

# Pineapple Chunks

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As Link stares through the windshield at the red glow of the traffic light filtering through the sheen of a downpour, the only thought in his head is *what the hell am I doing in a car with him?*

“Oh, dude—this one’s my favorite!” Patrick says from the driver’s seat, cranking up the volume. Patrick says that about every song that plays on the alt-rock radio station. Link’s head aches in time with the drumbeat.

Ten minutes before he got into this godforsaken car, Link was rifling through the sparse contents of his fridge to scrape together a meal to watch urban exploration videos to. He deserved a restful evening after the thirty-minute phone calls he’d waded through at his job as a receptionist at the local urgent care. He nearly fell asleep on the spot when he shed his khakis for sweatpants. So, when the doorbell to his apartment rang, Link waited a minute before sighing heavily and answering the door.

Dripping rainwater on his doormat was Patrick Ryans, exactly how Link remembered him: highlighter bright shorts, knee-high rainboots, Misfits hoodie, and gel running down his face off his no longer spiked hair. The only new thing was the pathetic look of concern slathered across his face. Back when they’d been roommates, Patrick never looked anything less than confident, even when his actions caused Link physical pain via secondhand embarrassment. The only thing that stopped Link from slamming the door on Patrick’s sad face was the energy it would take.

Look, Patrick was an asshole. In the near decade they’d been friends, Patrick hadn’t held a job down for more than a month tops. He forgot to give Link a ride when he needed one, chatted up the girls Link called dibs on, leeches off Link’s food supplies, and stole from Link’s record collection—just the record, not the jacket or inner sleeve, meaning they got all scratched up. But Patrick could also be incredibly compassionate. He’d stay late at bars chatting to strangers until they’d sobbed their entire life’s story into his sleeve and vowed to go back to therapy. A minute later, he’d break a guy’s nose for disagreeing with his music taste and Link would think *compassionate my ass*.

Link slid the worst parts of their friendship to the back of his mind when he was with Patrick, but the grievances piled up. Patrick’s impulsiveness and constant complaining was hell on Link and his undergraduate degree, causing Link to move in with Ada (his then girlfriend, now ex) sooner than either of them were

ready for. He graduated, thank god, but never made it into medical school like he wanted.

The space from Patrick had been worth it all, though. With his world no longer dominated by Patrick's whims, Link reanalyzed their friendship from a more objective perspective and discovered how much of an asshole Patrick was. Link made other friends, safer friends, and tried to let his and Patrick's friendship fizzle out like forgotten birthday candles drowning in their own wax. But Patrick doubled down, texting at all hours of the night and sending him so many memes he thought his phone would run out of storage. So, Link blocked him.

A week later at a New Year's Eve party, Patrick showed up and cornered Link in the middle of the living room to ask why he'd been avoiding him.

"Seriously, man." Patrick's voice rose, and he shifted from foot to foot. "Why are you being such a dick? Did I do something to piss you off?"

The ball was dropping on TV, and people around them were searching for a partner to kiss. Link felt their annoyed eyes bury under his skin. They were probably all wondering what awful thing Link had done to Patrick to deserve his fury. Link wanted to scream that he wasn't the problem, *Patrick* was.

"Just tell me how to fix this," Patrick whined.

The B-tier celebrity started counting down on TV, the chant echoing around them.

*Five, four, three, two—*

Something inside Link snapped. He shouted, "Are you that stupid? You can't be fixed, and I'm sick of trying."

Patrick's rage melted off his face, leaving behind burnt shards of humiliation as he excused himself from the party to the opening lines of "Auld Lang Syne." The people around Link fell silent, glares hot and sticky on his skin. He left soon after.

To Patrick's credit, he gave up on their busted friendship after that. The past few years went by without so much as an email. But then he showed up on Link's doorstep.

As Link answered the door, "What the hell are you doing here?" was on the tip of his tongue, but Patrick hugged him before he could say it.

“Ada told me,” Patrick said, destroying any other protests from Link. They stood like that for a minute in the open doorway, Patrick trying to hide his sniffling in Link’s shoulder and Link ignoring the wet spots it left on his ratty t-shirt.

Once his legs felt like they might give out under Patrick’s weight, Link asked, “Want to come inside?”

Patrick sat on the lumpy IKEA couch they’d bought together years ago. Link microwaved some water for tea.

“Didn’t know you still talk to Ada,” Link said over the buzz, watching the mugs dance around each other on the turntable. Ada had cut contact with Patrick around the time Link did and never mentioned a reunion. Course, Link and Ada didn’t talk about everything now, having suffered a relatively messy breakup. It was Link’s fault, he admitted—the struggle to get into med school and giving up on his dreams of being a physician took a toll on his ability to be a good boyfriend. Recently, he’d rebuilt a semi-stable friendship with Ada, who’d found her own happiness in a coffee shop she’d founded.

“Yeah,” Patrick said, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. “She got me a job at her shop.”

“You have a job?” Link asked before he could stop himself.

Patrick laughed. “Three years is a long time.”

“You dress the same,” Link said, settling back against the counter.

“Doesn’t mean I’m still the same stupid, jobless, record-thief,” Patrick said. “I’ll get those back to you, by the way.”

“It’s fine,” Link said. “I’m not really into records anymore.”

“Even *Dark Side of the Moon*?” Patrick asked.

Link paused, response dying in the back of his throat. “You took *The Dark Side of the Moon*?”

Patrick dried his hair on his hoodie. “Like I said, I’ll get it back to you.”

“Don’t.” Link’s fingers clenched around the countertop. “I don’t have a lot of free time for records anymore.”

Patrick’s face twisted. “Like you didn’t have time to tell me you got c—”

*God*, that song is fucking loud. Link's head pounds, pulling him back into the present, in the car with Patrick.

"Can you turn that down?" Link asks, squeezing the bridge of his nose.

"Oh—yeah, sure man," Patrick says, twisting the volume dial. "Right. Headaches. From the cancer and stuff."

Link sighs, wishing again that Ada kept her mouth shut. When he found out about the brain tumor, he told her first. He doesn't really have anyone else to tell, and he doesn't want his diagnosis to spread among acquaintances and strangers who'll tell him they sympathize to clear their conscience and bring him casseroles he doesn't want. He just got the diagnosis confirmed a week ago, and he has no idea what to do. As a pre-med student he'd studied all sorts of treatment plans, but it's different now that he's the patient. Besides, he doesn't even know what treatments his insurance will pay for.

"What are your odds?" Patrick asked, back in the kitchen. The microwave beeped, loud and cacophonous as a middle school choir.

"About seventy-thirty," Link said, thinking he should mop the floor sometime.

"Seventy you live?"

"Seventy I'll die."

That was when Patrick grabbed Link's hand and pulled him outside to his car, telling him they were going out. Link protested, complaining about the ache in his head and back, but Patrick assured him it would be quick, and Link was too tired to care.

So that was how Link ended up next to Patrick in his car.

"Is the temperature okay?" Patrick asks, hands tapping out the beat on the steering wheel.

"Stop acting nervous," Link says with a snort. "I'm not one of your dates."

"If this were a date, I would've pulled out my special date playlist, guaranteed to get me laid," Patrick says. "And you'd be wearing a G-string under those sweatpants."

"How do you know I'm not?" Link asks.

Patrick lets out a choppy, raucous laugh, the kind that used to get him and Link thrown out of classes, churches, and restaurants. “God, I missed you,” he says, wiping his eyes.

“Yeah,” Link says, fidgeting with a hole near the hem of his shirt to distract himself from the way his stomach sours. A few minutes later, Patrick whips the car around into a parking space, narrowly avoiding a station wagon to his left.

“We’re here,” Patrick says.

“Where’s here?” Link asks, squinting through the rain.

“You’ll find out,” Patrick says with a knowing smirk that reminds Link why he’d been friends with Patrick to begin with.

Patrick is like a firework: bright, colorful, exciting, and overall breathtaking. But he’s also extraordinarily loud, hurts your eyes if you stare at him too long, and leaves charred remains and the distinct smell of smoke in his wake.

Like the time Patrick thought it would be a good idea to break into an animal shelter. It was just before three in the morning and Link was supposed to be getting sleep before his organic chemistry exam. Patrick shot down all of his protests as he picked the lock on the back door with practiced ease.

The lock clicked open. “Ladies first,” Patrick said through the handkerchief covering his lower face.

Link entered the building slowly, tugging up his own makeshift mask. The shelter was low on funding—no security cameras or alarms that he could see. Then again, the second they got to the kennels the dogs started barking louder than any man-made alarm. The mix of types and pitches of howls in the echoing hallway neared deafening. Link wished very much to be at home.

“God, they’re just packed in here like luggage,” Patrick yelled over the roar, kneeling to stick a finger into the cage of a Doberman, who scuttled back, ears flat against its head. “It’s not right.”

“We should get out of here.” Link yelled back, eyeing a poodle that snarled like it was under demonic possession.

Patrick stood with a wildness in his eyes not unlike the kind he’d get when stuck on the final level of a video game. “They deserve to live,” he said, opening the doberman’s cage.

“Holy fuck!” Link slammed his back into the cage on the other side of the aisle from the large black dog, fully expecting to watch his best friend get his throat ripped out. But the dog didn’t move; it just shivered violently.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Patrick whispered as he crouched, palms outstretched in front of him. The dog stepped forward gingerly, then sniffed his hands. “You’re free, buddy,” Patrick said.

The dog stared at Patrick, then took off down the hallway. It stopped at the back door of the building, looking back at Patrick expectantly.

“Open the door for her,” Patrick said as he moved to open the next cage. Link did, moving slowly so the dog wouldn’t decide to take a chunk of Link’s leg as a to-go meal. The dog bolted into the night. Link hoped someone would find it before a car did. The shelter was miles from any major roads, but it was late and the dog’s coat blended in with the dark.

After the Doberman came a flood of dogs, big and small, slow and stumbling, some coughing, some howling, like a ragtag parade. If he hadn’t been so worried they would all get run over before sunrise, Link would have said it was weirdly beautiful.

Last out of the shelter was Patrick, carrying what looked like a disheveled mop. They ran back to their (Link’s) car and slammed the doors, out of breath in the front seat. The silence was piercing after the previous canine cacophony.

“Hey, bug-a-boo,” Patrick said, petting the mop, which licked him. Looking closer, it was a scraggly white dog with red-rimmed eyes, drooling on Patrick’s jeans.

“You stole one?” Link asked.

“Look at him. He’s sick,” Patrick said, gesturing toward the admittedly pathetic dog. “He looks like a strong breeze would kill him.” The dog whined as if agreeing.

“You should take it back,” Link said. “They know how to take care of it better than you.”

“It’s a kill shelter,” Patrick said louder, gently combing his fingers through the dog’s tangled fur. “The older ones, the sick ones, they’re first on the list. I left the puppies. They’ll get adopted no problem.”

“Oh,” Link said. He started the car.

“His name’s gonna be Joey. Like Joey Ramone,” Patrick said. “You like that, Joey?” The dog sneezed, the force of it knocking his head against Patrick’s knee.

“I think he’s deaf,” Link said as he pulled out of the parking lot, careful to check for any newly stray dogs.

“Perfect, he won’t mind if you turn the music up,” Patrick kissed Joey’s head. “Right, sweetie?”

Joey had lived with Link and Patrick for three months before dying of lung cancer or some other canine respiratory disease they couldn’t pay to fix. Putting Joey down almost killed Patrick, but Link reminded him it was better than living in pain. Plus Joey had spent the last few months of his life eating bacon and pizza with a human who loved him.

Patrick didn’t come out of his room for a week after. He turned his music up, but all the punk rock in the world couldn’t cover the sounds of his sobbing.

Bright, shocking, and beautiful for a moment, then back to smoke and melted plastic. Link wonders when Patrick will crash tonight.

Link follows Patrick through the downpour, focusing on his industrial grade orange shorts to lead the way. The sign above the building clears up as Link gets closer, and once he can read it he turns to Patrick.

“You took me away from home to go to a goddamn grocery store?” Link shouts to be heard over the rain.

Patrick shrugs and says, “I thought you’d be too tired for a strip club.”

Link almost laughs in incredulity.

Inside the store, Link shakes the water off his skin. He gives up on his clothes, which are completely soaked. In the television positioned to show them security camera footage, he sees the shadows under his eyes and his stooped frame, pronounced by his wet clothes. He looks like shit. He wonders how much worse he’ll look after radiation or surgery. He wonders if he’ll be able to afford either. For a split second he wishes someone would just put him down before it gets bad, like they did Joey.

Inside, Patrick speedwalks recklessly around the store, practically running down the other shoppers. A woman with broken sunglasses glares out of the empty frame as Patrick nearly knocks her over in the cereal aisle. Link apologizes for him, but Patrick is already in the next aisle over.

After tracking him down, Link grabs hold of Patrick's arm. "Slow down. What are you looking for?"

"You know," Patrick says, shaking him off.

"I really don't," Link says, more exhausted than ever. He feels like he's babysitting a toddler who hasn't learned fundamental conversation skills yet.

"You know," Patrick says again, firmer. He passes a tired-eyed man crouching in the pharmacy section with a fussy baby on his back. "Goddammit," Patrick hisses under his breath.

"Just tell me," Link says, pissier than he intended.

"Come on. You remember," Patrick says, heading for the dairy freezers. Link grabs his arm again, holding firm.

"Fucking tell me," Link says a little too loud. The tired father glares at him.

Patrick shrinks a little. "Pineapples, dude."

Link turns it over in his head. "Why the hell are you buying pineapples in October?"

"You seriously don't remember?" Patrick asks, suddenly sounding a little congested.

That's when Link remembers.

Back when Link was a pre-med student living with Patrick, he shared the health tips from class with anyone who would listen. Patrick, who had the immune system of a Victorian infant, received the brunt of it. Whenever Patrick got the flu, a sinus infection, or particularly bad allergies, Link cut up fresh fruit for him. Though it changed depending on the season, he most often bought pineapples on sale at a local stand.

"Vitamin C will boost that immune system," Link would say, plopping a bowl of fruit on the couch. "Makes your skin glow, too."

"Fuck off," Patrick would say underneath a mound of blankets and tissues even as he started eating.

"Cures all ails," Link would add.

Between coughs Patrick would say, “You sound like my mother.”

“That’s what I get for sleeping with her,” Link would say before dodging the pillow tossed at his head.

The fruit stand shut down a few years ago from pandemic-related problems. Link hasn’t thought about it in ages. He thought the whole thing annoyed the hell out of Patrick, the kind of habit someone only allows after years of friendship. But Patrick’s frantic eyes now plead with him to remember, hands hanging uselessly by his sides.

“I need to—” Patrick cuts himself off, clearing his throat as he surreptitiously wipes his eyes.

Link takes his hand and leads him across the store to the canned fruit aisle. Patrick insists on paying, digging through his wallet for the necessary five dollar bill after his card declines. On the drive home, Link turns the radio up, smiling as Patrick sings along with a voice that could make dogs howl and children cry. His headache isn’t that bad anymore.

The rain lets up to a sprinkle, the kind of mist that feels nice in warmer weather, so they sit on a nearby bench instead of heading back into the apartment right away. A dying streetlight casts just enough light for them to feel safe from mugging but not enough to hide the stars. A dog howls contentedly somewhere in the distance.

“Fuck,” Patrick barks.

Link looks up in alarm. “What?”

Patrick turns to him with a look of saturated horror. “I forgot forks.”

They stare at each other for a second before Link bursts out laughing.

“Here,” he says, pulling the tab to open the can before handing one to Patrick. “Drink up, Trick.”

“So stupid,” Patrick says, accepting the can.

Link pauses opening his own can. “You’re not stupid. It’s eleven PM, we’re all stupid.”

“Gee, thanks,” Patrick says with an eye roll. His face gives way to a pleasant smile all the same.

“Cheers,” Link says, clinking their cans together. “To our health. Mostly mine.”

“Eat your fruit, asshole,” Patrick says, tipping his own can back.

Link does. The pineapple chunks taste more sweet than bitter.