FRIEND AHOLIC

CONFESSIONS OF A FRIENDSHIP ADDICT

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DEDICATION

For Emma, my best friend.

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INTRODUCTION

I was once told about a man who despised small talk. If he found himself at a party, he would never ask about someone's job or comment on the weather or enquire how long it had taken a guest to get there and what route they had taken and did-they-avoid-the-traffic-on-the-A40. Instead, his opening gambit was always: 'Aside from work and family, what's your passion?'

When I was first told this story, I admired the man's inventiveness. But I couldn't immediately think of how I would answer. What *was* my passion?

As a teenager, I had been taught the importance of having hobbies to put on your CV in order to show you were a well-rounded person. I had struggled to scrape any together. I went to one salsa class and hated it, but I whacked it on my CV to placate the careers adviser. My father had taken me abseiling as a child, so I added that into the mix. I played the trumpet and put that down too. 'Film' I typed because it's true that I did like going to the cinema and ordering a medium bucket of sweet and salty popcorn. The result was that any prospective employer would consider me a well-qualified salsa-dancing, trumpet-playing, cinema-going abseiler. But I couldn't say that I felt *passionate* about any of it (other than the popcorn). Besides, a passion is different from a hobby, isn't it? The former can be a concept, a feeling, a person; the latter involves some form of activity, occasionally with crampons.

Then, two years ago, the answer came to me with sudden clarity. We were living through a pandemic and, like millions of people around the globe, I went from having an active social life to none at all. I missed my friends with startling acuteness. I missed their faces, their hugs, the smell of their particular perfume. I missed our chats. I missed making sense of things by talking to them.

I had discovered my passion: it was friendship.

My friends had seen me through life's unexpected turns. They had been there to support me through break-ups, fertility issues, marriage, divorce,

miscarriage, job changes, home moves and more. They had given me support and kindness and good advice. And when things had gone well, they'd celebrated with me. We had laughed and cried and walked hand in hand through both hardship and success.

There wasn't any language I could reach for to describe precisely what they meant to me. Most of the vocabulary around love had been co-opted for romantic relationships. I told my friends I loved them all the time. But of course I wasn't *in* love with them. It was more nuanced than that. I was passionate about them.

Like many passions, it had grown to obsess me. Looking back, I realised that I loved the feeling of connection so much I came to rely on it. I sought out new friendships again and again and again. I would meet a person and instantly want to bond with them in some small way. We would fall into conversation and I knew that if I listened closely enough, I would be able to find something we had in common: a shared sense of humour or a mutual liking for a particular book or song or TV show. I would get a buzz from that moment of exchange; a hit of pure friendship adrenalin. In that moment, I would feel worthwhile and liked and accepted. I wanted more of it. Then I *needed* more of it. Then it became something I relied on for my own self-worth. *I must be OK*, the reasoning went, *I've got so many friends!*

At some point in my late thirties, it started to feel unsustainable. I found myself unable to keep up with all my friendships in the way that I wanted to. There wasn't enough time to be there for everyone and still maintain a functioning life. It meant that I became a conspicuously less good friend because I was spreading myself too thinly. I was trying not to let anyone down, which ensured inevitably that I did. I said yes to invitations and dinners and shopping trips and weddings and birthdays and baby showers because I was worried a friend might be disappointed with me if I didn't. I was indiscriminate in my attentions. The most important thing, it seemed to me, was to keep saying yes in order to keep the friendships afloat. If I didn't manage that, I would be deemed unlikeable. I would be excommunicated from the circle of the sociable. And if I had no friends, I would have to look honestly at myself. I would have to confront the existential loneliness of the unloveable. That felt scary.

It turns out I wasn't just passionate about friendship: I was addicted to it. I had a physical and emotional dependence. I had an urge to pursue it, even

when it came at a damaging cost to my own peace of mind. I was, in short, a friendaholic.

You might be reading this and thinking ‘well, too many friends hardly seems like a problem’. You might be reaching for your metaphorical tiny violin and your imaginary crocodile to cry the requisite tears. And you’d be partially right: having a wide circle of acquaintances can be a wonderful thing, especially when the alternative is enforced isolation. There are those who suffer from crippling social anxiety, who have communication difficulties or live with an array of mental health conditions. They can struggle to leave the house, let alone make friends. A 2017 report published by the counselling service Relate found that 13 per cent of people have no friends at all.[1] A lack of social interaction can be just as bad for your health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day, and it can be twice as harmful to your life expectancy as obesity.[2]

But if having no friends decreases the quality – and length – of your life, having too many friends also has a negative impact. Researchers studying adolescent friendships have found that those with either too large or too small a social network both have higher levels of depressive symptoms.[3] People aged fifty or over from across Europe display a similar pattern: depression is minimised when individuals have four to five close relationships and engage in social activities on a weekly basis. Any more than this, and the benefits decline, disappear altogether or become actively disadvantageous. This downward spiral is especially marked in those who have seven or more close relationships. The demands of maintaining those friendships were linked to an upswing in depressive symptoms.[4]

And while there is a widely held assumption that someone with lots of friends must be a person worth being friends *with*, it turns out the opposite is true: people prefer to befriend someone with a relatively small social circle, rightly intuiting that if someone has an overabundance of friends, their ability to reciprocate in any meaningful or reliable way will be severely diminished.[5]

All this time I’d been busily making and maintaining connections and I’d actually undermined the thing that was most important to me. I’d become a worse friend to the few who really counted in my desperation to be accepted by the many I barely knew.

It wasn’t, in fact, that I had too many friends, it was that I’d misunderstood the fundamental concept of friendship, which is that it should be stable,

reciprocal and attentive. And for the purpose of clarity, my definition of a friend is someone you voluntarily want to spend time with, to whom you are not attached through familial bonds and with whom you don't have a sexual or romantic relationship. A true friendship, to my mind, is founded on mutual respect, support, affection and kindness. You can't be those things to everyone who enters your orbit unless you first work out a way to reconstruct the space–time continuum.

But understanding that you might be addicted to friendship does not mean you know how to cure yourself. I had no idea how to course-correct. I did not know where to look for resources, for understanding or for a lexicon of friendship itself. I didn't really know what friendship *was*. It was a term so diffuse as to be rendered almost meaningless. Yet, for me, it simultaneously encapsulated all that was most meaningful and this also rendered it beyond the grasp of mere words.

So I did what I always do when I try to make sense of the world: I spoke to my friends. This book is the result. It is an attempt to fill in some of the gaps and provide some of the words. It is a journey of discovery, with a starting point of curiosity, and as such it will not have all the answers. It might not have any. But I hope it asks some interesting questions and contains some thoughtful jumping-off points for bigger conversations.

There are so many ways to be a friend that it's impossible to do justice to them all, especially because attitudes to friendship diverge according to background, upbringing, age and geography. Ghanaians are more likely to advocate caution towards making friends and to emphasise the need for practical assistance, for instance. Americans, by contrast, have larger friendship networks and are more likely to emphasise companionship and emotional support.[6] Chinese adolescents are concerned with the moral quality of close friendship whereas their Western counterparts focus predominantly on interaction, intimacy and keeping promises.[7] The British and Australians value friends who are alike in outlook, with whom they can bond over similarities. In India, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, people are more likely to say that 'a large social network' is an essential quality to have in a best friend.[8] In Kazakhstan, the nineteenth-century poet and philosopher Abai Qunanbaiuly had this to say about how to recognise true companionship: 'A false friend is like a shadow: when the sun shines on you, you can't get rid of him, but when clouds gather over you, he is nowhere to be seen.'[9]