



MATTHEW PERRY

A MEMOIR

Foreword
by Lisa Kudrow

Friends, Lovers, and
the Big Terrible Thing

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*For all of the sufferers out there.
You know who you are.*

The best way out is always through.

—Robert Frost

You've just got to see me through another day.

—James Taylor

Foreword

by Lisa Kudrow

“How’s Matthew Perry doing?”

Over the many years since I was first asked, it’s been, at different times, the most asked question for me. I understand why so many people asked it: they love Matthew and they want him to be OK. Me too. But I always bristled at that question from the press, because I couldn’t say what I wanted to say: “It’s his story to tell and I’m not authorized to tell it really, am I!” I would have wanted to go on to say, “This is very intimate personal stuff and if you don’t hear it from the actual person, it is, to my mind, gossip and I’m not gossiping about Matthew with you.” Knowing that no response at all could do more damage, sometimes I would just say, “I think he’s doing well.” At least that doesn’t amplify the spotlight and maybe he can have a fraction of privacy as he tries to deal with this disease. But truly, I wasn’t exactly sure how Matthew was doing. As he’ll tell you in this book, he was keeping it a secret. And it took some time for him to feel comfortable enough to tell us some of what he was going through. Over those years I didn’t really try to intervene or confront him, because the little I knew about addiction was that his sobriety was out of my hands. And yet, I would have periods of wondering if I was wrong for not doing more, doing something. But I did come to understand that this disease relentlessly fed itself and was determined to keep going.

So, I just focused on Matthew, who could make me laugh so hard every day, and once a week, laugh so hard I cried and couldn’t breathe. He was there, Matthew Perry, who is whip smart ... charming, sweet, sensitive, very reasonable and rational. That guy, with everything he was battling, was still there. The same Matthew who, from the beginning, could lift us all up during a grueling night shoot for the opening titles inside that fountain. “Can’t remember a time I wasn’t in a fountain!” “What are we, wet?” “Can’t remember a time I wasn’t wet ... I!” (Matthew is the reason we are all laughing in that fountain in the opening

titles.)

After *Friends* I didn't see Matthew every day, and I couldn't even hazard a guess with regard to his well-being.

This book is the first time I'm hearing what living with and surviving his addiction really was. Matthew has told me some things, but not in this kind of detail. He's now letting us into Matthew's head and heart in honest and very exposed detail. And finally, no one needs to ask me or anyone else how Matthew's doing. He's letting you know himself.

He has survived impossible odds, but I had no idea how many times he almost didn't make it. I'm glad you're here, Matty. Good for you. I love you.

—Lisa

Prologue

Hi, my name is Matthew, although you may know me by another name. My friends call me Matty.

And I should be dead.

If you like, you can consider what you're about to read to be a message from the beyond, my beyond.

It's Day Seven of the Pain. And by Pain, I don't mean a stubbed toe or "The Whole Ten Yards." I capitalize Pain because this was the worst Pain I've ever experienced—it was the Platonic Ideal of Pain, the exemplar. I've heard people claim that the worst pain is childbirth: well, this was the worst pain imaginable, but without the joy of a newborn in my arms at the end of it.

And it may have been Day Seven of Pain, but it was also Day Ten of No Movement. If you catch my drift. I hadn't taken a shit in ten days—there, there's the drift. Something was wrong, very wrong. This was not a dull, throbbing pain, like a headache; it wasn't even a piercing, stabbing pain, like the pancreatitis I'd had when I was thirty. This was a different kind of Pain. Like my body was going to burst. Like my insides were trying to force their way out. This was the no-fucking-around kind of Pain.

And the sounds. My God, the sounds. Ordinarily, I'm a pretty quiet, keep-to-myself kinda fella. But on this night, I was screaming at the top of my lungs. Some nights, when the wind is right and the cars are all parked up for the night, you can hear the horrific sounds of coyotes ripping apart something that is howling in the Hollywood Hills. At first it sounds like children laughing way, way off in the distance, until you realize it's not that—it's the foothills of death. But the worst part, of course, is when the howling stops, because you know whatever has been attacked is now dead. This is hell.

And yes, there is a hell. Don't let anyone tell you different. I've been there; it exists; end of discussion.

On this night the animal was me. I was still screaming, fighting tooth and nail for survival. Silence meant the end. Little did I know how close I was to the end.

At the time, I was living in a sober living house in Southern California. This was no surprise—I have lived half my life in one form or another of treatment center or sober living house. Which is fine when you are twenty-four years old, less fine when you are forty-two years old. Now I was forty-nine, still struggling to get this monkey off my back.

By this point, I knew more about drug addiction and alcoholism than any of the coaches and most of the doctors I encountered at these facilities. Unfortunately, such self-knowledge avails you nothing. If the golden ticket to sobriety involved hard work and learned information, this beast would be nothing but a faint unpleasant memory. To simply stay alive, I had turned myself into a professional patient. Let's not sugarcoat it. At forty-nine, I was still afraid to be alone. Left alone, my crazy brain (crazy only in this area by the way) would find some excuse to do the unthinkable: drink and drugs. In the face of decades of my life having been ruined by doing this, I'm terrified of doing it again. I have no fear of talking in front of twenty thousand people, but put me alone on my couch in front of a TV for the night and I get scared. And that fear is of my own mind; fear of my own thoughts; fear that my mind will urge me to turn to drugs, as it has so many times before. My mind is out to kill me, and I know it. I am constantly filled with a lurking loneliness, a yearning, clinging to the notion that something outside of me will fix me. But I had had all that the outside had to offer!

Julia Roberts is my girlfriend. *It doesn't matter, you have to drink.*

I just bought my dream house—it looks out across the whole city! *Can't enjoy that without a drug dealer.*

I'm making a million dollars a week—I win right? *Would you like to drink? Why yes, I would. Thank you very much.*

I'd had it all. But it was all a trick. Nothing was going to fix this. It would be years before I even grasped the notion of a solution. Please don't misunderstand me. All of those things—Julia and the dream house and \$1 million a week—were wonderful, and I will be eternally grateful for all of them. I am one of the luckiest men on the planet. And boy did I have fun.

They just weren't the answer. If I had to do it all over again, would I still audition for *Friends*? You bet your ass I would. Would I drink again?

You bet your ass I would. If I didn't have alcohol to soothe my nerves and help me have fun, I would have leaped off a tall building sometime in my twenties. My grandfather, the wonderful Alton L. Perry, grew up around an alcoholic father, and as a result, he never touched a drink in his life, all ninety-six long, wonderful years of it.

I am not my grandfather.

I don't write all this so anyone will feel sorry for me—I write these words because they are true. I write them because someone else may be confused by the fact that they know they should stop drinking—like me, they have all the information, and they understand the consequences—but they still can't stop drinking. You are not alone, my brothers and sisters. (In the dictionary under the word “addict,” there should be a picture of me looking around, very confused.)

In the sober living house in Southern California, I had a view of West LA and two queen-size beds. The other bed was occupied by my assistant/best friend, Erin, a lesbian whose friendship I treasure because it brings me the joy of female companionship without the romantic tension that has seemed to ruin my friendships with straight women (not to mention, we can talk about hot women together). I'd met her two years earlier, at another rehab where she had been working at the time. I didn't get sober back then, but I saw how wonderful she was in every way and promptly stole her from that sober living rehab and made her my assistant, and she became my best friend. She, too, understood the nature of addiction and would come to know my struggles better than any doctor I'd ever seen.

Despite the comfort that Erin brought to the situation, I still spent many sleepless nights in Southern California. Sleep is a real issue for me, especially when I'm in one of these places. That said, I don't think I have ever slept for more than four hours straight in my entire life. It didn't help that we'd been watching nothing but prison documentaries—and I was coming off so much Xanax my brain had fried to the point where I was convinced that I was an actual prisoner and that this sober living place was an actual jail. I have a shrink whose mantra is “reality is an acquired taste”—well, I'd lost both my taste and smell of reality by that point; I had Covid of the understanding; I was completely delusional.

There was nothing delusional about the Pain, though; in fact, it hurt so much I'd stopped smoking, which if you knew how much I smoked, you'd

think was a pretty sure sign that something very serious was wrong. One employee of the place, whose name badge might as well have read NURSE FUCKFACE, suggested taking an Epsom salts bath to alleviate the “discomfort.” You wouldn’t take a Band-Aid to a road traffic accident; you don’t put someone in this much Pain in water filled with his own sauce. But reality is an acquired taste, remember, so I actually took the actual Epsom salts bath.

There I sat, naked, in Pain, howling like a dog being ripped to shreds by coyotes. Erin heard me—hell, people in San Diego heard me. She appeared at the bathroom door, and looking down upon my sad, naked form as I writhed in Pain, she said very simply, “Do you want to go to the hospital?”

If Erin thought it was hospital-bad, it was hospital-bad. Plus, she’d already noticed I wasn’t smoking.

“That sounds like a pretty damn good idea to me,” I said in between howls.

Somehow, Erin helped me out of the bath and dried me off. I started to put my clothes back on just as a counselor—alerted by the slaughter of a dog on the premises, presumably—appeared at the door.

“I’m taking him to the hospital,” Erin said.

Catherine, the counselor, just so happened to be a beautiful blond woman to whom I had apparently proposed upon my arrival, so she probably wasn’t my biggest fan. (Not kidding, I had been so out of it when we’d arrived that I’d asked her to marry me, and then promptly fell down a flight of stairs.)

“This is just drug-seeking behavior,” Catherine said to Erin as I continued to dress. “He’s going to ask for drugs at the hospital.”

Well, this marriage is off, I thought.

By now, the howls had alerted others that there were probably canine entrails all over the bathroom floor, or someone was in real Pain. The head counselor, Charles—think: male model father, homeless mother—joined Catherine in the doorway, to help her block our expected exit.

Block our exit? What were we, twelve years old?

“He’s our patient,” Catherine said. “You don’t have the right to take him.”

“I know Matty,” Erin insisted. “He isn’t trying to get drugs.”

Then Erin turned to me.

“Do you need to go to the hospital, Matty?” I nodded and screamed some more.

“I’m taking him,” Erin said.

Somehow, we pushed past Catherine and Charles, out of the building, and into the parking lot. I say “somehow” not because Catherine and Charles made much of a fuss about stopping us, but because every time my feet touched the ground, the Pain became even more excruciating.

Up there in the sky, looking down on me with scorn, caring not for my agony, was a bright yellow ball.

What’s that? I thought through paroxysms of agony. *Oh, the sun. Right ...* I didn’t get out much.

“We have a high-profile coming in with severe abdominal pain,” Erin said into her phone as she unlocked the car. Cars are stupid, ordinary things until you’re not allowed to drive them, at which point they become magical boxes of freedom and signs of a successful previous life. Erin lifted me into the passenger seat, and I lay back. My belly was twisting in agony.

Erin got into the driver’s seat, turned to me, and said, “Do you want to get there fast, or do you want me to avoid the LA potholes?”

“Just get there, woman!” I managed to say.

By now Charles and Catherine had decided to up their efforts to thwart us and now stood in front of the car, blocking us. Charles’s hands were lifted, his palms facing us, as if to say “No!”, as though three thousand pounds of motor vehicle could be stopped with the force of his mitts.

To make matters worse, Erin couldn’t start the car. The ignition works via *telling* the car to start out loud, because you know, I was on *Friends*. Catherine and the Palms didn’t budge. Once she worked out how to start the damn thing, there was only one thing more to do: Erin revved the engine, put the car in drive, and slewed it up and onto a curb—the jolt of that action alone, ricocheting through my entire body, almost caused me to die right there. With two wheels up on the curb, she revved past Catherine and Charles, and out into the street. They just watched us drive away, though by this point I would have urged her to drive over them—not being able to stop screaming is a very scary state to be in.

If I were just doing this to get drugs, then I deserved an Oscar.

“Are you aiming for the speed bumps? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m kind of struggling right now. Slow down,” I begged her. We both

had tears streaming down our faces.

“I have to go fast,” Erin said, her brown, compassionate eyes looking over at me with concern and fear. “We have to get you there now.”

It was right about here that I drifted out of consciousness. (A 10 on the pain scale is losing consciousness by the way.)

[Please note: for the next few paragraphs, this book will be a biography rather than a memoir because I was no longer there.]

The closest hospital to the sober house was Saint John’s. Since Erin had had the foresight to call ahead and alert them that a VIP was en route, someone met us at the emergency valet. Not knowing at the time how crazy sick I was when she made the call, Erin had been concerned about my privacy. But the folks at the hospital could see something was seriously wrong and rushed me to a treatment room. There, I was heard to say, “Erin, why are there Ping-Pong balls on the couch?”

There was no couch, and there were no Ping-Pong balls—I was just completely delusional. (I wasn’t aware that pain could make you delusional, but there ya go.) Then the Dilaudid (my personal favorite drug in the whole wide world) hit my brain, and I briefly regained consciousness.

I was told I needed surgery immediately, and suddenly, every nurse in California descended upon my room. One of them turned to Erin and said, “Get ready to run!” Erin was ready, and we all ran—well, *they* ran, I was merely wheeled at high speed to a procedure room. Erin was asked to leave mere seconds after I’d said to her “Please don’t leave,” then I closed my eyes, and they wouldn’t open again for two weeks.

Yes, that’s right: a coma, ladies and gentlemen! (And those motherfuckers back at the sober living had tried to block the car?)

The first thing that happened when I lapsed into a coma was that I aspirated into my breathing tube, vomiting ten days’ worth of toxic shit directly into my lungs. My lungs didn’t like that very much—enter instant pneumonia—and that is when my colon exploded. Let me repeat for those in the back: my colon exploded! I’ve been accused of being full of shit before, but this time I really was.

I’m glad I wasn’t there for that.

It was almost certain at that point that I was going to die. Was I unlucky that my colon exploded? Or was I lucky that it happened in the one room in Southern California where they could do something about it?

Either way, I now faced a seven-hour surgery, which at least gave all my loved ones ample time to race to the hospital. As they arrived they were each told, “Matthew has a two percent chance of making it through the night.”

Everyone was so wrought with emotion that some crumbled to the ground right there in the hospital lobby. I will have to live out the rest of my days knowing that my mother and others heard those words.

With me in surgery for at least seven hours and convinced that the hospital would do everything they could, my family and friends went home for the night for some rest while my subconscious fought for my life amid the knives and tubes and blood.

Spoiler alert: I *did* make it through the night. But I wasn’t out of the woods yet. My family and friends were told that the only thing that could keep me alive short-term was an ECMO machine (ECMO stands for Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation). The ECMO move is often called a Hail Mary—for a start, four patients that week at UCLA had been put on ECMO, and they all died.

Making things even tougher, Saint John’s didn’t have an ECMO machine. Cedars-Sinai was called—they took one look at my chart and apparently said, “Matthew Perry is not dying in our hospital.”

Thanks, guys.

UCLA wasn’t willing to take me, either—for the same reason? Who can say?—but at least they were willing to send an ECMO machine and a team. I was hooked up to it for several hours, and it seemed to work! I was then transferred to UCLA itself, in an ambulance filled with doctors and nurses. (There was no way I’d survive a fifteen-minute car ride, especially the way Erin drives.)

At UCLA I was taken to the heart and lung ICU unit; it would become my home for the next six weeks. I was still in a coma, but honestly, I probably loved it. I was lying down, all snuggled up, and they were pumping drugs into me—what’s better than that?

I’m told that during my coma I was never left alone, not once—there was always a member of my family or a friend in the room with me. They held candlelight vigils; did prayer circles. Love was all around me.

Eventually, my eyes magically opened.

[Back to the memoir.]

The first thing I saw was my mother.

“What’s going on?” I managed to croak. “Where the hell am I?”

The last thing I remembered was being in a car with Erin.

“Your colon exploded,” Mom said.

With that information, I did what any comic actor might do: I rolled my eyes and went back to sleep.

★ ★ ★

I have been told that when someone is *really* sick a kind of disconnect happens—a “God only gives you what you can handle” kind of thing kicks in. As for me, well, in the weeks after I came out of my coma, I refused to let anyone tell me exactly what had happened. I was too afraid that it was my fault; that I had done this to myself. So instead of talking about it, I did the one thing I felt I *could* do—during the days in the hospital I threw myself into family, spending hours with my beautiful sisters, Emily, Maria, and Madeline, who were funny and caring and *there*. At night it was Erin; I was never alone once again.

Eventually, one day Maria—the hub of the Perry family (my mom is the hub of the Morrison side)—decided it was time for me to be told what had happened. There I was, attached to fifty wires like a robot, bedridden, as Maria filled me in. My very fears had been true: I had done this; this was my fault.

I cried—oh *boy* did I cry. Maria did her best to be wonderfully consoling, but there was no consoling this. I had all but killed myself. I had never been a partier—taking all of those drugs (and it was a *lot* of drugs) was just a futile attempt to feel better. Trust me to take trying to feel better to death’s door. And yet here I was, still alive. *Why?* Why had I been spared?

Things got worse before they got better, though.

Every morning, it seemed, some doctor would come into my room and give me more bad news. If something could go wrong, it did. I already had a colostomy bag—at least I’d been told it was reversible, thank God—but now, apparently, there was a fistula, a hole in one of my intestines. Problem was, they couldn’t find it. To help, I was given *another* bag that oozed out gross green stuff, but that new bag meant that I was not allowed to eat or drink anything until they found it. They searched daily for that fistula while I got thirstier and thirstier. I was literally begging for a Diet

Coke and having dreams of being chased by a gigantic can of Diet Sprite. After a full month—a month!—they finally found the fistula in some tube behind my colon. I thought, *Hey fellas, if you are looking for a hole in my intestine, why not start looking behind the thing that FUCKING EXPLODED.* Now that they'd found the hole, they could start to fix it, and I could learn to walk again.

I knew I was on my way back when I realized that I was attracted to the therapist they assigned to me. True, I had a giant scar on my stomach, but I was never a guy who took his shirt off much anyway. I'm no Matthew McConaughey, and when I take a shower, I just make sure to keep my eyes closed.

★ ★ ★

As I've said, for the entire stay in those hospitals, I was never left alone—not once. So, there *is* light in the darkness. It's there—you just have to look hard enough for it.

After five very long months, I was released. I was told that within the year, everything inside me would heal enough so that I could have a second surgery to reverse the colostomy bag. But for now, we packed my overnight bags—five months of overnights—and we made the voyage home.

Also, I'm Batman.

1

The View

Nobody ever thinks that something really bad is going to happen to them. Until it does. And nobody comes back from a perforated bowel, aspiration pneumonia, and an ECMO machine. Until somebody did.

Me.

I'm writing this in a rented house overlooking the Pacific Ocean. (My real house is down the street being renovated—they say it will take six months, so I figure about a year.) A pair of red-tailed hawks is circling below me in the canyon that brings the Palisades down to the water. It's a gorgeous spring day in Los Angeles. This morning I've been busy hanging art on my walls (or rather, having them hung—I'm not so handy). I've really gotten into art in the last few years, and if you look close enough, you'll find the odd Banksy or two. I'm also working on the second draft of a screenplay. There's fresh Diet Coke in my glass, and a full pack of Marlboros in my pocket. Sometimes, these things are enough.

Sometimes.

I keep coming back to this singular, inescapable fact: I am *alive*. Given the odds, those three words are more miraculous than you might imagine; to me, they have an odd, shiny quality, like rocks brought back from a distant planet. No one can quite believe it. It is very odd to live in a world where if you died, it would shock people but surprise no one.

What those three words—*I am alive*—fill me with, above all else, is a sense of profound gratitude. When you've been as close to the celestial as I have, you don't really have a choice about gratitude: it sits on your living room table like a coffee-table book—you barely notice it, but it's there. Yet stalking that gratitude, buried deep somewhere in the faint-anise-distant-licorice of the Diet Coke, and filling my lungs like every drag of every cigarette, there's a nagging agony.

I can't help but ask myself the overwhelming question: Why? Why am I alive? I have a hint to the answer, but it is not fully formed yet. It's in the vicinity of helping people, I know that, but I don't know how. The best thing about me, bar none, is that if a fellow alcoholic comes up to me and asks me if I can help them stop drinking, I can say yes, and actually follow up and do it. I can help a desperate man get sober. The answer to "Why am I alive?" I believe lives somewhere in there. After all, it's the only thing I've found that truly feels good. It is undeniable that there is God there.

But, you see, I can't say yes to that question "Why?" when I feel like I'm not enough. You can't give away something you do not have. And most of the time I have these nagging thoughts: *I'm not enough, I don't matter, I am too needy*. These thoughts make me uncomfortable. I need love, but I don't trust it. If I drop my game, my Chandler, and show you who I really am, you might notice me, but worse, you might notice me and leave me. And I can't have that. I won't survive that. Not anymore. It will turn me into a speck of dust and annihilate me.

So, I will leave you first. I will fabricate in my mind that something went wrong with *you*, and I'll believe it. And I'll leave. *But something can't go wrong with all of them, Matso*. What's the common denominator here?

And now these scars on my stomach. These broken love affairs. Leaving Rachel. (No not that one. The real Rachel. The ex-girlfriend of my dreams, Rachel.) They haunt me as I lie awake at 4:00 A.M., in my house with a view in the Pacific Palisades. I'm fifty-two. It's not that cute anymore.

★ ★ ★

Every house I have ever lived in has had a view. That's the most important thing to me.

When I was five years old, I was sent on a plane from Montreal, Canada, where I lived with my mom, to Los Angeles, California, where I would visit my dad. I was what is called "an unaccompanied minor" (at one point that was the title of this book). It was typical to send kids on planes back then—flying children alone at that age was just something people did. It wasn't right, but they did it. For maybe a millisecond I thought it would be an exciting adventure, and then I realized I was too

young to be alone and this was all completely terrifying (and bullshit). One of you guys come pick me up! I was five. Is everybody crazy?

The hundreds of thousands of dollars that particular choice cost me in therapy? May I get that back, please?

You do get all sorts of perks when you're an unaccompanied minor on a plane, including a little sign around your neck that reads UNACCOMPANIED MINOR, plus early boarding, kids-only lounges, snacks up the ying-yang, someone to escort you to the plane ... maybe it *should* have been amazing (later, as a famous person, I got all these perks and more at airports, but every time it reminded me of that first flight, so I hated them). The flight attendants were supposed to look after me, but they were busy serving champagne in coach (that's what they did in the anything-goes 1970s). The two-drink maximum had recently been done away with, so that flight felt like six hours in Sodom and Gomorrah. The stench of alcohol was everywhere; the guy next to me must have had ten old-fashionedes. (I stopped counting after a couple of hours.) I couldn't imagine why any adult would want to drink the same drink over and over again ... Ah, innocence.

I pushed the little service button when I dared, which wasn't very often. The flight attendants—in their 1970s hot boots and short-shorts—would come by, ruffle my hair, move on.

I was fucking terrified. I tried to read my *Highlights* magazine, but every time the plane hit a bump in the air, I knew I was about to die. I had no one to tell me it was OK, no one to look at for reassurance. My feet didn't even reach the floor. I was too scared to recline the seat and take a nap, so I just stayed awake, waiting for the next bump, wondering over and over what it would be like to fall thirty-five thousand feet.

I didn't fall, at least not literally. Eventually, the plane began its descent into the beautiful California evening. I could see the lights twinkling, streets splayed out like a great sparkling magic carpet, wide swathes of dark I now know were the hills, the city pulsing up toward me as I plastered my little face against the plane window, and I so vividly remember thinking that those lights, and all that beauty, meant I was about to have a parent.

Not having a parent on that flight is one of the many things that led to a lifelong feeling of abandonment.... If I'd been enough, they wouldn't have left me unaccompanied, right? Isn't that how all this was supposed to