

Cold Turkey

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Young Writer Category - Third Prize

A Note to the Reader:

To this day it remains a heated debate amongst those amateur scholars who populate the more useless corners of the Internet exactly what happened to Patrick O'Brien during his Thanksgiving party that one year. While most say it was alien mind control, it's hard to be sure. The aliens, as you know, vehemently deny the accusation. They argue that reprogramming the mind is costly and not worth the effort, especially when human bodies are so ill-suited to galactic warfare. It's kind of hard to believe that coming from a creature that resembles an oversized twig, but I'm not one to be fastidious.

Another popular belief is that Patrick, suffering from the withdrawal which follows an unexpected taste of fame, discovered that hurling himself across a table full of guests was a good way to stir things up again.

Still others point out that after being trapped for hours in the same room as the wine and the in-laws, surely anyone would go a little insane.

These accounts are as false as they are entertaining, the work of conspiracy theorists and novice comedians. Most advertise a title in flashing colors that simultaneously induces you to click on them and your migraine to take a battering ram to your cerebrum: **WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED TO PATRICK O'BRIEN...CLICK HERE FOR THE TRUE STORY!!!**

I know you know what I'm talking about. And unlike those jokers I can assure you that this story, while just as entertaining, contains no distasteful advertisements, no neon letters, and just the right amount of absurdity. And it's the truth. The *real* truth.

Don't give me that look.

The story began on a night in which our main character spent very little time sleeping and a good deal of time doing things his mother would probably not approve of. Patrick would have very much preferred that this were not so. His company, which sold absurdly-priced napkin rings, had taken a big hit last week. The stress made sleep scarce. If you're wondering how he even made a living selling only jewel-encrusted metal circles, you're not alone. Patrick's customers were both ridiculous and ridiculously wealthy, and though they were few, they were excessive enough for Patrick to live quite comfortably in a mansion of his own. Apparently in high society much of one's dignity resides in owning napkin rings more costly than your mother's wedding dress.

Thanks to his affluent clientele, Patrick lived like a king but also with the king's constant fear that someone would soon topple his throne. He kept his appearance as meticulously pressed and prim as his three-piece suit, lest any of his customers ever catch him looking unfit for aristocracy. He was thirty-two, handsome in the way one might describe a good crop of tomatoes that will inevitably go soft and squishy with age. He had no spouse or children for fear that he could not manage their impropriety. Nothing was more important to him than his reputation.

Oh, and he despised cats.

Patrick squinted bleary-eyed at the clock on the bedside table. It read 1:31, gleefully ticking off each second of lost sleep. Outside, the wailing that had woken him continued. Either it was that blasted cat again, or a tornado siren had come down with laryngitis. With a sigh Patrick heaved himself off the mattress and moved towards the noise.

Poised on the windowsill was a local tomcat whose collar read “Wallace” in elaborate script. While no one knew for sure who owned him, everyone was certain he or she must have been despicable (What kind of person abandons a pet to the streets? Moreover, what kind of person names their cat *Wallace*?). With an owner like that, Wallace was better off alone. But he didn’t have to be uncared for. Although he spent most of his time on the streets, his fur remained long and lustrous thanks to frequent grooming from the neighbors; this permitted him to act every bit as punctilious as Patrick. Wallace also exhibited the perfect combination of tenderness and cunning to serve the dual purpose of charming old ladies for food scraps and intimidating small children. He exuded a self-righteous air that even other cats dared not imitate. And, having conquered the world, he had decided that Patrick’s cat allergies were similarly beneath him.

When Patrick first moved in on the block, Wallace had arrived to show his welcome and elicit some handouts. He felt personally slighted when the door refused to open, and had since taken to belting passionate arias from the windowsill until Patrick came out with a spray bottle.

This was Wallace's fourth visit already this week, and Patrick felt the cat's tuneless pleas grating on his ears *and* his patience. It wasn't just that the stock market dropped last week. Thanksgiving was in a little less than a month, and he was already worried sick about it. It was Patrick's dream to someday branch out from napkin rings and enter the jewelry business, so he had invited a number of prestigious jewelers to dinner over the holiday hoping that one of them would offer a partnership once they saw his fine craftsmanship. He had to stay sharp, and the dark circles under his eyes really didn't give off that impression. The cat would have to go.

Yawning he plodded to the window and, pretending not to see the smug triumph on Wallace's face, fumbled with the latch. The cat wasted no time in entering, purring like a Harley-Davidson and depositing clumps of fur all over Patrick's designer pajamas. Disgusting. Patrick tried (unsuccessfully) to rid his pants of the offending substance.

Outside the lawn was an indefinite maze of shrubs and statues. The porch lights barely cast any light on the ground, obscured as they were by falling snow. Patrick turned with a grimace to the creature twining around his legs. He grabbed uncertainly at the cat's body, then marched with Wallace held at arm's length down a couple flights of stairs until he reached the front door.

It was just as cold on the porch as it had looked from the window. Patrick's favorite slippers were soaking in the ankle-deep snow, and he didn't waste time admiring the moonlight on the untouched drifts. With a flash of annoyance at the servants for neglecting the trash, he shoved the now-disgruntled Wallace in a garbage bin before running inside to nurse his freezing toes.

He still didn't sleep well that night. He couldn't stop sneezing.

The next day was Sunday, and Patrick woke midmorning to more clatter outside the window. It seemed as though a great many people were gathered on the porch and—were those cameras flashing? Hurriedly he threw on yesterday's pants and tailored jacket.

There was indeed a crowd gathered outside, all gaping at whatever was in its center. Patrick jostled people aside, announcing that this was *his* house and *his* porch and *what* in God's name did they think they were doing barging in here with no invitation. More cameras went off.

Dodging elbows, Patrick noticed a gold cylinder in the crowd's center, perhaps five feet tall, with strange-looking hieroglyphs carved into its side. The material was otherworldly, unblemished and smooth apart from the writing and a groove running along its circumference near the upper edge. Like a kind of bizarre trashcan. Still, he could have sworn he had seen something like it before. Patrick moved instinctively to open the capsule. The crowd gasped, though no one stopped him. The top swung upwards with ease. Patrick leaned nervously to peer inside...

...Only to be smacked in the forehead by a furry white projectile which rocketed up from the bottom. Man and cat flew backward onto the snow, Patrick desperately trying to free himself from Wallace's claws and Wallace only gripping tighter in protest. Somewhere above him a number of stick-like things were also climbing out of the cylinder, but Patrick paid them no notice. His brain could only take so many shocks at

one time. He was still sitting stunned on the porch, Wallace clinging to his chest, when government officials arrived.

It took a lot of newspaper scanning to get the facts straight. The aliens, those skinny creatures who owned the trashcan-like vehicle, were pioneers in space travel and had recently identified another celestial body that could sustain life. Due to a technical issue with the spacecraft they were forced to land on the dark side of the planet and wait for daylight to introduce themselves. The unexpected arrival of a discontented feline through the upper hatch suspended the drafting of an opening speech. Then they were interrupted *again* several hours later by a member of the human species. At this point they determined it necessary to make contact with the Earth creatures and point out that it was rude to just invade someone else's spacecraft without asking first.

The reporters did an admirable job of over-exaggerating and misinterpreting every detail. Soon Patrick was "a lonely soul" to whom the alien benefactors returned a "dear companion". And while Patrick couldn't care less about Wallace's welfare, he very much enjoyed the publicity. His phone was abuzz with requests for interviews from news channels and talk show hosts. Napkin ring sales went through the roof (they looked, after all, a little like the aliens' spaceship. Eventually he crafted a special variety of rings that also included the exotic hieroglyphs). Even after the media moved on to other stories, he still got requests from random strangers for autographs or blessings.

As for Wallace, Patrick worried that turning the cat loose would bring an untimely end to his newfound fame. Therefore Wallace received a very posh suite at the other end of the mansion, as far away from Patrick's room as possible. One of the servants brought him fresh sardines each morning with water and a saucer of cream. It was any cat's

dream, but while Wallace did enjoy the fish, he couldn't stomach the fact that Patrick was still inaccessible.

It started a week before Thanksgiving. Patrick, scrolling through the thousands of emails in his inbox one morning, discovered a message from a friend that he had neglected to open. It read:

Hello! As you know, Margaret and I are vacationing for a month in Spain and from what I have heard you are a real cat enthusiast nowadays. Would it trouble you to watch my two darlings for a little while?

Best regards,

O. Mikaelson

Patrick frowned. He was about to send a vague reply about being too busy when the butler, Jack, arrived at the study door hefting a large box.

“Sir, this package arrived for you today. It's...mewing.”

Patrick frowned deeper, then wondered if all this frowning would give him wrinkles and tried to organize his face into a tight smile instead.

“Is there a return address?”

“No, sir.”

“Who brought it?”

“Otto Mikaelson, sir. He said you offered to take care of these animals for him?”

“I did nothing of the sort,” spluttered Patrick, “Go downstairs and tell him to take it back.”

“I would sir, but he’s already gone. Said something about being late for his flight.”

After that, the cats just kept coming. Not long after Otto Mikaelson’s two cats Pigeon and Ginger were settled in Wallace’s room, another visitor arrived bent over with the weight of an enormous purple pet carrier. Even Jack, who had never been fond of emotions, couldn’t quite keep a straight face when he answered the door.

“Yes?”

“Natalie Wood, sir. Is this Patrick O’Brien’s residence?” said the stranger, panting. She tried and failed to lift a hand from the pet carrier for him to shake. “I’m a friend of Otto Mikaelson’s. He said Mr. O’Brien had some sort of cat care service that he runs around here? I need someone to look after the poor things for a while. My mother’s sick, you see, and with a full-time job to manage I’m worried I won’t be able to care for them properly.”

Jack was beginning to think Patrick was joking with him, which was very worrying to say the least. But he knew better than to question his boss’s decisions. Wordlessly he hefted the pet carrier onto his shoulder—eliciting a series of distressed meows—and headed toward what he now thought of as the cat room.

It did indeed become that, because every day new packages arrived with more cats in need of a temporary home and all were transported to Wallace's end of the manor. It appeared Patrick's fame came with an unforeseen side effect. The owners were mostly friends of friends who had recognized Patrick's name on the news, but every once in awhile a perfect stranger simply dumped their pet on the doorstep requesting that Patrick cure it of disease or demonic possession. By Wednesday the room was brimming with cats: lounging on the couches, investigating the windowsills and fireplaces, even dangling from curtains or, occasionally, chandeliers. One of the bathtubs now functioned as a litter box. A bewildered delivery boy carted wheelbarrows full of sardines and milk cartons to the kitchens each morning.

Despite all this, Patrick was largely oblivious to the cats and the growing fortune it was costing him to manage them all. His nerves were spiking in anticipation of dinner the next night—for indeed, several notables of the jewelry industry had accepted his invitation. He spent the day yelling orders at anything that moved. Tables had to be set, metal polished, meals prepared, every cat hair vacuumed and vacated from the premises. Napkin rings gleamed from their prominent displays on the white tablecloth. When he discovered a paw print on one of the dishes, Patrick decreed that all cats were to be kept under heavy guard in Wallace's suite. Should they even twitch a whisker in the wrong direction...Patrick didn't finish the threat because he couldn't think of a suitable punishment (the cats weren't likely to listen anyway), but the servants heard enough from his tone.

Thanksgiving had come. And no man would keep Patrick from success.

Patrick smothered his nervousness with a welcoming smile as he shook hands with the sparkling men and women at the front door. A few wore the entirety of their jewelry stores on their necks and wrists. Others were more modestly dressed but even their warm gazes had an edge that made their occupations clear: these people meant business.

The final guest to enter was Christina Robinson, a lofty woman who smiled every time she spoke. Her company was the most lucrative, which made earning her favor Patrick's primary objective.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Patrick," she said around her smile, "I've heard so much about you in the news lately. It seems you're quite the cat lover, if they're to be believed!"

Something died a little in Patrick's eyes, though his expression didn't change.

He motioned the herd of guests around a mahogany table where a Thanksgiving feast as dressed up as they were steamed seductively on silver platters. A few of the visitors leaned forward into the wafting aromas. Patrick waved for everyone to sit down, feeling the sudden urge to itch his nose. Nerves, probably.

The first courses arrived. Slowly and deliberately he held his rolled-up napkin so that the light caught the many facets of the jewels encrusting its ring. No one paid any notice. "Nice plates," remarked one man curtly, gesturing to the fine porcelain as he spooned on heaps of cranberry relish. Patrick felt a flicker of annoyance. They weren't supposed to notice the plates. He racked his brain for ways to bring up napkin rings in casual conversation without raising suspicion.

Patrick's relatives were also at the table, under strict orders to stay away from the business side of things. But as wine flowed and stomachs filled, the atmosphere relaxed. Laughter floated in the air amidst the merry *clink* of glasses.

Christina turned to him suddenly.

"So, let's talk about your ambitions in the jewelry industry, Patrick."

Patrick startled in surprise. He had been waiting for her to bring up the topic, but he hadn't expected her to do it so abruptly. "O-of course, but how did you know that that is what I was interested in?" he stammered.

Smiling, she replied, "No one invites wealthy nonrelatives to a Thanksgiving dinner without some kind of motive in mind. So, can you tell us about your experience with the trade? Only if you want to, of course. I don't mean for this to be a job interview."

Across the table, Patrick's family seemed very preoccupied with their mashed potatoes.

Now was the time. Patrick, a little louder and more stiffly than necessary, began the speech he had been rehearsing for weeks.

"I am deeply honored that you have taken notice of my business. I took pleasure in metalworking from a young age and it remained my primary avocation throughout middle and high school. Shortly after, the diamond industry also piqued my interest. It would be my greatest pleasure to partake in this estimable trade and humbly pursue the attainment of higher quality and diverse selection for my custome—aaAACHOOO!"

At that moment Patrick let loose a symphony of sneezes that could have rivaled a high school marching band in volume. It was a lethal and incessant attack, punctuated by

failed attempts to recover normal speech: “I-AACHOO-w-aCHOO-can’t-ACHOOaCHOO.” At least he had the good sense to shove his face into his lap before he sprayed the guests or their dinner. Raising his head at last, he saw that Christina’s smile had evolved into something like pity. What was going on?

Then he saw it. A flicker of color from the corner of another room, barely noticeable. But he knew what it was immediately: the silent, but unmistakable, twitch of a tail. He shrieked.

The dinner table went silent. All of them watched with worried expressions as Patrick’s face went red, then pallid. He was staring somewhere behind them and seemed not to recognize their presence at all. Christina finally broke the silence.

“So, uh, you...you said you started working with metals as a child?”

Patrick’s eyes slowly refocused, and he turned to her with an abstract approximation of a smile. At the other end of the table the relatives hurriedly resumed shoveling mashed potatoes into their mouths. Bit by bit the ambience returned to normal, though Patrick remained a little pale. He felt something furry brush against his leg.

Christina politely inquired more about Patrick’s childhood, passion for metalwork, and experience in jewelry fashioning. There were, thankfully, no more sneezing fits. The cooks brought in the turkey in all its glory, smothered in rosemary gravy and large enough to feed twice the number of people attending. It was the main showpiece of the dinner; Patrick felt that if they could just get through the turkey without any other problems, everything would be all right.

As one of the cooks made to slice it, Christina sat back a little in her chair.

“Well, Patrick, it sounds like you would be a wonderful asset for my business, or anyone else’s, should you like a position.”

Patrick’s heart jumped up into his throat. This was the moment he had been waiting for! Two pairs of green eyes peered at him from underneath a coffee table. He ignored them.

“It would be an honor,” he replied, a little shakily.

“Wonderful!” Christina beamed, “We really could use a cat jeweler.”

“I’m sorry?” said Patrick, wondering if he might be going a little deaf.

“A cat jeweler,” repeated Christina, bemused. “Little bells, designer collars, and the like. It’s a very viable field. That *is* why you invited us here, right? For a position in luxury pet jewelry design? Don’t think I haven’t noticed your fondness for the little darlings.”

Patrick’s vision narrowed, and his hands clenched. *Cat jeweler?* Who did they think he was? Some kind of feline aficionado with no purpose other than to design useless frivolities like rhinestone collars?

It didn’t take long to realize that was *exactly* who they thought he was.

At that moment Patrick caught movement across the room. Stretched out on top of a nearby dresser was a lithe gray cat—Pigeon, he remembered. She was on her back, licking a paw indulgently, and not likely to cause any havoc. Good. But where had the movement come from? Then he noticed an orange tabby sitting at the wardrobe’s base, belly to the ground and eyes dead-set on Pigeon. Patrick looked around. Everyone at the table was preoccupied with the turkey and took no notice of the impending danger. The tabby cast a wide-eyed glance toward Patrick, muscles tensing. Patrick gave a small

shake of his head, silently begging *no*. He watched the tabby relax, and, relieved, returned his full attention back to Christina.

“Patrick?” she asked, taken aback by his silence and shifting glances.

As Patrick opened his mouth in reply he saw the tabby tense again, then spring squarely onto Pigeon’s exposed belly. A startled Pigeon kicked her legs toward the wall and launched herself up high above the unsuspecting dinner guests.

The whole month’s anxiety, anger, and confusion boiled up all at once in Patrick’s chest. He felt himself go airborne right as Pigeon did. For a moment they just hung there, Patrick straining to grab Pigeon before she sank her claws into his prosperous future. His fingertips just barely brushed her fur. Then he had just enough time to read the expressions of utter disbelief on the guests’ faces before he crashed right into the ill-fated turkey, the cat landing daintily on her feet just ahead of him. She streaked underneath a nearby chest before anyone could notice her.

For a moment no one moved. It was too incomprehensible. A red wine stain spread over his cousin’s shirt. Patrick felt gravy dripping from his hair. The entire table was silent except for tinkling glass, and, Patrick imagined, the pitter-patter of padded feet sauntering away with his remaining pride.

Christina was the first to move. She spoke nothing, but her expression said everything she needed to. Silently she stepped up from her chair, pushed it back toward the table, and walked towards the entrance. Her colleagues scrambled after her. The family members, trying to find an explanation for what had just happened and finding none, also crept silently out of the room.

Soon Patrick was alone, the forgotten feast growing cold beside him. In the background he could hear the servants scrambling to corral the hoards of cats who had fled past their guards during dinner.

Wallace entered from one of the other rooms. He realized with growing excitement that Patrick was defenseless and unoccupied. At last! Nothing provided greater joy for Wallace than having a companion. Lightly he stepped into Patrick's lap—Patrick, for once, did not protest—and settled in for a nap.

They sat there quietly for a time, Patrick sniffing and absentmindedly running a hand along Wallace's back, while Pigeon and Ginger started in on the turkey.