



# *A Friend Indeed*

*The death of actor Matthew Perry has hit me hard and I'm not sure why. I think it has something to do with my finely honed inability to navigate loss.*

I was in my early thirties when Friends first aired and was immediately hooked. I've never thought about it until now, but the show filled a void in my life. I had just married an Aussie and moved from New Jersey to Canberra (though not in that order), taking what seemed like forever to say goodbye to those near and dear. Friends allowed me to grieve my 20s, my New York City upbringing, my share house and those endless coffees (and wines) with my five flatmates – strangers who, like Ross, Rachel, Monica, Chandler, Joey and Phoebe, became lifelong friends.



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Grief is a term usually reserved for loved ones, so it's odd that I'm so deeply mourning the loss of someone I didn't even know. Though in a sense, many of us felt that we knew Matthew Perry's Chandler. He was the friend we wanted to have and wanted to be: funny, honest, supportive, empathetic. I'm sure I'm not the only one who identified with his random, inappropriate dancing, his clumsiness, his job that no one seemed to understand, his awkwardness when posing for photos, his disdain for the gym and his use of humour to diffuse tension. Like Chandler, 'I make jokes when I'm uncomfortable' ... which is nearly all the time.

Chandler's funny, fidgety frustration with the world somehow assured me that I'd be alright. The character gave me hope that people who were riddled with fears and insecurities, who looked at the world through a different lens, would eventually find their way. In many of his film and television roles outside of Friends, Matthew Perry played a Chandler of sorts. He was the witty, anxious, tentative guy with a big heart, masterfully employing sarcasm to deflect, rather than deal with, his true feelings. I can relate.

Over the years, I've realised that I don't cry much. I suspect it has something to do with not wanting to lose control. Interestingly, most of my random outburst of emotions, particularly along the grieving theme, have been in the context of the arts – a film or television show that transported me right to my father's graveside decades ago, or to my friends', or more recently, my mother's. I nearly lost it in Ghost, namely, the scene where the spirit of Sam (Patrick Swayze) pushes the penny up the door to prove to Molly (Demi Moore) that he is with her. I don't state this proudly – grasping 'circle of life' issues in the early years would arguably save a lot of angst in adulthood – but we are mysterious and complex beings, and there is no playbook for how to navigate loss. (And if there is, please send it to me.) It's not surprising that much of my writing seeks to explore this rocky, largely unmapped terrain.

Matthew Perry said that when he died, he didn't want to be known primarily for his role as Chandler. He wanted to be remembered for helping others. And he has. In more ways than he could ever know.

***Maura Pierlot***