusetts lawyer said he felt "angry and disappointed" when his wife started seeing one of his best friends as the couple were going through their divorce in the late 1980's.

"It's a multiple infidelity," said the lawyer, who was given anonymity so he would share details about his private life.

The lawyer, whose two daughters stayed with him, said he wondered if his wife had taken up with his friend to spite him. Or whether the two had started their relationship before the breakup. Or whether their relationship, which continues today, hastened the demise of his 18-year marriage.

He also wondered what was said behind his back by two people he had trusted. "Are they whispering what a jerk I am?" he said, adding that the friendship did not survive.

Even when romantic liaisons are brief, resentment can run deep. Molly Neiseld, 20, a journalism student at Point Park University in Pittsburgh and an intern at Girls' Life magazine, said that in the 10th grade she dated a boy for a month and later heard that the friend who had helped them come together was dating him. She said she didn't hold a grudge against the ex, but did against the friend.

"Friends are supposed to help you through the breakup, and you're supposed to forget about the guy," she said. "Friends are not supposed to steal the guy from under you."

Recycled partners are a staple of the young Hollywood social circuit, of course, with bachelors like Wilmer Valderrama and Stavros Niarchos exchanged as casually as air kisses. Mr. Niarchos, for instance, has gone from Mary-Kate Olsen to Paris Hilton to Lindsay Lohan in the click of a paparazzo's shutter.

But the passing around of partners after a divorce or a breakup is also fairly common to other cliquish environments like suburban neighborhoods, country clubs and churches, and is especially prevalent during the hormonally charged high school years.

A 20-year-old college student from Baltimore who would share details about her love life only if she spoke anonymously said she dated her old boyfriend's best friend when she was in high school, where sharing partners was common, and even almost expected.

"It was a close group of friends, and at that age you don't really venture out too far, so your choice is limited," she said.

The student said that at that age she wasn't thinking about consequences, the worst being that the two boys ended their friendship even though her relationship with the best friend lasted only weeks.

"I felt most guilty about the friendship being over," she said. "Now relationships mean to me a lot more than they did when I was younger."

Sometimes, a friendship can withstand such a test, and there are cases in which friends even give their blessings to the relationships.

When Eric Clapton, for instance, fell in love with Pattie Boyd, the wife of his good friend George Harrison and the inspiration for Mr. Clapton's brooding classic "Layla," and later married her, the friendship between the men endured.

There is no etiquette on how to date a friend's ex-partner. After all, how do you drive through a minefield? But a safe way to break the news and help avoid emotional mayhem, some experts say, is to focus on the capriciousness of the heart.

"I want you to know what's going on," Ms. Yager, the sociologist, suggests as a script. "I hope this is something you can handle. I'm not doing this to hurt you."

Then be prepared to lose the friendship.

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