

Harris Wittels

B. 1984

THE COMEDIAN'S COMEDIAN

Remembering my friend through the digital ephemera he left behind.

By Aziz Ansari

It's a strange moment when a friend who has died shows up on your phone. My friend Harris Wittels died in February, but his name still occasionally pops up in my email, my Gchat, my Facebook feed and my text messages. It hurts, because for a second, I forget what has happened, and then this electronic ghost forces me to remember all over again.

What do you do? Are you supposed to delete the friend from your phone? It feels mean. The person just died, now I have to "delete" him?

When these digital ghosts pop up, I usually end up going down a rabbit hole, scrolling through these old exchanges and remembering my friend.

I met Harris eight years ago, when we were performing standup comedy. I really enjoyed his work, and he opened some tour dates for me, and we eventually collaborated on several unproduced screenplays together. I loved Harris's writing. A lot of comedy writing is not very funny, especially to other comedy writers. People invariably pitch similar versions of the same joke. In a writers' room, a winning pitch is usually acknowledged with a chuckle that conveys "I see why that would work comedically" rather than with boisterous laughter.

Harris was a fantastic exception: His writing always made us laugh. A good comedy writers' room is filled with talented people, but there is usually one really funny person to whom the room turns when you hit a wall. Harris was that person. His jokes were unexpected and bizarre and full of joy.

Once, in the "Master of None" writers' room, we were trying to figure out a simple joke: Someone would give my character bad advice on what to text a woman who wasn't responding to his texts. After a million rounds of pitching, Harris piped up: "What if he tells him to text her a photo of a turtle coming out of a briefcase and then quickly write 'Wrong person?'"

"Why?" someone asked.

"Because it's mysterious, and she'd immediately wonder why he'd be texting that to someone, so she'll definitely write back."

It was immediately clear that Harris's line needed to go in the script and that the rest of us were wasting our time.

Another time we needed to figure out a set piece for when Colin Salmon, an eccentric actor, invites my character over to his apartment one evening. A million more pitches, no progress, until Harris chimed in, "What if he has a huge domino rally setup at his house, and he invites him over to knock them over, and then tells him good night and he just leaves?"

We did that, too.

I'm glad we have the brilliant, but all too brief, output of his comedy. And despite the shock of seeing them pop up, I'm also glad I have all those emails and messages. This preserved record of our mundane, day-to-day, digital interactions helps remind me what it was like to have him in my life and what a sweet and hilarious man he was.

Here are bits of a Gchat exchange between Harris and his sister Stephanie. You didn't look at Harris and immediately think "ladies' man," but he was genuine and fearless in what he would do to make someone laugh.

Harris: did i tell u i'm gonna be on the real world?

Stephanie: WHAT? NO

Harris: i talked to this girl at a bar all night and there were cameras on us.

Stephanie: did you do a bedroom scene???????

Harris: they were doing their job thing which was walking around with candy trays and trying to get tips and wearing these vests for a group called the "meow meows" and i said i'm in the ruff ruffs and she giggled and then she literally ripped my shirt off and put on her vest and gave me the tray

Stephanie: shut up!!!

Harris: and i started selling her candy and getting a lot of tips

Stephanie: Were there sparks?

Harris: mad sparks [...] i was like whats yer name and she was like kimberly and i was like your last names burly? she loved it

I was Harris's boss on "Master of None," and if he had been anyone else he would have been fired immediately. He was reliably 15 to 30 minutes late and went on extended unauthorized phone breaks constantly. Once, my co-creator and I had to leave the writers' room, so we put Harris in charge while we were gone. I later found out that shortly after we left, Harris told the room that they were done for the day, and everyone left. He was so talented and lovable that he knew all would be forgiven.

Before working with me, Harris spent many seasons writing for Mike Schur on "Parks and Recreation." Consider how talented and charming someone must be to continue to maintain employment while engaging in texts like this:

Harris: Hey man I'm taking a        in the basement.

Mike: I'm your boss.

Harris: Found a great vacant bathroom downstairs. Be back soon. You guys keep going.

Mike: I'm tweeting this if you don't get up here in 30 seconds.

Harris was very open about his struggles with drugs. On an episode of the "You Made It Weird" podcast with Pete Holmes, Harris detailed how heroin became a part of his life. It's a brutal story that only Harris could share in a way that is both heartbreaking and hilarious. You melt when you hear how, at a low point, Harris didn't care about his life anymore. But minutes later, he makes you laugh as he recounts how people in a Los Angeles park were unknowingly having a lighthearted barbecue steps away from him just as he was making his first awkward foray into purchasing serious opiates.

Just before Harris died, we had plans to move to New York together to film "Master of None," and we felt very inspired creatively. He had found a counselor in the city to help him stay sober. I was naïve about addiction and assumed that because he was so good about pursuing treatment, things would be fine. He always seemed so hopeful, and things were all pointed the right way. His mother, Maureen, forwarded me the final email she received from Harris, which he sent the same day he died of a heroin overdose.

i found a cool place to live in Manhattan. I feel good!! I am feeling very fortunate. Love you

Since Harris's death, I've dug deeper into his podcast history just to hear his voice. I found one bit where he pretended to be calling from heaven. If there is a heaven, I hope it's like this:

"Hey, it's Harris callin' from heaven. Ahh, it's pretty great up here. Ahh, it's beautiful for starters. Hitler's up here, however, for the vegetarianism thing so callin' [expletive] on that. But other than that it's pretty great. It is very cloudy. You sit on them so that's cool. Oops gotta' go, ice cream buffet!"