

# “I’LL BE THERE FOR YOU”

When Lizzie Pook found herself faced with the loss of her father, she happened upon a surprising source of comfort: a little show about six friends from New York



“ Grief is an emotion felt strongest in the stomach. It’s a 10-tonne punch. It floors you. Grief manifests itself in the most visceral of ways. It’s a hollowness that seizes your insides; a silent adversary that sweeps in from out of left-field and disarms you with a crushing blow to the gut. It’s almost 10 years since my

father died on 31 October 2004. I was 19 years old. He was 53. It feels like yesterday and it feels like a hundred years ago. I can go for days without experiencing that paralysing sudden emptiness, or I can find myself bent double and breathless in the supermarket queue as I wait to buy tea bags and tin foil.

Everyone’s relationship with grief is different and people deal

with the process of loss in many ways. This is just my story; a note of gratitude, rather, to the one thing – alongside the unwavering support of my family and friends – that offered a sense of solace when life got a little darker.

On my 18th birthday I was given a gift. A good one. My boyfriend was well aware that

I, like millions of others, had become obsessed with what

was already a cultural phenomenon: *Friends*. The show had played out for nine seasons – the Rachel haircut had already been ‘a thing’ and the series had been nominated for 62 Emmy Awards – and years of well-worn VHS copies and Channel 4 repeats on comfy Sunday afternoons meant I was as devoted as any *Friends* fan. I would litter my sentences with quotes – ‘Could I be wearing any more clothes?’ – and became completely submerged in the lives of these brilliantly crafted characters. Seeing this, my boyfriend (surprisingly) did not run a mile. Instead, he went out and bought me the entire series 1-10 box set on DVD. I was thrilled; this was a time before catch-up TV, and all I’d really had before were old car boot sale videos. But I could never have imagined just how valuable those 10 DVDs would become.

LOOKING BACK

I remember the precise moment I was told that my dad was going to die. I was in the middle of my A-levels and was supposed to be in my bedroom revising. Instead I was in the kitchen with my brother and my aunt, waiting for confirmation of why my dad (confined to his bed upstairs) had been so ill of late. My mum had just got off the phone with the doctor. A tumour had set its roots in his brain, he had said. It could not be removed, or destroyed with chemicals or radiation; there was nothing they could do. In that moment, I became unmoored. My head swam; my insides lurched. And I clutched the kitchen table with a strength I didn’t know I possessed to save myself from falling to the floor.

From that day and for the next six months – as my family weathered the slow torture that was my dad’s illness – I turned to that box set. Almost every night, after another desperate day watching my dad weaken, I would select a disc and slot it into my laptop. At first I chose at random, the lucky dip bringing me brilliant episode after brilliant episode: the one where Monica gets cornrows, the one where



Chandler can’t make the whipped noise and pronounces it ‘WHOOPAH’, the one where Joey goes on the quiz show, *Pyramid* (“Paper...snow.....a ghost!!”). Some nights I’d just watch my favourite Christmas episodes over and over again: *The One With Phoebe’s Dad* (where Chandler and Joey buy their presents from the petrol station), *The One Where Rachel Quits* (when Monica and Joey create a ‘Christmas miracle’ by saving all the trees destined for the chipper and setting them up in the apartment for Phoebe). The warmth and cosiness of Central Perk decked out in festive wares and twinkling New York City Christmas lights temporarily took me somewhere else; away from the wretchedness of a family in turmoil. I found calm in the Geller family flashbacks. Ross’s awful

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keyboard playing (the best comedic character quirk around), ‘fat’ Monica’s dancing and Rachel’s teen nose job were reassuring nuances of a family not gripped by real crisis. It was a comforting distraction. That box set, just a series of discs in their cardboard cases, became one thing I was able to get lost in when things turned bleak.

It’s not uncommon to find comfort in comedy at the hardest times (I’ve since learnt that some grief counsellors suggest their patients make a rule to slot funny films and TV shows into their day), and I’m sure others who have suffered loss have their very own televisual comfort blanket. While I had *Friends*, my twin

sister looked to Adam Sandler and Drew Barrymore. Every night, she’d fall asleep to an old VHS copy of *The Wedding Singer*. I’d walk past her door to hear the muffled riffs of Davie Bowie’s *China Girl* or a bad keyboard version of *Do You Really Want To Hurt Me?* She can, of course, now recite every line from the film word-for-word.

For me, watching *Friends* was a way to get lost in someone else’s problems. It felt good to laugh with abandon when Joey got his head stuck in a turkey at Thanksgiving. Or when Ross’s pet monkey, Marcel, was spirited away from his pen at San Diego zoo and onto the set of *Outbreak 2: The Virus Takes Manhattan!* alongside Jean-Claude Van Damme. I thrived off the sheer absurdity of it all, off temporarily feeling something other than aching sadness. I winced in empathy when Rachel landed

herself a fat lip by dressing up as a cheerleader and performing a cartwheel in a bid to impress ‘Josh-uah’, and chuckled when she brought home Mrs Whiskerson, the hairless cat that Chandler would go on to christen ‘a minion of the anti-christ’. Sometimes I’d just slot a disc into my laptop and listen. The soothing storylines drowned out the sounds of the house that reinforced quite how ill my dad had become; the hushed voices, the doctors’ phone calls, the sound of the chairlift we had installed to help him up the stairs when he became too frail to climb that mountain himself.

My dad was, as most dads are, a great man. He was

a Southampton FC devotee, a pub quiz aficionado, a typical dad who loved *The Sopranos*, *The Old Grey Whistle Test* and most of all, his children. Now, some things associated with him or his death can stop me in my tracks. Two bars from Depeche Mode’s *Enjoy The Silence* (a song that played quietly on the radio the night he died) and I am forced to take a moment to myself outside. Even seeing someone that looks like him – Bill Murray, David Jason, a bearded Tom Hanks in *Captain Phillips* – leaves me battling for breath.

LIGHT RELIEF

But, 10 years on, I still have that box set, and I still watch it. I try my hardest not to think about the period when my dad was ill; I have the sense to save myself from that. But *Friends* is a way to revisit it without any of the sadness. No matter how hard that period of my life was, I was always able to find a temporary happiness in *Friends*. And now, whenever I see a clip of the show or hear The Rembrandts’ iconic guitar riff, I feel one thing: an overwhelming sense of comfort.

As anyone who has lost someone will know, there is no cure for grief. Loss is not something that can be plastered over. It will always be a part of you. But at the same time, it is important to remember that the things which make you happy, the things that provide comfort when life gets a little dark, those things that somehow make it OK, are no less a part of you either. We adapt to accommodate grief. It does not become any smaller or less profound, but our lives continue to move and grow around it. *Friends* is just a TV show but it will always be an important part of my life. I don’t only credit it with making me laugh, for cheering me up on a bad day, or for giving me a library of annoying one-liners. I credit it with getting me – alongside the strength of my family and closest friends – through one of the most desolate times in my life. And for that I want to say, thank you.”



In memory of John Pook 1951-2004