

*To all the romances that couldn't happen,
and all the ones that still can.*

Dear Jean-Pierre,

I regret to inform you that this will be the last letter you ever receive from me. You see, this year I have decided to get a boyfriend and unfortunately (for you) I simply don't have the time to both continue my pen-pal responsibilities and give this new task the focus it requires.

I don't want to lie to you and say that getting a boyfriend is the only reason I'm stopping my letters. I think, Jean-Pierre, you are partly to blame. We have been writing letters to each other for nearly two years now and there hasn't been the slightest hint that you'll invite me to France despite me having invited you to my house several times. Invitations which you have, rather rudely, ignored. There was also the issue last year when you addressed your letter to someone called 'Felix' and in the process made it abundantly clear that ours was not an exclusive writing relationship. Have you invited Felix to Normandy, Jean Pierre?? Don't even bother responding to that because I shan't reply. Lastly, and I don't quite know when this happened, but I've noticed that we now write all of our letters in English and because of this, my French has not improved at all. I wish you well and I hope that life is kind to you and despite all of this I genuinely hope that you get into the tennis team this year. I know how important that is to you.

But like I said, this is the last you will ever hear from me,

Kind regards, à bientôt,

Patrick Simmons (Patch)

PS In your first-ever letter, you attached a Milka chocolate bar (which was quite the incentive for keeping up our pen-pal relationship, and I wrongly assumed they would be a regular addition to your letters). I think it would be a really classy and symbolic move to send me one more as a final 'adieu' to our writing relationship. Also, they are really quite hard to find here. OK, now that is the last you'll ever hear from me, properly this time.

Au Revoir!

Patrick Simmons (Patch)

xxx

Chapter 1

I cross out the kisses at the end of my letter because I think it undermines the gravity of what I'm saying. My chair creaks as I lean back and hold the letter up for inspection. Faultless penmanship, as always.

I do feel a bit guilty for ending my pen-pal relationship with Jean-Pierre but 'in order to make room for new relationships in my life I have to de-weed the ones that aren't bearing fruit'. I learned that phrase from one of my mum's self-help books, which I've taken to borrowing on a semi-short-term basis. If you look past the tacky covers there are some real pearls of wisdom there. It's fascinating how much is applicable to both a divorcee in her mid-forties and a queer sixteen-year-old; especially as we're both desperately seeking a man. While, *of course*, seeming to be happy on our own in order to lure them in. Ah, Jean-Pierre, au revoir!

It's worth noting that I have been in love twice before. The first time was with Fred; very charming with neat blond hair and a penchant for accessories. The problem was that he was an animated character on *Scooby-Doo*. I appreciate that he was romantically linked with Daphne but I always

felt their chemistry to be somewhat lacking. Fred took charge which I found very appealing (but now find a bit problematic) and he, alongside Velma, was a large factor of why the gang had such a high success rate when I don't think any of them were formally trained in detective work. The second time was with Josh, who was definitely a real person, but things turned sour when I discovered he was a paid babysitter rather than a seventeen-year-old genuinely interested in my origami and who weirdly enjoyed enforcing bedtimes.

You have to be *organized* in order to fall in love so I've given myself a 'boyfriend deadline'. The end of the school year feels much too far away; I'm ready to take the leap *now* and I'll get complacent if the deadline's too far in the future. Also I'm terrible at being patient. So, I've marked in my diary (with a big red heart) the perfect deadline: Prom. Our school doesn't do *actual* Prom, but my Drama Club puts on a party after the first big show which everyone calls 'Prom'. Apart from Ms Jenkins, who runs it, because she thinks that '*Americanisms* are melting our mind', which is ridiculous because America is responsible for such incredible things! Off the top of my head: Kelly Clarkson, the Hollywood sign and cereals so sweet they make your teeth shake. I even tried suggesting a big family holiday to America under the guise of 'political intrigue' but Mum quickly sniffed out it was for the cereals, so we went to Devon instead. Regardless, Prom

is the *perfect* time to have a boyfriend:

Why Prom is the PERFECT time to have a boyfriend:

- Proms are romantic (ask any film).
- There's a photo element (it is so important to professionally document love).
- I won't have to spend an awkward amount of time pretending to browse the crisp selection when the slow songs come on.
- It's in December, so I'll probably receive a thoughtful and romantic Christmas present from him (jewellery seems a bit obvious, but also I want it).

Last year, our 'Prom' was tasteless and uninspired; the theme was 'party'. It was my mission to convince Ms Jenkins (partly through pretending to cry) that this year it was integral to have a legitimate planning committee. Luckily, as I'm the only person who volunteered to be on the committee, I can essentially organize my own perfect night!

'Patrick! We are leaving at 7.45 *on the dot!*'

I'm snapped out of my daydream of slow-dancing with a new boyfriend to the sound of my mum yelling at me from downstairs. Bugger. I spent too long trying to impress Jean-Pierre with my handwriting and now I have ruined my life.

I stand up from the little wooden desk in my room and go to the mirror on the wall, which is in the shape of a

crescent moon, making it very difficult to see anything in. Today's the first day of school, so obviously I have to wear something that perfectly encapsulates the vibe of my upcoming year. Like a sociopath, I've left it until the morning to decide what that new look will be.

Looking at the moon mirror reminds me that I also need to redecorate my room to match my new vibe. I can't have my future boyfriend coming upstairs, obviously expecting to see the bedroom of a sophisticated adult with warm neutrals, wicker storage baskets and low lighting and instead entering the bedroom of a *child* – or more specifically a *child obsessed with space* because alongside the moon mirror are star curtains, an astronaut figurine, a giant poster of the moon landing and a hanging rotating model of the solar system. I don't even like space any more! I just so happened to be obsessed with it when I was last allowed to redesign my room. Luckily, over the last week I've managed to steal little touches that make my room seem more mature: a gingerbread-scented candle that my mum got for Christmas, one of the pillows from the sofa downstairs and a lamp I found in the shed which, unfortunately, gives me little electric shocks every time I turn it on, but it's worth it.

'Did you hear me, Patrick?!' Mum yells again.

Ugh. I lean my head out into the landing. 'It's *PATCH!*' I shout. Another part of my rebrand is shifting from Patrick to Patch to feel more characterful and mysterious. As if I

just don't have *time* to say Patrick. 'Patrick' is the type of person to give his hand a hickey from practising kissing too hard (true story, unfortunately), while 'Patch' is the type of person to give other people tips on how to kiss while also smelling divine and having the perfect amount of rip on his ripped jeans.

'Also!' I continue over the sound of the coffee machine. 'You're stressing me out, and this is a really important day! You should be savouring this! Your child is going into lower sixth, a once-in-a-lifetime occasion!'

There is a pause while she waits for the coffee machine to stop whirring. 'Apart from when Kath did it last year. Forty-five minutes, *Patrick!*'

My older sister, Kath, is old for her year (a cruel, cold-hearted winter baby) and I'm young for my year (a joyful, warm-hearted summer baby) and because of that we're only one school year apart which Mum misguidedly hoped would make us close. She's also misguided in giving me forty-five minutes to get ready. You can't do anything momentous in forty-five minutes! I contort my body in an attempt to see as much of myself in the moon mirror as possible so I can figure out what will be the quickest route of personalization. All I see is slightly ginger hair – I've branded it as 'sunset blonde' – and arms that are too long. As always, I decide to FaceTime Jean.

'We can do this, we just need to streamline,' says Jean

calmly on loudspeaker while I sift through a box of slogan badges.

Jean is my best friend in the world. It's unfortunate that her name is Jean but it's not something I hold against her. She's *sensational* but also a bit of a nightmare. Recently, she's taken to wearing a different decorative hair clip every day and learning everything there is to know about queerness. At first this was largely to support me, but now it's gone too far and she just tells me off when I'm not being progressive enough. This is theoretically good but realistically very annoying because, sorry, *I am the queer one*.

'OK, so our main options are hair, shoes or accessories,' I remind her, as I empty out a box of loose crystals onto my bed. I'm not positive what I can do fashion-wise with loose crystals but I'm willing to get creative.

'This would be so much easier if we didn't have a school uniform,' she moans over the phone as she forces a cherry, her clip of the day, into her unruly hair.

'Ugh, I know.'

I'm lying. I would never admit this but I find it very helpful having a uniform because otherwise I would be overwhelmed with choice and nobody would understand my more abstract outfit aesthetics such as 'a chance encounter' or 'memories of bohemia'. Also, the green polo-shirt goes with my colouring.

'What shoes do you have?' asks Jean, but she's left the

screen so her voice sounds slightly echoey.

‘Oooh, I don’t think that’s a route we want to go down because my shoes at the moment, while not super fashionable, have excellent arch—’

‘—Arch support yes. You’ve actually mentioned that several times,’ she says as she reappears onscreen with her school bag which, knowing Jean, has been packed ready for three days. ‘Hair it is!’

I stick my fingers into the ‘texture-enhancing putty wax’ that I have received every Christmas for the past six years from my godmother Pamela. Her and my mum aren’t even friends any more but she inexplicably still sends me hair wax every year with a flamingo-themed card. I’m following a hair tutorial called ‘messy beach look’ but after about ten minutes of twisting my ends in order ‘to create effortless definition’ the result is less ‘beach look’ and more ‘recently died by electrocution’. I run my head under the tap to reset and borrow my sister’s hairdryer. After another ten minutes, during which time Jean and I have two fights about whether it would be useful to invest in a hair diffuser (it definitely would) I inspect myself in the mirror and definitely have *volume*. I’m forced to lean quite far back in order to show Jean the full effect but we both decide that volume is something to celebrate so I hang up and proudly go downstairs to showcase my new look.

‘Nice hair,’ says Mum while grabbing her bag for what I

imagine is the eleventh time to look for her keys.

‘Why do you never support my creative endeavours?’ I snap, carefully tapping the top of my hair to make sure it hasn’t lost any precious volume.

‘By creative endeavours do you mean using a hairdryer?’ she replies absentmindedly, barely looking up from her bag. ‘Where are my flipping keys?’

‘Caroline.’ I address her by her first name so she knows I’m serious, and take in a slightly performative shaky breath. ‘If you continue to stunt my personal growth by saying patronizing things like “nice hair” . . . then I’m not sure I can carry on living under this increasingly oppressive roof.’

Mum looks like she’s about to snap something back but then furrows her brow in confusion. ‘What?’

My mum used to be proud of my rapidly expanding vocabulary, but it appears she’s no longer thrilled that her son is a word prodigy. In theory, I’m very impressed by my mother because she’s a single mum raising two children (one of whom is an angel and one of whom is Kath) but in practice I find her to be increasingly annoying especially when she refuses to give me her unyielding support in my every endeavour, which surely is the whole point of being a parent?

‘Alright, Patrick,’ she continues, using the tone of voice I have learned to recognize as ‘*can this conversation be over?*’. ‘Your hair is the best thing I’ve ever seen. It’s close

to godliness . . . and not just because of its height,' and proceeds to laugh at her own joke. 'Now where the eff are my effing keys!' she hisses into the butter dish.

I actually know where her keys are but in order to give myself time for Weetabix, and to punish her for both calling me Patrick and the hair joke, I withhold that piece of information. My trick with Weetabix is eating one at a time so you aren't left with the dreaded soggy mush. I crave texture both in life and in breakfast cereal.

As I move onto my second Weetabix, Kath trudges into the kitchen dragging her school bag behind her, not dissimilarly to how she sometimes drags me behind her. My sister has recently discovered eyeliner in an aggressive way, but won't let me show her how to do a 'flick' so instead just looks like she's making sure astronauts in space know exactly where her eyes are. Just before she crams whatever cured meat she can find in the fridge into her mouth she looks me up and down with unveiled contempt. 'What is going on with your hair?' she asks.

'What?' I self-consciously tap it. It's a bit crunchy.

'Looks weird,' she replies.

"Weird" is just another word for unique. So *thank you*, Kath, for saying I look unique.'

'Whatever,' she says and fists a handful of salami in her mouth. There's been somewhat of a cold war between Kath and me over the last year or so because she refuses to admit

that she broke my karaoke machine when the evidence is all there (aka, me just *knowing* it was her!). She mistakenly thinks I'll get over it eventually but she underestimates my skill in holding a grudge. It's actually one of my top five skills.

My Top Five Skills:

1. Acting.
2. Knowing what any TV advert is promoting within two seconds.
3. Being able to roll my r's.
4. Holding a grudge.
5. Triple jump (I'm weirdly good at triple jump but unfortunately it doesn't hold much weight nowadays).

'Alright, let's gooooo! We really are running late,' I say, swiping the keys off their spot and handing them to my puzzled mother who always thinks the key hook is 'too obvious' a place to look.

Just as Mum is about to lock the door, I stop her. It's funny how time-pressured situations always provide moments of clarity. I turn and sprint upstairs to grab the *one thing* that has the power to tie my entire look together and set the tone for the whole year.