# When the laughter stops

**The star of the sitcom "Friends" died on October 28th, aged 54**

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE, now, to watch it in the same way. The emphasis has changed—and emphasis is what matters in comedy. He'd always known that. The words, the sentence, the scene can be the same but alter the emphasis—lean a little harder on this word, push a little on that one—and the joke is transformed. He and his friends had played with this when they were at school. They'd developed their own way of speaking. "Could it *be* any hotter?" they'd ask. "Could the teacher *be* any meaner?" It changed everything.

Emphasis was always his thing—it had got him the part in the first place. Everyone had wanted to be in "Friends Like Us" but in the audition it was he who had nailed it, reading the words in that unexpected way, "hitting emphases that no one else had hit"; making everyone laugh. It was less that he, Matthew Perry, could play Chandler than that he *was* Chandler. He changed the part—and then the part changed him. Fame, fortune, money followed. And above all, The Big Terrible Thing. The thing so big, so terrible that it would demand emphatic capitals; cause him to return to rehab 14 times—and change the emphasis of those jokes for ever.

Watch "Friends" after everything that happened and suddenly it seemed different: not simply a sitcom but a chronicle of his decline. Take that episode in season three, the one titled "The One With The Hypnosis Tape". Later people saw it instead as The One Where You Could See How Thin He Was. By then, he was addicted to opioids which had left him vomiting and all but unable to eat. Anyone watching that season should, he thought, be "horrified" by his thinness. Everywhere, hindsight makes the lines land differently. Take that episode in season one, where a shrink turns up and starts to analyse him. "You're so funny," the shrink says to Chandler. "I wouldn't want to be there when the laughter stops."

"Friends" was not how he wanted to be remembered. Though he did definitely want to be remembered—on that he was clear. Before that first audition he'd fallen to his knees, eyes closed. "God, you can do whatever you want to me," he had prayed. "Just please make me famous." God seems to have listened, as success on a different scale followed. Ever after he would be a man to be measured in millions: 22m watched the pilot episode. More than 50m watched a single, star-studded episode in series two. By series eight, he was making $1m an episode. "But the Almighty, being the Almighty, had not forgotten the first part of that prayer as well." He would later spend over $7m in rehab.

But before that there was the success. Which was staggering. "Friends Like Us" became first "Friends" then, for its fans, almost "friends". Television was still consumed en masse then and for a time a whole generation seemed to know which Friend they "were": the nerdy one (Ross); the pretty one (Rachel)—or the funny one: him. It was less a programme than a paradigm; people started copying everything about them: their hair ("The Rachel cut" was particularly popular); their syntax (the definite article gained a newfound celebrity—"The This"; "The That"). Even English intonation itself bent before the show. It was, he thought, surely not an exaggeration to say that Chandler had changed how America spoke. Could its influence *be* any more clear?

And each week, tens of millions of Americans sat on couches to watch the Friends sit on their couches. Which was ironic, in a way, as he had always loathed sitting at home on couches. Performing in front of thousands—that he could do. But put him alone "on my couch in front of a TV for the night and I get scared." Being on his own had always frightened him. His parents had split up when he was small. When he was five, his mother had put him on a plane, alone, to go and see his father in Los Angeles. He had snacks, and priority boarding, and fancy lounges. He had perks; but no parents. He'd been terrified. Later, as a famous actor, he'd get some of the same airport perks again. He hated them then, too.

In the end, it was alcohol that comforted him. When he was 14, he and some friends had got a six-pack of Budweiser and a bottle of white wine. His friends had just got drunk—but he had got a sudden, overwhelming sense of well-being. At last, he knew that he was taken care of; at last he knew it was all fine. It was *bliss*. After that, there were more drugs, more bliss and, after a neck injury, there were opioids. They were better yet: "like replacing your blood with warm honey".

Then the bliss faded. Watch "Friends" now and you can tell the state of his addictions by his appearance: chunky—that's the alcohol. Skinny—that's pills. The goatee? That was lots of pills. Eventually the opioids would give him such severe constipation that his colon exploded and he passed out. "I was so full of shit it almost killed me." There was still humour, of a sort. He would later learn that while he was unconscious there had been a debate about whether he should be taken to a different clinic. The different clinic thought not: it apparently took one look at his chart and said: "Matthew Perry is not dying in our hospital."

It is odd, he later wrote, "to live in a world where if you died, it would shock people but surprise no one." He was right about the shock. People were often shocked by him. They were shocked when they saw him in life: he looked so old. Those who had watched "Friends" the first time around were shocked afresh when it was re-aired on Netflix in 2015; though this time the shock was not at his age but their own. It all looked so dated: the hair; the ties; the staginess; the whiteness. How had we not realised that we had been living in the past? That time had been passing so quickly? For millions, he became less a man than a memento mori.

Mr Perry himself needed no reminders about death. He had been to death's door, and back. Although that wasn't quite the emphasis he gave it—and for him emphasis, as always, mattered. He had started writing his memoir on his phone; it finally came out last year. And from its first pages it was clear where he wanted to lay the stress. Not on death, after all; but life. "I am alive," he wrote. "Those three words are more miraculous than you might imagine...I am alive." ■