

"Just Keep Rowing"

"Just keep rowing, just keep rowing."

The gray sea was obscured by a thick fog. Orin sat in the rowboat, back to the prow, paddling with all of his might. The oars dipped into the froth, and when they emerged they splashed water into the boat, drenching his legs. His shoulder bled. His arms ached. He was getting dizzy.

"Just keep rowing. Dammit, keep rowing!"

He heard a splash off in the distance. He flinched and stopped rowing. His eyes went wide and he strained his hearing, searching the mist. His heart pounded in his ears and he almost burst into tears.

"Don't stop, you fool!" he said to himself, and he rowed faster, sending a shower of water into the boat. He breathed heavily, trembled, and began to whimper.

Earlier that day, Orin was drinking from a bottle of bubbly, watching reruns of SNL. His favorite episodes were the ones when Christopher Walken guest-hosted. He laughed at the cow-bell joke, and he got himself drunk. Booze was the only thing that kept him sane.

The phone rang and he swore. He looked to his left towards the table where the phone normally rested, but it wasn't there. He swore again. He stood up and searched around his chair as the phone rang endlessly. He saw it under his chair, but when he reached for it he knocked over his bottle, spilling its contents. He swore again.

"Yeah, what?" he said angrily into the receiver. It had been an expensive bottle.

"*Mañana. Tres en punto. Ok?*" said the voice, and Orin sighed.

"*Sí,*" he said. "*Estaré allí.*"

He slowly hung up the receiver. He stared at his rough hands and his mind drifted. His drunken feet carried him to his desk and he sat down heavily.

His digital clock advanced but he didn't pay any attention to the time. Instead his eyes drifted to a crumpled blue uniform resting on the desk. Orin gazed at its brass buttons and his heart was lifted, but then it sunk just as quickly and his eyes grew dark. He stood for something back then. He had a noble purpose. But now?

He stood up quickly and threw the uniform across the room with a cry. He leaned over his desk and a few drops fell from his eyes. It was too late now. He could never go back.

The clock blinked two o'clock and so he got dressed. He struggled with that part and had to button his shirt twice to get it right. He threw a Hot Pocket into the microwave and burned it, but ate it anyway. Then he had a cup of coffee and finished it off with some Altoids. Anything to mask the booze.

He opened the door to his garage and gazed at his car. It was a very dull vehicle, all gray with circles of discoloration, a few rust spots and peeling paint. It said "Vol--" on the very front, for the plastic emblem was broken and incomplete. He hated that car, but it was the only one that would do. He figured that by this time he'd have had a corvette. "You fool," he said to himself.

The afternoon was blisteringly hot. It was November but it still felt like summer; during the day, at least. And yet Texas was always hot in November, especially in Brownsville. Being so close to the Gulf of Mexico made the air muggy and nearly unbearable. Orin lived there for one reason.

He merged onto the highway and headed south towards the border. The border station was in shambles. The booths were falling apart and few who worked there really cared about their job, except for the occasional new-hire who took it way too seriously. There were no guardrails, no barriers or barricades, just three booths and a faded, white line where cars were to stop. People were coming home from work in droves, flooding the highway with honking, squealing and cursing. Orin wondered why they couldn't have picked another time to call him. "Those bastards," he thought. "They don't care."

He turned on the radio. A talk show host was talking about the dangers of illegal immigration. Orin listened intently, but when a commercial came he changed the channel. He needed to listen to something happy. He came across some salsa music. "No thanks," he said. He came across some jazz. "Ugh," he said. At last he came across some oldies. "Ahhh," he said, and he smiled.

With his window rolled down, Elvis coming from it and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, he finally pulled up to the booth.

"Back again Orin?" asked the immigration officer. Orin burped silently with his mouth clenched tight.

"Yep, got me a lady waitin' in Matamoros," he said.

"Hah, you have a lot of those," said the immigration officer and Orin laughed.

"It's easier than finding white women to bed," said Orin. "They're too stuck up." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his passport. "Sure you don't want this?" he asked, but the immigration officer spat.

"Don't insult me! You know we don't check our own. Besides," he said, and he leaned into the window. "Bring me back something. I don't care what; I just want to get drunk tonight."

Orin laughed.

"You got it Marv, I'll see you soon." He put his Volv-- in gear and drove off with a wave.

He loathed himself. He hated his very being. It was easy, so easy to pretend friendship in order to get what you wanted. A few choice words, a declaration of loyalty, and the simple were all too eager to trust. That's why he was able to do his job as well as he did. He had told himself that it didn't matter—that the only person he needed to look out for was himself. The government paid poorly and didn't care about the border anyway. Why should he? Why should he spend his days risking his life and being miserable for paltry pay, boredom and no appreciation? Self-interest, the right to happiness—those

were the only justifications he needed. Yet it wasn't so simple, as Orin had now realized, for with selfishness comes betrayal, and Orin now had to live with that traitor for the rest of his life.

It was a little bit of a drive to Matamoros, but Orin didn't care. He needed time to strangle his conscience. The wind on his face felt good, and the radio station was playing all his favorite songs. He pulled out another cigarette – this was his fifth so far.

"Youuuu're my, brown eyed girl!" he sang as he sped by on the highway. He didn't miss his job at all. He couldn't stand asking the questions, searching trunks, frisking men and spending his days in a boring, non-air conditioned, muggy booth. But at least back then he had a soul. Now? Well, he didn't like to think about now.

"Sha-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-lada-ti-da!" he sang. Anything to put his mind elsewhere.

Soon he arrived in Matamoros. The place was a tourist trap. It was built for white people who had too much money. He saw signs advertising Mexican car insurance and children stood on the streets holding newspapers, offering to braid hair and so forth. When he first came into Matamoros, this sort of thing bothered him. Not anymore.

He found a shop where a poor family sold tacos made from meat which they cut from an upside-down cone of spinning flesh. "*Los Carne Tienda*" was its very creative name. He turned left before the shop and drove down a dirty alleyway. It ended at a blue dumpster, overflowing with trash. Two men stood facing Orin as he approached. They did not smile.

Orin put his car into park and stepped out. He walked towards the two men and smiled.

"*Mi compadres!*" he said in a rather flippant tone, and he outstretched his arms as if wanting a hug. The two men glared at him.

"You ready stop playing?" said one man. He wore suspenders and a hat made from grass.

"As always *amigo*," said Orin with a wink. "That is, of course, if you have the moolah." He rubbed his fingers together and coughed.

Without a word, the second man retrieved a white envelope from his leather coat pocket. He handed it to Orin unceremoniously, and Orin fingered through it. It was all in hundred dollar bills. He counted it audibly. Four thousand dollars. He raised an eyebrow.

"Four?" he asked.

"Four," said the man in the grass hat.

"I don't think I can fit four," said Orin, and he scratched his chin. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I can't.

"I need four!" said the man with the grass hat. "They paid four, you drive four." Without waiting for Orin's response, he and the other man turned and began to pluck pieces of trash out of the dumpster. They threw the garbage on the ground until hands began to emerge from the dumpster. Four men climbed out and stumbled to the ground. They spewed a string of expletives that Orin had not learned yet.

"Ok, well, we'll see," said Orin, and he led the four men to the back of his car. He opened the back hatch and it swung upwards. He had to prop it up with a stick. The back was filled with one long seat. Orin reached for the base of the seat and ripped off a bit of the car's interior, which was attached by Velcro. He revealed a handle and, grasping it, he lifted the seat. Below was a compartment, surprisingly large for the size of the car. He motioned for the men to get in, and they looked at him.

"No, no," said one, and he pointed at the passenger seat. "*Asiento*."

"No," said Orin. He pointed at the chamber. "*Ahora mismo*."

They shook their heads and some covered their eyes, and they spoke very fast so that Orin could not understand.

"Tell them that if they are visible I could go to jail, and they will have to come back here," he said. The man in the grass hat looked cross, but he spoke with the four very lowly. At length he turned to Orin.

"No room. Sit seat."

"Of course there's no room! I can't fit four!" shouted Orin and he kicked his tire.

"*Espera,*" said the man in the leather coat, and he pulled what appeared to be a passport out of his pocket. He held it up and looked at the four men, then looked back at the passport, then looked at the men again. "*Aquí,*" he said, and he handed it to one of the men.

"Oh come on," said Orin, and he walked over to look at the passport. It was a real passport, stolen from some sorry individual, but the man in the photo didn't look like any of them.

"This won't work," he said flatly, and he raised his hands, backing away. "I'm not dealing with this," he said, and he walked towards the driver's seat.

Suddenly the men behind him burst out in a violent chatter, and he heard a gunshot. He froze in his tracks. Slowly he turned around. The man in the leather jacket held a revolver. It wasn't pointed at Orin, but he got the picture.

"Ah," he said with a shaky laugh. "I'm sure I can fit four."

He helped three of the men into the compartment. Even with just three, it was a very tight squeeze. He looked at the fourth with the passport and then at the compartment and he sighed.

"It'll have to do," he said, and he closed the back. He and the fourth man got into the car and he backed away from the dumpster. The man in the leather coat pointed his gun towards the sky and smiled, waving a hand. Then the two began to laugh.

"Schmucks," said Orin.

He stopped at one of the nearby liquor stores to get a bottle of tequila for Marv. He couldn't think about what he was doing. If he did, he wouldn't go

through with it. A little tequila is a cheap bribe, but a great token of friendship, and tokens are perfect for manipulation. What would Marv say when he saw Orin's passenger? "I won't give him a chance to say anything," thought Orin. Men are loath to confront their friends for fear of risking friendship, and are therefore ripe for exploitation. This universal rule had served him well so far.

When he got back to his car he heard the men in the compartment arguing with the man in the passenger seat.

"What are they whining about?" asked Orin to his passenger, but the man just grinned and nodded.

"Figures," he said. "Just keep calm back there, *paciencia, paciencia*, we will be there soon. Once we pass the border you can sit in the rear seat."

It was now five o'clock. The sun was on its way down but it was still hot as ever. The line into America was longer than the line into Mexico had been. Orin sat there with his window down, playing oldies in the blistering heat. He pulled out a cigarette and put it in his mouth.

"No," said his passenger, reaching out his hand and pulling his down. The man waved his hand in front of his nose and then mock-coughed.

Orin stared at the man for a moment with a bemused look on his face.

"Tough luck," he said, and he lit up his smoke. The man next to him lowered his eyebrows and turned away.

Orin made sure to pull into the lane where he knew Marv was working. He was getting closer. He took the bottle of tequila in his hands, ready to present it to his friend. At last he was next in line—but something was wrong. As the person manning the booth leaned forward to talk with the driver of the car in front of him, Orin realized that it wasn't Marv. It was a woman, and worse than that, a woman he had never seen before.

Orin began to panic. He looked behind him, but the line had grown incredibly long. He was in the middle lane, surrounded on either side by cars,

themselves patiently and impatiently waiting to get past the border. He was trapped, and he didn't know what to do.

The car before him pulled away, and the woman manning the booth waved for him to advance. Orin just sat there, grasping the wheel with one hand and the bottle with the other, sweating profusely. The woman again motioned him forward. Slowly Orin eased up on the break and the car inched closer to the booth. The woman stared at him without an expression.

"Where you coming from?" she asked. Orin couldn't see her eyes behind her dark sunglasses, but he could feel them. They were cold. He stared at her, trying to come up with something.

"Matamoros," he said.

"Yeah? And what were you doing there?"

"Just went for a drive."

"What's that you got there?" she asked, pointing at the bottle. It was then that he realized that he still had it in his hands. He laughed nervously.

"Oh nothing, I bought it for a friend," he said.

"Sure you did," said the woman. "Let me see."

He handed her the bottle. She looked it over and saw that it was still sealed. She handed it back.

"You been drinkin'?" she asked.

"No m'am."

"Got any identification?"

He did have identification and he eagerly reached into his pocket for his passport, pleased to give her something she wanted. He handed it to her.

"Orin Blackwater," she said. "So you live in Brownsville, eh?"

"Yes m'am."

"What do you do there?"

His heart froze. What did he do there besides watch TV and drink?

"I...I drive. For a living."

As soon as he spoke those words he cringed, realizing that it was the wrong profession to pick. She leaned over and stared him straight in the eyes.

"Do you now? What sort of driving?"

"Shuttle. For a hotel. I shuttle people around at a hotel."

"Which hotel?"

Now she was just being annoying. He knew that she really didn't have the right to ask him all these questions. Something he had said or done had made her suspicious, but the worst thing he could do was refuse to answer. He made up something really fast.

"The Marriott. I work the swing shift and take guests to restaurants, malls, shopping centers and other stores." The key was to make up something simple and convincing, but not so extravagant that it sounded like a lie. "I work three to eleven, five days a week. I have weekends off, and..."

"Ok, ok, spare me your life story," she said. She looked past him now and at his passenger. The man just smiled.

"Who's your friend?"

Orin looked at his passenger. He hadn't ever learned his name! The man held out his stolen passport. Orin snatched it and handed it to the woman, glancing at the name quickly.

"Here is his passport, m'am. This is my friend Hernando. We were looking for good fishing spots for a future trip."

"Hernando, huh," said the woman, chewing her gum. "That true Hernando?"

The man who was supposed to be Hernando was getting nervous. He started to sweat. He looked at Orin anxiously.

"Um, he doesn't speak any English," said Orin.

"I can see that."

"*Saluda la con cabeza,*" said Orin quietly to his passenger. The man nodded his head and smiled.

"Why did you just tell him to nod his head?" asked the woman. Orin looked at her stupefied.

"I...I just—"

"What, you think I work this job and don't know Spanish? Why didn't you tell him what I asked?"

"I just was trying to make things go smoother," he said.

"Ok sir, I need you to get out of the car."

"Yes m'am," said Orin.

He opened the door and stepped out. His passenger got jumpy and unbuckled his seatbelt.

"Just stay there sir; *no te muevas de ahí.*" She walked to the back of the car.

"Open it," she said, and Orin complied. He opened the rear and then stepped aside. She leaned into the back and looked around. She didn't see anything out of the ordinary. But the passenger couldn't stand it anymore. He opened the car door and got out.

"*Sentarse!* Get back in your seat!" she commanded, but the man just turned towards her, pulled out a pistol and fired.

The bullet got her in the chest and she reeled backwards.

"What are you doing!" cried Orin. The men inside the back began to shout and bang the roof of the compartment. The woman had fallen to the ground and pulled out her own firearm. The passenger walked around the side of the car, pointing the gun right at her. She managed to get off one shot which caught him in the leg, but then he shot her in the head.

He pointed the gun at Orin.

"*Conducir! Ya!*" he cried, and Orin nodded. He raced to the driver's seat and closed the door. His passenger hobbled inside, gun in hand, and pointed it at him. Orin put the car in drive and sped off. He stomped on the pedal and the battered car strained and lurched. The men in the back were yelling and pounding on the bottom of the seat.

"What the hell did you do?! What did you do!" screamed Orin, but the man hit him in the head with the gun. The car swerved and Orin saw stars, but he regained the wheel and stayed on the road.

"Cerrar!" shouted his passenger, and he kept the barrel leveled at Orin.

He raced down the road. He didn't know where he was going. The sun was setting and he turned his lights on. Soon he saw flickering lights behind him, blue, red and white, and then he heard sirens.

"Look what you did!" he shouted, but the man paid no attention. He looked at the police cars behind.

"Más veloz!" he yelled, turning back to Orin.

"This is as fast as she goes! I can't go any faster, not in this old thing."

Just then an intersection appeared before them.

"Derecha!" ordered the passenger, and Orin complied, instantly turning right onto Boca Chica Highway. Orin new that this was a dead end, but it was too late. He couldn't turn back and there was no outlet. The wailing sirens followed him. Spotlights glared at him from his rear-view mirror, and he turned it away. It was now fully dark and he could hardly see the road in front of him.

A gunshot rang through the night sky. There was a thud and a groan from beneath the rear seat. Then Orin heard screams. The men underneath the seat began to pound furiously. The police came up alongside his car and again tried to shoot out the tires. His passenger opened the door, leaned outside and leveled his gun at the police. He fired once, then again, and the police cars drew back to a safer distance.

Now was his chance! Orin lurched the wheel to the left abruptly and the passenger cried out, straining to hold onto the car. But the trick didn't work, and he quickly got back in and shut the door. He reached over and dashed Orin across the head with the gun. Orin blanked out for a moment, and the wheel spun. The car screeched and smoke billowed from the tires. When Orin could see again he grasped the wheel and discovered that they were driving through brush.

The passenger was shouting orders that Orin could not understand, and Orin wrenched the wheel, forcing the car back up onto the road. A gunshot again rang out, and this time it got its tire.

As Orin's crippled car shuddered along, sparks flew. Just as Orin knew it would, the road came to a sudden end. The ocean loomed before them, and the road ended at a wooden fence. Beyond the fence was a long wooden dock. Orin skidded to a halt at the fence. The police cars all stopped behind him and the officers opened their doors, leveling their guns right at him.

"Get out of the car with your hands up!" shouted a loud voice and Orin raised his trembling hands. His passenger was shouting for him to keep going but Orin motioned towards the dock before them and the sea beyond that. There was no going any further.

The passenger cursed, spat, and turned around. He aimed at the officers through the rear windshield and fired three times. He dropped one cop and was aiming for a second when a barrage of gunfire burst through the window, peppering the rear seat. A hot bullet grazed Orin's head, and then he felt a searing prick of pain in his shoulder.

That was it. He was going to die one way or another. Orin opened his door and leapt out onto the street. He ran and jumped over the fence, tumbled down a slight grassy embankment and flung himself onto the dock. He heard gunfire behind him and screams, and then all at once the gunfire stopped, but he didn't stop running. He ran and kept running, as fast as he could down the dock, and soon he heard lumbering footsteps behind him.

A mist from the sea had enveloped the dock and its end was obscured from him. The thundering of footsteps behind him grew louder and the dock seemed to never end, until at last he saw two wooden pillars which marked its termination.

When he reached the very edge he noticed, to his great joy, a rowboat with two oars, tied to the dock and unattended. He leapt in, cast aside the rope,

took the oars into his hands and quickly began to row away from that terrible nightmare. Swimming was no longer his plan. He wanted to lose himself in the mist.

With his back to the sea, he rowed as fast as he could, and the dock started to fade away. Suddenly he saw a dozen dark shapes appear at the dock's edge, and they spoke in huddled, confused voices. Then one yelled and Orin heard a number of gunshots. Flashes of yellow flame pierced the thick fog, and he heard bullets whiz by and splash into the water to each side. He didn't think about it. He closed his eyes and wrenched at the oars with all of his might.

"Just keep rowing!" he said to himself. "Just keep rowing!"

Hours had passed since he left the dock, and still Orin rowed out to sea. He trembled and dried blood trickled down the side of his head where a bullet had grazed him. His right arm was numb and crimson. He panted so hard that his throat hurt. The night had grown colder, but it did not soothe him. At last his strength failed him and he stopped rowing. His feeble fingers released the oars and they dropped into the sea. He quickly lunged at them but the boat rocked and water poured in. He regained his balance and the boat leveled out, and all he could do was watch as the oars floated away from the bobbing dinghy.

Orin sat, hunched over, staring at the deck. His eyes were unblinking and his mind was numb. He felt like dying, but couldn't bring himself to leap over the side. At length the mist began to dissipate, and over the course of several minutes it completely vanished.

Orin looked up. The gray vastness of sea stretched out before him in all directions. He could not see the dock. He could not see land. All he could see were the stars on the horizon, set against a pitch black sky. He had no idea which way he was headed. He had no idea which way went home.

Orin laid himself down in the boat, and wept.