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This Empty Darkness

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The bombing had begun again an hour ago, the military and the liberation front exchanging fire from rim to rim of the deep canyon cut by the river through the city. The rains hadn't come yet, and the river was narrow and sluggish. Even at midnight, the dry heat radiated from the alleys of closely packed homes of block, wood, tin, cardboard and blankets that had grown up the sides of the ravine like jungle vegetation.

Evelita retreated from the doorway of one of the block houses as a lone bomb screamed overhead to land on the edge of the ravine above the barrio. She felt the tremors seconds after the explosion briefly lit the midnight sky. The action seemed to be slowing, and she turned to the man slumped on the bench behind her. His white shirt glowed dimly in the darkness, the left side showing dark splotches and his arm hanging at an awkward angle.

"Miguel," she whispered, "we must go."

Rogilio's cousin slowly shook his bowed head. "No...too dangerous up there."

An hour ago, when Rogilio had appeared at her door and begged her to help him, she had left her children and her mother and come to this house. For it was Rogilio who had always helped the women at the coalition when their sons or husbands disappeared; and it was he who had rocked her like a baby as the men had pulled her husband's mangled body up from Puerto del Diablo—the human dump. It was her chance to help him now, except his cousin's injuries were more than her basic health training could deal with.

Evelita turned to the doorway and cautiously looked out into the street. Nothing. No movement, no light. For the moment, it was quiet. She hurried back to Miguel and wrapped his good arm around her slight shoulders.

"Come," she breathed, urging him up. The man groaned as he labored to his feet. "Come!" she whispered again. She half supported, half pulled him through the doorway into the black night. Keeping close to the rough cement walls, they shuffled past the huddled houses, beginning the difficult climb out of the barrio up toward the railroad tracks along the edge of the ravine. Miguel halted as a staccato burst of machine gun fire echoed through the night.

"Shouldn't...go up there," he slurred through his pain. Squads...out... looking...."

"Sh! We must get you to the hospital," she answered. "Rogilio will have a car in the alley by the train tracks. Come on, we'll make it."

Miguel hung back, but Evelita was the stronger one now. She propelled them up the rutted alley, sliding past the darkened doorways where children whimpered and mothers prayed in fear. The sickening sweet smell of the garbage dump near the riverbed grew fainter, and the acrid smell of war filled the air as they approached the top of the ravine. Not much farther now, she thought. Please, God, let Rogilio be waiting.

They stopped in the shadows of the houses next to the train track. The lights along them were still working, and Evelita hesitated. Miguel leaned heavily against the wall, and she motioned to him to stay still. She inched forward until

she could glance around the corner of the house. The tracks looked deserted, and she returned.

"Quickly!" she whispered, and guided him along the house. They stumbled across the tracks and slipped between two buildings on the other side, then stopped, listening. All quiet. A few more yards and they would reach Rogilio and the car, and she could slip back home to her children and her mother.

They edged along the rough wall and turned into the next alley. Evelita sighed in relief as she recognized the outline of a vehicle ahead and hurried forward.

"Rogilio!" she called softly, and was immediately blinded by a pair of headlights. Miguel cursed and lurched into a run, but a short burst of gunfire sent him sprawling to the dirt. Evelita screamed as the soldiers surrounded her. She was grabbed by the hair and jerked back, and one of them threatened. "We'll make you sing, comunista!" A blindfold cut off her sight and she was dragged off to the patrol truck.

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Evelita slumped in a heap on the cold stone floor as the heavy slam of the metal door pounded against her ears. She held her breath, listening to the tread of boots and the laughter fade away, leaving her absolutely alone. Her breath came out in a mutilated sob at which every muscle in her torso screamed with pain. Her wrists wore bloody bracelets of raw skin where the ropes had burned them, and her abdomen, chest and back were swelling from repeated blows of the butts of rifles. Slowly, she levered herself to a sitting position. Her bruised and bleeding fingers fought clumsily with the knot of her blindfold until it fell from her eyes. Complete and utter blackness enveloped her.

"Madre de Dios!" she whispered. "Where am I?"

The walls echoed her question but gave no answer. She shivered, for it was cool here. Cold stone and darkness. They must have brought her to the underground cells this time. She tried to control the tremors that shook her nude body as she registered this thought, for it was agony even to tremble, making her breath catch in little gasps of pain.

Yet she was almost used to the pain. It was, in a way, her friend, assuring her that the arms, legs, fingers and toes that hurt so much were still a part of her. That she was still alive.

But this empty darkness—surely it would drive her mad. She tried to focus her swollen eyes on something, some glimmer of light, but there was nothing. She forced into her mind the image of the hot Pacific sunlight as she had last seen it five days ago on her way to the central square of San Salvador. She tried to imagine its rays piercing through this stone prison, warming her cold, weary body, bathing her in light; but her exhausted mind could not retain the image.

A sudden scuttling behind her made her jerk, and the pitiful moan that left her lips was half pain, half fear. Mice? Rats? She scabbled, sobbing, away from the sound until her shoulder contacted the rough granite wall. Shrinking against it, she felt around for some sort of defense. Soft, stringy strands entangled the fingers of one hand, and the other found something dry and withered. She felt

them closely, and the bile rose in her throat as she realized she was feeling human hair and fingers. She retched and retched, great dry heaves that tore at her insides, for there was nothing there to bring up.

Weak and spent, she curled up in a ball on the stone floor. Voices shouted in her head, and she felt again the blows aimed at her body which had swung like a human piñata from a beam above the interrogation room.

"You are a communist"

"No...no. I just wanted to help my friend."

"Your friend was a dirty guerrilla animal and deserved to die. What other friends have you been helping? Tell me the names of your leaders."

"We are not animals. We only want to know what has happened to our husbands and brothers who have disappeared. What is wrong in that?"

And now other images flooded her mind. Jaime and Maria as she had left them with her mother at the supper table. The boy in the next cell last night, who had said, *Don't be afraid of death. We were born to die.* The faces of those who had already died: Her husband Bernardo, her brother, Carmel's son, countless other friends from her childhood.

Evelita knew now that she would die, too, probably right here in this cold, dark prison, where others had died before her, and more would die after she was gone. Surely her death and all those others would not be in vain. One day, surely, her children and all the children who had suffered so much would be as free as the birds?