

Lost Sleep Regained

Paulo and Filipe had made a stretcher. It was just a heavy curtain tied to two bamboo poles, but sufficient to bear the weight of Emilio's broken, emaciated body. The two friends had made their night journey to reach the swamp along paths familiar from childhood. A raft they had left tethered earlier could just be made out in the starlight. The moon shed a weak light on the infested water between the mangroves as they pushed out towards the far bank. They moored just below the government compound and farthest from the guard's hut where there were still lights. Their only fear of the remaining guards was that they would be recognised in the darkness. If surprised, the guards, more fearful than they, would shoot before they called. They were local men, left behind while Emilio's captors moved on. A shape moved across the doorway.

That's Jose, whispered Filipe. *I couldn't believe he was with the rebels. Why? Do any of us have a choice?* Asked Paulo.

We have. Filipe responded with surprise. *That's why we're here risking our lives.*

Ricardo had been released earlier and could tell them where to find Emilio's body. His captors had dumped him behind the latrines which drained into the swampy grass reaching out into mangroves. It was not difficult to find him. *Emilio,* Paulo whispered to him. The lifeless body convulsed. A weak cry of pain and fear came from his lips. Filipe put a hand over his mouth to silence him. *Emilio. It's Filipe and Paulo. Be quiet. We've come to take you home.* Emilio lay back exhausted by his brief moment of panic and pain. He was used to being summoned for some activity to keep him awake.

The friends lifted him on to the stretcher as gently as they could. Emilio tried to move, still unsure that he was now in safe hands, but he had no strength to resist. At the riverbank they rested, glad to leave behind some of the fears amid the stench of kerosene and rotting refuse. Paulo took water from a bottle to moisten Emilio's lips before they made a short, but perilous journey across the water. Crocodile and other water creatures could easily scent the blood from Emilio's wounds. Mosquitos had discovered a feast. The night was full of sounds breaking through the persistent backing chorus of cicadas, frogs and distant gunfire. Paulo held Emilio as gently and reassuringly as he could to keep him steady on the flimsy raft. Filipe had the paddle and kept lifting it from the water, pausing to listen for human sounds or suspicious natural movements in the waters around them.

Christina and Madalena met them at the edge of the trees. A whisper of wind among the tall palms spelt caution and mystery. Paulo turned his torch to the path and motioned the women to do the same. He was afraid to let them see Emilio. Christina laid a blanket across the stretcher as she called his name softly. *Emilio!* He responded with the faintest groan. She and Madalena fought back their tears.

At their house, a usual mud-brick dwelling under a corrugated iron roof, a small company were waiting. Emile suggested they leave and come back in the morning. *We may be being watched, he advised them. None of us are safe. There's nothing you can do here except pray and you can do that as well at home.*

Christina brought water to wash Emilio and ointment for his wounds, but soon realised it would be better to wait till daylight. Even in the dull light of kerosene lamps it was clear how bruised his body was, his eyes too swollen to open but for brief moment. His wrists were raw from ropes and chains. His arms showed little space between festering burns. It was impossible to discern how many bones were broken or what internal damage he had suffered. Medical help could be days away.

Let him rest. He will need much sleep. Said Madelana as she continued to moisten Emilio's lips. *We will watch and pray till the morning. Let him sleep now.* He had heard her last words. If only she knew just how much he longed to sleep. For the past three weeks he had been constantly awake. Even when he collapsed through sheer weakness his captors forced him to keep awake, holding him up while they beat and kicked him. Their shouting drummed in his mind. They seemed to think that by the volume of their cries they could force him to renounce his faith. Now it was impossible to sleep. Every slightest sound, every gentle movement brought him awake with fearful starts. The women sat either side of the bed holding Emilio's hands, praying, as did the men outside with tearful heart-pleading intercession.

Morning came at last. His mother Maria insisted that she should be the one to wash his body, until Paulo spoke what was in all their minds. *Mother. Not now. In a little while you will wash him and we will help.* They knew he meant they would be preparing him for burial. They could see more clearly now.

Courageously ignoring the blood clotted rags they would soon peel from him, Maria laid her head next to his and kissed her son, her tears falling into his eyes. She alone saw his lips move as he whispered, *Mother!* Suddenly he stirred, his chest heaving, his eyes struggling to open. Staring into the sunlit doorway he exhaled - a long, long breath in which they heard him call clearly and gently - *Jesus!* The time had come for Emilio to recover the hours of his lost sleep. His body relaxed gently into peace as he followed his Master into the life where rest supplants human sleep; that promised paradise where night and day are one and no sleep is lost.