

Orinoco's Retreat

No one understands the individual way the sun illuminates a room like Mr. Orinoco. He senses every angle of light, every variety of intensity slipping through the blinds, every expected point on a temperature gradient. Across seasons, across the hours, Mr. Orinoco knows the way the light enters his room in the morning the way a gosling knows his mother. He follows the light, the way it spills across the windowpane in the morning all the way across the day to its quiet demise. Even when he was a young Air Force fighter pilot, he would forget where he was and indulge in a dangerous love triangle between himself, the sun, and the clouds.

Seconds before his eyes open, Orinoco calculates the rays to remember where he is, and when he does, he sighs. *Still in Emerald Forest*. He tries to drift back into dream, but the realization has been made, the illusion, shattered. Orinoco, the uniformed young man pulling out of a spiraling dive and into endless blue dissolves into an old man in a retirement home as sleep seeps out of mind and into the pillow.

Mr. Orinoco decides to stay in bed with his eyes shut. Louise will arrive shortly, and when she does, she will ask, "How are you this morning, Mr. Orinoco?" and Orinoco will respond:

"Another war dream, Louise."

And she will tell him he wouldn't have such nightmares if he would just take his medicine as the doctor instructed.

"It wasn't a nightmare," he'll say, "It was flying."

"Flying to shoot people, Mr. Orinoco. If not your nightmare, then someone's."

Louise is sweet, but she doesn't understand. Yes, Orinoco has warrior in his blood, the branches of his family tree weigh down with military medals, but he is not a killer. Sure, there's

a trigger in the cockpit and enemies to dodge and circle, but that was active duty and training. The flying, tough, the freedom of free-fall, *that* was instinct. And what are dreams if not fixed patterns of action?

“You’re my nightmare, Louise,” he’ll mutter.

Mr. Orinoco is not always the most pleasant company, but Louise likes him just the same. She likes the way his neck is too long and thick for his small little head and how his beaky nose is always a ruddy pink even when allergy season has come and gone. He’s irritable, and snappy, and honks at the nurses for the slightest infraction, but she enjoys bringing the old man his breakfast everyday. There was a certain camaraderie in the way they both hated Bingo Day and of all the crazies, at least he was witty, his sarcastic comments betraying a lingering zest for life.

“Hey now, don’t bite the hand that feeds you,” she’ll chide, placing a metal cafeteria tray by his bed, “Literally.” In addition to the daily oatmeal, orange juice and sad slice of fruit, a rainbow assortment of pills rattles in the smallest compartment.

“I would never bite you, Louise,” Mr. Orinoco will say, “I can’t afford a new pair of dentures. Pull up those blinds, will you.”

“Like that hasn’t actually happened,” Louise will chuckle as she leans over the bed to pull up the shades, “We nurses gossip, you know. I know all about the Tapioca Fiasco of 2007.” She’ll also grab the leather watch on the bed stand and strap it onto Orinoco’s thin, wispy-haired wrist for him. One of the pills is for the painful shaking in his fingers. “Tamara’s still traumatized, you know.”

“Sorry,” Orinoco will respond unapologetically, shifting slightly into an upright position. “But I hate tapioca. It’s called fight or flight response, Louise. And I can’t fly anymore. Put those blinds back down a bit.” Louise will roll her eyes but oblige, saying,

“Actually, I think it's called PTSD, Mr. Orinoco.”

“More like *Pity* S.D.,” Orinoco will scoff, “I see the way Tamara looks at me.”

Louise won't respond. Instead, she'll fill a cup with water and bring it to Mr. Orinoco, who by now will have sat up in bed and shimmied up to the tray. She'll wait around for a while in the hopes of seeing him take his pills, but he'll deny her this satisfaction. Instead, he'll make pointed eye contact with her until she sighs, and turning away, wishes him a good day. She'll be back in a couple hours with lunch, she reminds him, and with that will wheel the food cart out the door and to the next room. Thus will conclude the most exciting episode of Mr. Orinoco's day. At least on a normal day.

But today the sun messed up.

Mr. Orinoco was flying over the Atlantic when he noticed.

“Orinoco to Johnny Boy, Johnny Boy, check six, over. Look at these storm clouds. Something's up.”

“Johnny Boy to Orinoco, copy, something looks off alright, over.”

“It's the light. The light's wrong.”

“What do you mean by wrong, over?”

“We're in a storm, Johnny, why's the sun shining so bright? It's gotta mean something. God is writing our fates in the skies, and his signature's on the clouds, pay attention—orange and yellow ink splattered where it shouldn't be, by his own design there shouldn't be any light on the clouds right now—yet there it is, fresh tangerines in a bed of ash. Do you copy?”

“Negative. Say again?”

“It's like a sign, Johnny.”

“You're losing me, Noco.”

“We gotta move. It's now or never. You on my six?”

“Negative. This isn't my flight. This is all you, Orinoco. Just you and the sun.”

“Roger. Over and out.” He dives.

Orinoco wakes again to a sun that's now too bright. He must have fallen asleep again. Louise still hasn't come around. And there's something to remember, but what? Something about the light, something about a sign, something something. He looks around the room. It's off. It's too much. Urgently, Orinoco pulls himself out of bed and hobbles to the window to investigate. Hands and bill-like nose pressed against the glass, Orinoco gasps and leaves a fog of excitement against the pane.

Someone's left the gate open.

The back entrance to Emerald Forest Nursing Home is left unguarded. Usually, the towering steel gates surrounding the compound are clasped together like a strict mother's hand on her unruly child's wrist. But today, they are flung wide open. Someone must have let a delivery truck in and then forgotten all about it. The sunrise beams normally obstructed by the harsh grey of the gate's solid metal doors today shine through like the radiant smile of a gap-tooth child, calling out to play. Come out, Mr. Orinoco, come out and play!

Orinoco's heart trills. Even though he longs for it, he doesn't go out much anymore. It's too depressing. There's only a small yard the resident patients of Emerald Forest are allowed to venture into, and always accompanied. There aren't even any flowers, just a grassy lawn and one lonely sycamore tree, and even critters reject its shade. It's been years since there's been a nest. Birds refuse to call this place home.

But now there's a chance to leave this place forever, push off the windowsill and into the air, landing on soft grass and bolting it out the gate and far, far away. Goodbye, Emerald Forest,

the mighty force of the Orinoco is greater than your metal gates, your dulling medications.

Now's his chance to escape, make his way to an airport and hop on the next plane. Screw the young nieces and nephews who turned him over to the old folks loony bin when his panic attacks got too much for them to handle. He's got relatives in South America. That's where he'll head.

Orinoco can hear the spinning wheels on Louise's timely food cart beginning its ritual morning run down the hall. *Now or never, Orinoco.* Still in his pajamas, Orinoco flings open the window and, knee over arthritic knee, climbs out his first floor room and fumbles onto grass. Nearly tripping, he uses the momentum to push himself a couple steps towards his escape. The squeaking wheels can still be heard from outside the room, sounding an alarm louder than any air raid drill ever did. Old training kicks in. *Move, move!*

Orinoco sprints up the slight incline towards the gate to the best of his abilities. To us, it looks like a light, albeit strained jog, but to Orinoco it's the sprint of an Olympic athlete, of a dreamer to his destiny. Step by painful step, sweat beads up between his eyebrows and slides down the length of his beak, dripping into the grass. He's never going to make it. Surely any second now someone will yell, "Hey, you! Stop!" Someone will notice their error and close the metal doors in his face. Someone in scrubs will bring a straight jacket. Not likely they would actually use it (there's no need, Orinoco's not strong enough to hurt anyone), but to make a point. It's a symbol of complete captivity, imprisoning the body as well as the mind. In the jacket, a man struggles until, utterly exhausted, he forgets he has arms. His mind, like macaws in a cage, forgets it can fly.

But none of this happens. Mr. Orinoco reaches the top of the hill, and holds his breath as he crosses out of enemy territory. *He's free.* He exhales and turns left on the sidewalk heading

towards the intersection. Why left? Who knows? Who cares? He just knows he has to keep moving, the Forest Staff will be coming after him any second now.

Orinoco flies across the street, and hurries down another block, his bedroom slippers slapping against the sidewalk. Yet another block, then a right, away from the pathetic “garden,” from the doctors with their polychromatic medications and artificial interactions. Away, away, nothing can stop him n-----

A blaring car horn screams in Orinoco's face. Having tripped over one of the many cracks on the pathway and into the road, he's almost hit by a rush hour Toyota. The car behind screeches to a stop, and the same of the vehicles following, creating a chain of cacophony down the road.

“What the fuck, old man? Get the fuck out of the road!” Orinoco stands frozen, silly fabric slippers glued to the tarmac. He trembles from his feet up.

The Toyota driver throws up his arms and knocks on his front window.

Tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh.

“Hell-lloo? Anybody home?”

Tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh.tuh.tuh. Tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh.tuh.tuh.

Bullets graze Orinoco's plane. His head is down, but he can hear them against the side of this F-102 Delta Dagger. The enemy's moving in. They're getting closer. He hears their guns, the noise, so much blaring noise. They're right on top of him, and he's got to move. *Dive, get out of here. Move, move!*

Mr. Orinoco's pajama-panted legs are pumped with adrenaline. He runs. Muscle memory kicks in, but his flesh has amnesia; it can't remember the details. His legs seem to spin uselessly. The pressure in his chest fluctuates dangerously, and his hip threatens to jump

out of socket—oh Orinoco, what a poor carrier you've become. You can barely support your own sorry weight, just skin and bones, heavy with age.

As he flees, his heart echoes the *tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh* yet eventually insists, *throttle down, throttle down*. He slows. He stops. He doesn't know where he is, but it seems to be a park of some sort. There are trees everywhere, and they're blossoming. Who knew it was spring? He sees a bench by a pond. Sanctuary.

Mr. Orinoco sits and greets the ducks wading on the surface. He sees some bread crumbs left on the bench and tosses them in. The waterfowl are voracious. They dart at the food and push each other aside, making that strange lapping sound as they consume gulps of water along with the bread. The ducks quack angrily at each other, such a naturally rude sound. Orinoco concludes that ducks are assholes, but he likes them anyway. He decides there's something very fulfilling about watching hungry animals eat. He wishes he had more bread.

Mr. Orinoco observes the ducks scavenge for complimentary carbohydrates until they realize he's got nothing left to offer. They linger for a bit but then eventually make their way across the pond and back to their nests. Mr. Orinoco feels a little offended until he realizes the sun is setting, and the ducks probably want to retire to their nests. Confused, he checks his watch thinking he'd only been out for less than an hour. But he's not wearing a watch. He wonders how long he had been running, how long he had really been watching the ducks. He thought it had only been a few minutes, but the light begs to differ, and the light is rarely wrong. He realizes he's exhausted. He wants to retire, like the ducks.

“Mr. Orinoco.”

Orinoco barely hears the voice, thinks it might be another attack. He looks around anyway, and sees Louise standing a few feet behind the bench. Orinoco wonders how long *she's*

been standing there. He turns back towards the pond and hears Louise walking forward. Sensing a new presence (and a new prospect for food), the ducks come back out on the water. *Selfish scoundrels. They really did leave me because I had nothing.* She slides into the spot next to him and takes a paper bag out of her purse, the remnants of a sandwich now dessert for the ducks. They sit in silence as the sky bruises purple and gold like a cut plum.

“How did you find me?”

“It wasn't too hard once I spotted your slippers on Wren Avenue. I pretty much just followed the direction they pointed and ended up here.” Mr. Orinoco realizes he is barefoot. How silly he was to think he could escape to South America. He doesn't even have a passport, let alone shoes.

“No cops?”

“Nah, I covered for you. When you weren't in your room for breakfast I figured you had taken advantage of the open gate to go for a walk or something, so I told the director some relatives were taking you to the zoo, but I forgot to fill out the paperwork beforehand. They're pretty irked.” Louise smiles wanly and tosses a sandwich corner in the pond. “I found you here on the bench around noon, and thought you should be heading back soon, so I didn't bother you. You seemed so peaceful just looking out at the water, at these little guys.” She breaks another corner in half and throws them father into the pond. With no more bread left, she begins to wring her hands together. “When you never did come back, I finally got worried and realized maybe I should have brought you back right away, as soon as I found you. But, at the time, I just thought you could use some alone time--I'm sorry, Mr. Orinoco, you must be starving--”

But Orinoco cuts her off, “You know, Louise, you can call me Johnny if you want.” He had really stopped listening a while ago. Louise sighs and stuffs the paper bag back in her purse.

“Thank you,” she stands up, and stares at Orinoco with eyes like tapioca. Orinoco doubts she will cover for him again. “But I think I prefer Mr. Orinoco.”

The last bite of sandwich corner has been gobbled up, and the ducks have retreated to center of the pond, now a peach and pink mirror of the dying sun. Mr. Orinoco examines the old man in the reflection. Feathers float on rings of water, orbiting a stranger's face in slow circles.

“Can we get flowers in the garden?” Mr. Orinoco asks quietly. It's not clear whether Louise has heard or not. A moment passes. The sun sets, and Mr. Orinoco thinks of the transition to twilight in his room, the way the chrome softens into dusk, then dark.