

'IT WAS A TEXT FROM MY SISTER THAT DID IT

— the one that woke me up on Sunday morning announcing that our cousin (who is the same age as me) had just got engaged. I was pleased for her, really I was, but having spent the previous night at another close friend's engagement party, marriage — or rather my lack of it — had been propelled to the forefront of my mind. 'I was — still am — in a great relationship and in no way ready to start picking out flowers and favours myself (we'd only been together for 18 months), so why was I now feeling a rumbling of discomfort in my stomach? If I'm honest — and, on this subject, it's hard to be — I was experiencing a stab of friend envy. Why wasn't I getting married? Would my boyfriend propose one day? And, maybe more importantly, how was all this "good news" going to change my relationship with these two friends? 'As always, I hated myself for feeling that twinge of mean, because admitting you're not over the proverbial moon when brilliant things happen to your best friends is a bit like saying you didn't cry at *Beaches*, or that someone's newborn is quite ugly, actually. 'Friend envy isn't new — we've been

I'VE GOT

FRIEND ENVY

dealing with it in one form or another since we were kids — but the politics of how we treat it in our thirties are complex. For many of us, friends are the new family, so conflicts become so much more intense. And when they flare up, the feelings you have inevitably take you back to the playground. When I was six, I shouted and cried when one of my friends bagged all the best chocolate from the Easter Egg Hunt, but I'm pretty sure that hitting the ground and wailing was not the way to go that Sunday morning (instead, I went down the sitting-in-front-of-the-*Hollyoaks*-omnibus-and-sulking route, since you ask). 'In my twenties, I turned my green-eyed moments into a wake-up call — if a friend's achievements shone a spotlight on my own insecurities, then I needed to pull myself up by the bootstraps and ▶

So your best friend has just announced she's engaged/having a baby/mortgage-free. You're pleased for her, right? Yes, says writer Charlotte Ward, 30 — but that doesn't stop you being just a teensy bit envious too...

Photography: KATIE KAARS





Charlotte (left) and friend Laura go '80s. Above right: tucking into cupcakes with mate Heather



'When one of my closest friends (and wobbly tum body-double) dropped a dress size, it made me join a gym'

make changes to my life. When a journalist friend of mine, Jenny, got a dream job on a national paper while I was bored in my regional role, it made me apply for jobs in London. When one of my closest friends (and wobbly tum body-double), Laura, dropped a dress size (unveiling a stomach that would have made Liz Hurley cry) two weeks before we went on holiday to Ibiza, it made me join a gym. And when my best friend Claire got married, just as I realised the guy I was with wasn't The One, I found the courage to split up with Mr Wrong. But then, in each of those circumstances, it was clear what I needed to do to "catch up", to stay in the gang.

'IN YOUR THIRTIES, THE STAKES ARE HIGHER, AND LIFE DOESN'T ALWAYS GO YOUR WAY. Jealousy can work the other way – ripping through a friendship, causing chaos and destruction. When children come into the equation, things can get especially prickly. My close pal Penny was devastated when a friend, who was undergoing IVF, made her feel guilty for getting pregnant. Penny's friend, who had been trying for a baby for years, couldn't bear to be around her as her bump bloomed, and told her so. In a tearful conversation she said she resented Penny for having the one thing she wanted most in the world. Penny was heartbroken; with her hormones already all over the place, she couldn't sleep or eat. "Her words hurt me so much," she said. "I cried for days. I didn't choose to get pregnant to torture her. I wanted her to have a baby more than anything, but I couldn't cope with being made to feel guilty for having mine." 'As it happens, the envious friend is now expecting. While they are now back in contact and hope to reconcile, there are

still bridges to be built. Penny knows deep down that her friend did not want to feel angry with her – it was just the way her pain was expressed and wasn't something she could necessarily help. "The adage is ancient, but it still resonates: "You can't choose your family, but you can choose your friends", and maybe that's why feeling jealous makes us so uncomfortable. You pick your friends from the many women you meet. You tell them everything. You let your guard down faster than you would with a man. You think that they will be there forever – they won't care if you get middle-age spread, they won't cheat on you with their secretary, or leave you with the kids. Revealing so much to them makes you closer, but more vulnerable, too. So when something goes wrong and they suddenly become someone you envy as opposed to a mirror to your life, it's natural to feel a little strange. But is it because you genuinely want their life? Or is it simply because you're terrified that with each new move they make – whether it's the ring/mortgage/baby/promotion – they are moving further away from you? "When my friend Claire left our flat-share to relocate to another part of the country to be with her boyfriend, I was devastated. On the surface, someone could have thought I was feeling a little jealous – she was living with her man and I was not – but what I was really upset about was the fact our friendship would never be the same again. There would be no more borrowing each other's clothes, laughing until we cried and sitting on the sofa drinking wine while putting the world to rights. I felt lost without her, and while the pain of losing daily access to my best friend has lessened, when we get together

I always wish things were different. If only our life paths had allowed us to live just down the road from each other, but fate didn't deal us that hand.

'THE THING IS, WOMEN HAVE VERY INTENSE RELATIONSHIPS. Sometimes breaking up with friends is almost worse than breaking up with a lover. When I fell out with one friend last year, after I felt she'd attacked my character and accused me of being selfish, I was a mess. I cried for three days solid and even had to go home from work. Eventually, a mutual friend encouraged us to talk at a party and I learnt that a whole host of issues had built up in her mind over time. She felt I'd been dismissive of certain factors in her life and when I did one more thing to frustrate her, the resentment came flooding out with venom. She apologised and said she'd wished she'd vocalised the problems earlier; and I, on reflection, realised I should have taken the time to listen to her point of view, needs and feelings. 'Perhaps we were both a little envious of each other, or too wrapped up in number one to prioritise the other's needs, but we eventually managed to work it out. I'm sure that, in some cases, you just have to admit that you have changed as people, and it's natural to edit your friends now and then and say goodbye; but if you can work through it, your relationship is stronger as a result.

'There's always a yin to the yang, and while one aspect of a friend's life may seem desirable, they could be battling against other less perfect things, too – so you should always take time to listen and support them. My cousin is married and expecting a baby now, and I can't wait to meet the latest addition to our family. One distant day in the future, I'll catch up with her in the life stakes – I've realised it's not a race. If envy does make an unexpected visit, I'm going to swallow down the lump in my throat and discard it from my mind. After all, as one friend says, "It's the thoughts we act on, and not the ones we don't, that make us who we are." "

Have you ever felt friend envy? Let us know at feedback@graziainmagazine.co.uk. Charlotte Ward's novel, Why Am I Always The One Before 'The One'? One Girl's Quest To Bag Mr Right, is published by Headline on 1 May and costs £7.99