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Reuniting the “Disappeared” Children of El Salvador
with their Biological Families

by

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B.A. (University of California, Berkeley) 2001

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Spring 2007

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University of California, Berkeley

Spring 2007

Reuniting the “Disappeared” Children of El Salvador with their Biological Families

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by Elizabeth Sarah Barnert

Dedication

To the disappeared Salvadoran children, those who have been found and those who remain to be found; to the mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, cousins, nieces, nephews, sons, and daughters of the disappeared; and to the late Padre Jon Cortina for dedicating his life to bringing justice and peace to these families.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Asociación Pro-Búsqueda and the community of disappeared children and their relatives that the organization serves: for inspiration, for sharing cherished moments and painful stories with me, and for indispensable assistance in the form of car rides, guidance, trust, *pupusas*, and countless more.

I am grateful to the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center, the UC Berkeley-UCSF Joint Medical Program (especially my classmates), Physicians for Human Rights, and the fabulously dedicated team of geneticists at the California Department of Justice DNA laboratory. Thank you to my mentors Philippe Bourgois, Suellen Miller, Karen Sokal-Gutierrez, and Eric Stover for your dedication to the academic, artistic, and humanitarian integrity of this project. You taught me to let my ideas shine and believed in me as I found my voice. I wish to thank my family, especially my parents and Tío Leon, for endless favors such as translating, reviewing drafts (there were many), and supportive phone calls (also many), and most importantly, for making me laugh. Finally, thank you to my partner Mark for your patience, your creative input on this project, and for joining me for rejuvenating visits to the ocean.

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Introduction

“When I found my family, my life changed 180 degrees: it was the incentive I needed to try to give meaning to my existence... I had a history, a reason for being.”

-Armando, age 27, a disappeared youth reflecting on his reunion with his family, El Salvador, 2002.

Armando is a young man who was forcibly separated from his family at the age of three during El Salvador’s civil war. Raised in an orphanage in San Salvador, fourteen years lapsed between his *disappearance* and his *reunification* with his biological family. The objective of this research is to understand the experiences that shaped the life of Armando and the lives of the thousands of disappeared Salvadoran children whom he represents.

Throughout their experiences of forced separation, these children (now young adults) underwent a complex process that involved an interplay of several factors, including exposure to extreme psychological and physical trauma; loss of identity; geographic displacement; and status as an orphan, adopted, or abandoned child (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). How did family reunification affect these young adults? The lack of research on this topic makes this a difficult question to answer—a surprising gap in the literature when one considers that countless families around the world are reunited after being separated by causes as prevalent and diverse as war, natural disaster, immigration, and adoption (International Committee of the Red Cross 2003). To gain a

better understanding of the “disappeared” children of El Salvador, and of family reunification in general, my primary research question is:

- *What are the experiences of the disappeared children of El Salvador in the process of family reunification?*

The human rights framework provides a powerful legal tool for restoring justice, particularly for children who are directly impacted by war. However, though a multitude of factors strongly affect these children, the human rights framework primarily addresses issues uniquely salient to the disappeared children in terms of their right to identity (1989). Thus, my second research question asks:

- *How does family reunification affect the sense of identity of the disappeared children, if at all?*

Section 1 of my thesis is a literature review in which I interrogate the concept of identity as a first step towards understanding the experiences of these children. More specifically, in preparation for an ethnographic study on the experiences of the disappeared children of El Salvador, this literature review will address the following topics: (1) Historical context: Civil war, disappearances, and reunifications in El Salvador, (2) What is identity? (3) Losing identity, and (4) Family reunification as a catalyst for recovering identity.

I took an autoethnographic approach to addressing my research questions, a decision and method that I elaborate on when I describe my methodology in Section 2. Data collection involved autoethnographic fieldnotes and interviews with disappeared children and their relatives. For data analysis, I employed “writing as a method of inquiry” (Richardson 1994). This method allowed me to transform my fieldnotes into a non-fiction creative writing piece through which I relate the experiences of the disappeared children in their processes of family reunification.

Section 2 opens with a statement of my study objectives followed by a description of my methods. Next, readers will find my autoethnographic fieldnotes through which I present the voices of the disappeared children and their relatives. I encourage readers to immerse themselves in the narrative just as they would plunge into the lives of characters when reading a story. Following the fieldnotes is a glossary of Spanish terms I have used in the notes. Finally, I close Section 2 (and this thesis) with a conclusion that synthesizes the “story” I tell in the fieldnotes with the research question and theory that I have laid out in Section 1.

SECTION 1: Literature Review

I. Historical Context: Civil War, Disappearances, and Reunifications in El Salvador

Counter-insurgency campaigns carried out by the military against guerrilla sympathizers during El Salvador's 12-year civil war (1980-1992) resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, the destruction of entire villages, and forced separations of children from their families (Danner 1993; Sprenkels 2001). Often the military turned over the abducted children to the Salvadoran Red Cross, which either placed them in orphanages or arranged for their adoption (PHR 1995b; Sprenkels 2001). The frequency of disappearances of children reached a peak from 1980-1982 (Harmon 2005). Forced into hiding and exile during the war, hundreds of families had completely lost track of their biological children by the time Peace Accords were signed in 1992 (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004).

A. ANTECEDENTS OF CIVIL WAR

1932 Massacre: The Birth of Military Rule

The 1932 *matanzas* ("killing") of 30,000 indigenous farmers protesting for a living wage and land reform signified the beginning of military rule in El Salvador. From this date

forward, the government established a pattern of domination over the Salvadoran people, using the military to suppress popular movements that called for economic and political reform (La Feber 1993).

Factors Leading to War: Growing Inequality, Death Squads, and Fraudulent

Elections

During the mid-twentieth century, as the gap between the wealthy and the poor widened, the aristocratic “Fourteen Families” of El Salvador increasingly turned to the military to suppress the peasantry (La Feber 1993). From 1960 to 1980 government-sponsored death squads were strategically used to suppress the popular movement (Armstrong and Shenk 1982; Fish and Sganga 1988; La Feber 1993). Meanwhile fraudulent political elections further intensified people’s feelings of frustration and under-representation in the political system (La Feber 1993). This climate bolstered the conviction of opposition groups that armed conflict was the only means by which they would achieve the desired economic and political reform (Alvarenga and Láinez-Villaherrera 2004).

In 1980, in response to an intensification of state-sponsored violence, Monseñor Oscar Romero, the archbishop of El Salvador, spoke out from the pulpit against U.S. military aid and called for an immediate end to bloodshed (Armstrong and Shenk 1982). In March 1980, in a plot suspected to be orchestrated by top Salvadoran officials, Monseñor Romero was assassinated while performing mass in a cathedral in San Salvador (La

Feber 1993). His assassination is symbolically considered to be the spark that ignited the civil war (Fish and Sganga 1988).

In 1981, the five existing rebel groups united to form the Faribundo Marti Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), named after the leader of the protestors in the aforementioned 1932 *matanza*. Civil war had begun (Alvarenga and Láinez-Villaherrera 2004; La Feber 1993).

B. SALVADORAN CIVIL WAR (1980-1992)

Civil War (1980-1992): Clash between the Salvadoran Military and FMLN

Guerrillas

The climate of the early 1980's in El Salvador was colored by disappearances, torture, assassinations of religious and political leaders, and massacres of *campesinos* [farmers], such as the massacres that occurred at the Sumpul River and at El Mozote (Armstrong and Shenk 1982; La Feber 1993; Sprenkels 2001).

In 1981, the FMLN launched a counter-offensive designed to rouse popular support for the rebels in the countryside (Alvarenga and Láinez-Villaherrera 2004; Inacio 2005; La Feber 1993). When the guerrilla groups retreated to the rural areas, the military adopted the counter-insurgency strategy of destroying the guerrillas by isolating them from the social base that sustained them. Thus, from its onset, the Salvadoran military identified

civilians, particularly those living in rural areas, as a strategic target during the civil war (Danner 1993; La Feber 1993).

As the FMLN grew in power, so too did the resolve of the United States to suppress the so-called “communist” rebellion (La Feber 1993). In this era of Cold War foreign policy, the United States provided the Salvadoran government with \$4 billion in aid to finance the civil war—this was more U.S. dollars than any other nation except Egypt and Israel received in that decade (Danner 1993; La Feber 1993). Heavily funded by the United States, the civil war persisted for twelve years in Salvadoran cities and in the countryside (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004; La Feber 1993).

The Water that Put Out the Fire of War & the Signing of the Peace Accords

In November 1989, an elite group of the Salvadoran military brutally murdered six Jesuit priests while they were sleeping in their dormitory, and also executed their housekeeper and her daughter, in the Universidad de Centroamerica (UCA) (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004; Armstrong and Shenk 1982; La Feber 1993). In response to the assassination of the Jesuits, the international community raised its voice in outcry at the brutality of the civil war, marking a critical turning point that helped push the war-torn nation to peace. In addition, prolonged fighting and lack of a clear victor were key factors that encouraged the signing of the 1992 Peace Accords (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). With over 75,000 people dead, 7,000 disappeared, and one million

people displaced (1/5 of the population), the Salvadoran civil war drew to a close
(Danner 1993; La Feber 1993).

C. LIVING THE WAR

Vulnerable Populations

Quantitatively, the health impact of violence can be measured by statistics describing the numbers of deaths, injuries, and disabilities due to war. In El Salvador, by 1981, just one year after the start of the civil war, war casualties ranked as the fourth highest cause of morbidity and mortality (Zwi and Ugalde 1989).

What was it like to be a civilian during the Salvadoran civil war? The political violence in El Salvador became a part of daily life for civilians, affecting nearly all aspects of their lives. Civilians living in rural areas were among the ones most strongly impacted.

Simply because they lived in guerrilla-controlled areas, they would be targeted as FMLN supporters by the military (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004).

Salvadoran community psychologist Ignacio Martin-Baró (one of the aforementioned assassinated Jesuit priests) reported that the army's psychological warfare involved keeping the public "well-informed" of violence as a means of inciting fear in the civilian population (Turner 1995). When stumbling across the mutilated body of a woman while fleeing the Salvadoran air force and army, American anthropologist Philippe Bourgois speculated:

“...[We] came upon the naked body of a middle-aged woman. Her clothes had been ripped off and apparently acid had been poured on her skin because it was bubbling off. The body had been left in a prominent position along the path, presumably to terrorize the survivors” (Bourgois 1982).

Terror was rampant in the countryside.

As stated in El Salvador’s Truth Commission report (1993), terrorizing and in some cases even eliminating the rural population in areas with guerrilla activity was part of a deliberate strategy to eradicate support for guerrillas and establish military domination (Danner 1993; Fish and Sganga 1988). In their “scorched Earth campaign,” the Salvadoran military employed a strategy of “taking the fish out of the water.” This meant that the soldiers would take away the elements that sustained the population psychologically and physically (Danner 1993; La Feber 1993). Countless testimonies of *campesinos* describe “the most perverse” situations (Fish and Sganga 1988). Food crops were burned, causing many to die of starvation. Mass executions of men, women, and children took place in rural areas between the years 1980-1982 (Alvarenga and Láinez-Villaherrera 2004; Danner 1993; Fish and Sganga 1988). Many hundreds of women were raped before being killed, often in the presence of their children and relatives (Alvarenga and Láinez-Villaherrera 2004).

Campesinos who lived in areas of conflict report that for them the *guindas* were the most atrocious part of the war. The term *guinda* refers to the condition of people being in constant flight, sometimes for weeks at a time, fleeing the encroaching military (Fish and

Sganga 1988). Running from soldiers when they were near and walking by night in complete silence, groups of up to 100 civilians, including children and the elderly, mobilized themselves to reach a safe place (Alvarenga and Láinez-Villaherrera 2004; Danner 1993; Fish and Sganga 1988). Many died in flight due to fatigue, malnutrition, malaria, or other illnesses (Alvarenga and Láinez-Villaherrera 2004; Sprenkels 2002). Survivors recall the fear and unbearable terror that came with knowing that death could come at any turn (Sprenkels 2001; Sprenkels 2002). Survivors also tell of the desperate mothers who sacrificed their young children by stuffing rags in their mouths to stifle a cry and to save the lives of the group that was hiding (Sprenkels 2002).

In the Massacre at El Mozote, journalist Mark Danner documents one of the civil war's most horrific moments. In 1981, despite the carefully established neutrality of the village of El Mozote, all members of the village were accused of being guerrilla sympathizers and as a result the village was decimated. One of the sole survivors of the massacre, Rufina Amaya, escaped the mass murder and eventually told her story to Danner. She recalls how:

“At noon, they (the soldiers) finished killing all the men and then they took the girls to the hills. The mothers cried and screamed not to take their daughters, but they knocked them down with the butts of their guns. The children who cried the loudest and made the most noise were the first taken, and they did not return.”

All the women of the village were then locked into a building as the military executed the children. Locked in, paralyzed by inevitable death, Rufina Amaya recalls recognizing the

voice of her own young children calling to her from the church before they too were assassinated:

“Mamá, they are killing us; Mamá, they are choking us; Mamá, they are stabbing us!”

Next, the women were lined up for execution. Amaya kneeled beside a bush to pray. The bush hid her from the military and she eventually escaped. When Amaya told her story to “international people,” the Salvadoran president publicly denied that a massacre had occurred, referring to it as a guerrilla trick (Danner 1993). Yet, a few years after the signing of Peace Accords, a team of Argentine forensic anthropologists exhumed physical evidence, which confirmed that a mass killing had indeed occurred at El Mozote. Furthermore, a report issued by the U.S. Department of State in 1994 on human rights practices in El Salvador stated that forensic investigations at El Mozote had uncovered the remains of 143 people, all but 12 of whom were children twelve years or younger, including one fetus found between the pelvic bones of an adult (U.S. Department of State 1994). These numbers illustrate that during the Salvadoran civil war, children were among the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

Forced Disappearances of Children

Another dimension to the violence during the Salvadoran civil was the forced “disappearance” of hundreds of children (Fish and Sganga 1988; Sprenkels 2001). Understanding the experiences of these children is the central focus of this research project.

There were various ways by which children were separated from their families during the war. During the early years of the war, the Salvadoran military executed adults and children. In many cases, following a massacre, the soldiers gathered the surviving children and took them from the site of the massacre (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). In other cases, soldiers forcibly yanked children from their mother's arms while holding the mothers at gunpoint (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004; Danner 1993). On occasion, children would become lost in the chaotic, dangerous moments of the *guindas*. When the community searched for the lost children, they could not be found; it is believed that the military removed these children from the area (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). The peak of these disappearances occurred between 1980-1982 and the average age of children at the time of their disappearance was less than 2 years old (Harmon 2005). Salvadoran psychologists suggest that these disappearances were part of the military strategy to terrorize the people from supporting the guerrillas (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). It is suspected but not confirmed that military officials were also complicit in for-profit trafficking of these children (Cortina 2005).

The military handed many of the kidnapped children to the Salvadoran Red Cross, which either placed them in Salvadoran orphanages or arranged for their adoption (PHR 1995a; Sprenkels 2001). These children were adopted domestically and also internationally in such countries as United States, Italy, France, Spain, and Honduras. Many children were adopted into families with extremely different ideological and class backgrounds from their biological parents (Pro-Busqueda 2006). On occasion, in adoptions where children

were placed in developed countries, what seem to have been *illicit* proceedings on the Salvadoran side were fraudulently portrayed as legal to the country of the adoptive family (Cortina 2005; Pro-Busqueda 2006).

Though little documented, the FMLN is also implicated in the forced separation of children from their families. Testimonies of civilian survivors and former guerrillas that I gathered while in El Salvador in July 2005 suggest that on multiple occasions, the FMLN fighters forced fellow guerrillas to choose between either abandoning or accepting the execution of their child, since parenting was viewed as a dangerous impediment to combat. Survivors also reported that the FMLN coerced parents to “donate” their sons and daughters for the dangerous role of living in and thereby disguising “security houses,” which were used for the clandestine operations of the FMLN (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004).

While the previous scenarios describe an absolute lack of choice regarding the separation of children from the families, in other cases families left their children in the care of a third party in the hopes that the child would be delivered to safety. Through the course of the armed conflict many families lost contact with the caretakers of their children, thereby preventing family reunion after the close of the war (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004; Sprenkels 2001).

Movement to Find the Disappeared Children

The signing of the Peace Accords heralded an important triumph for the families of the disappeared children. In 1992, three courageous *campesina* mothers from the rural region of Chalatenango came forward and insisted that their kidnapped children were still alive. When each of these mothers found their children alive in an orphanage in San Salvador, other members of the community stepped forward to denounce the disappearances of their sons and daughters. In 1994, the families of the missing children founded the nongovernmental, human rights organization Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos (Search for the Missing Children) to assist families in investigating the fate of their missing children.

Pro-Búsqueda also provides legal and psychological support in the process of reunifying these disappeared children with their biological families (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). The organization serves families whose children were less than 12 years of age at the time of disappearance. Note that by the time of reunification, however, most of the disappeared children were between the ages of 15 and 30, and had been separated from their families for at least 15 years (Lovo 2005).

The Truth Commission that formed after the signing of Peace Accords brought to light the issue of the disappeared children in the national and international arena. Yet as stated in the U.S. Department of State 1994 report on *El Salvador Human Rights Practices*, “A significant number of disappearances during the war years remain unresolved, and the

new amnesty law meant that none of them was likely to be reopened” (U.S. Department of State 1994). Despite a lack of governmental support for the search for the missing children, through Pro-Búsqueda the relatives of the disappeared continue with the search for the missing children (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004; Sprenkels 2001).

As of March 2006, Asociación Pro-Búsqueda had documented over 765 cases of children who were disappeared and had located 310 of these children, the majority of whom were found residing in El Salvador, United States, Italy, France, and Honduras. The organization has facilitated 178 family reunions, and to date 455 cases remain unresolved (Zamora 2006).

Since the majority of children were under two years old when they were separated from their families (Harmon 2005; Zamora 2006), tools of forensic genetics are being used to match missing Salvadoran children with their biological families (Brenner 2005; PHR 1995b). The application of forensic sciences to human rights investigations was pioneered in the 1980s by the movement led by Argentine grandmothers in search of their disappeared grandchildren and in the exhumation of mass graves (Arditti 1999; Kirschner and Hannibal 1994). While volumes of human rights texts have documented the search for the missing in Argentina (Arditti 1999), little has been written about the process in El Salvador (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). Furthermore, the International Committee of the Red Cross has stated that the search for the missing, whether in response to natural disasters or war, is a critical issue affecting millions of families

world-wide. Yet there is a paucity of research that explores the psychological impact of the search for the missing on the disappeared person (International Committee of the Red Cross 2003). This research seeks to gain insight into the experiences of the disappeared Salvadoran children throughout the forced separation from their family and subsequent reunification.

Summary: Historical Context of El Salvador

From the point of view of civilians, the Salvadoran civil war was characterized by terror and violence (Armstrong and Shenk 1982; Danner 1993; Fish and Sganga 1988; La Feber 1993). Many hundreds of Salvadoran children were forcibly separated from their families during the civil war by both the military and FMLN (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004; Physicians for Human Rights 1995). Most of these children were either placed in orphanages or adopted (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). Following the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992, a movement led by mothers in search of the disappeared children inspired the founding of Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, a human rights organizations whose mission is to search for the disappeared children (now young adults) and reunite them with their families (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). Understanding how these children were affected by their disappearances and family reunification is the objective of this research.

II. What is identity?

As discussed in the opening section, the human rights framework considers issues relevant to disappeared children in terms of their right to identity. In the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), international human rights law recognizes the right to identity as an inalienable right of every child; however, the psychological impact of abrogation of child's right to identity has been little explored. Given the historical context of the Salvadoran civil war, which included terror, displacement, and forced separation of children from their families, it is reasonable to postulate that the process of identity formation of these youth was disrupted. In order to explore this idea further I will first address the question, "What is identity?"

Erik Erikson: What is identity and how does it form?

Erik Erikson, the "father of identity theory," is renowned for his seminal theory of psychosocial stages of life, through which an individual's identity is formed. The theory holds that an individual naturally passes through eight stages where each period of life brings a distinct developmental issue (termed "crisis"), offering a healthy path of development and an alternative unhealthy path (Erikson 1959).

For Erikson, the term "identity" incorporates not only an individual's sense of identity, but also continuity of personal character, ego synthesis, and solidarity with others.

Healthy identifications during childhood form the basis of identity formation in

adolescence, the main developmental “task” of this stage. Key areas of identity formation include: love (personal relationships), work (occupation), and ideology (beliefs and values) (Erikson 1968). Failure to resolve these issues before adolescence ends leads to what Erikson terms “identity confusion” (Erikson 1959).

Though identity formation is one of the eight psychosocial stages, Erikson believes that the search for identity is the most critical psychosocial challenge in all of life. Identity formation is, according to Erikson, a continuous and life-long process. He writes, “A sense of identity is never gained nor maintained once and for all...It is constantly lost and regained.” Furthermore, he maintains that success with identity formation is the key to personal satisfaction in life, and that identity confusion is correlated with unhappiness and lack of success (Erikson 1959).

If Erikson’s theory on the central role of identity (Erikson 1959) is indeed true then one can imagine that the events surrounding the Salvadoran civil war posed significant challenges for the disappeared children as they moved through childhood and adolescence, and into early adulthood. The extent to which the forced separation and subsequent reunification of these children with their families affect their sense of identity is unclear. Informed by Erikson’s ideas on the critical role of identity formation for psychosocial well-being, in section two I will seek insight into this question by listening to the voices of these children as communicated through ethnography.

Ethnic and Social Identity

Using Erikson's theories as a springboard, psychologists have identified several ways in which an individual's identity may be categorized. These are sex-role identity; ethnic and racial identity; and social identity (Arnett 2001; Bigler and Liben 1993; Cole and Cole 1989; Harter 1990; Hogg, Abrams, Otten, and Hinkle 2004). Since the experiences of the disappeared Salvadoran children involved separation from their families and placement in various social and cultural settings, I will first examine ethnic and social identity. Ethnic identity refers to an individual's attitude towards and feelings about membership to an ethnic group, while social identity encapsulates an individual's knowledge of and feelings about membership in any social group (Cole and Cole 1989; Hogg et al. 2004).

Ethnic identity:

The disappeared Salvadoran children's experiences in orphanages and with adoptive families may have impacted their sense of ethnic identity. (This is especially relevant to the children placed in non-Spanish speaking developed countries.) Although this question is currently unanswered, it is known that ethnic identity formation first occurs during early childhood (Bigler and Liben 1993) and is largely influenced by adult caregivers and by perceptions of power and wealth of their own group in relation to others (Cole and Cole 1989). As most of the disappeared children were separated from their family in early childhood (Harmon 2005) one can surmise that the formation of their ethnic identity was disrupted by the forced separation from their family.

While ethnic identity is formed in childhood, adolescence is a critical time for resolving one's ethnic identity (Phinney 1990). How then might the disappeared children have approached ethnic identity formation during the prolonged separation from their biological family? Phinney et. al. (1994) hypothesize that adolescents belonging to ethnic minorities have four ways of approaching their ethnic identity: assimilation (replacing the values of one's ethnic group with those of the dominant culture), marginality (feeling alienated from one's culture and from the dominant culture), separation (solely identifying with one's ethnic group), and biculturalism (dually identifying with both cultures). A study by Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997) examined African-American and Mexican-American high school students (N=98 10th and 11th graders) attitudes towards being bicultural. Quantitative analysis of interview and questionnaire responses demonstrated that bicultural youth have several identification patterns, suggesting that for minority adolescents their ethnic identity is multidimensional and complex (Phinney and Devich-Navarro 1997).

Bicultural identity may be both an obstacle and a catalyst for an adolescent's identity formation. A study on multiracial individuals suggests that while these individuals have the benefit of being able to choose what aspects of their identity they want to adopt they face several challenges such as conflicts between self-perception of identity and societal perception of identity, fear of double-rejection, and lack of role models (Shih and Sanchez 2005). Although not addressed in the literature, one wonders how individuals

surmount the challenge of forming a bicultural or multiracial identity when torn from their social fabric, as happened to the disappeared children of El Salvador.

Social identity:

Erikson's notion of the importance of conceptualizing an individual's psychology within a social context forms the basis for what developed into social identity theory (Arnett 2001). "We deal with a process (identity formation) in the core of the individual and yet in the core of (his/her) communal culture," writes Erikson (1968).

Despite the tendency for social psychology in particular and Western society generally to focus on individual identity as the major determinant of behavior, social identity also strongly affects individuals' behavior (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 2002). As described by Hogg, et al. (2004), the psychologist Tajfel coined the term "social identity" to refer to knowledge of individual membership in a group along with the emotions an individual has about being a member of this group. Whereas personal identity is based on idiosyncratic personality attributes, social identity is based on how one is similar to a group (Hogg et al. 2004). By considering how an individual's identity is contextualized in a social setting, social identity theory predicts how individuals will interact with people from different social groups (Abrams and Hogg 2004; Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 2002).

The self-schema theory asserts that one's sense of self is static and that the social environment that the self is emerged in is constantly changing. In order to understand a constantly changing social environment, individuals develop fixed "knowledge structures" called self-schemas as a tool to bridge the self, which is constant, with an ever-changing social experience (Onorato and Turner 2004). The notion of a static self is challenged by the self-categorization theory, which portrays the self-concept as fluid and context-dependent (Hogg et al. 2004; Onorato and Turner 2004). With this notion of a fluid self-concept, the self-categorization theory states that the way an individual views himself in a group will dictate how he feels about himself and how he behaves. In situations where social identity is strongly emphasized over personal identity, an individual's sense of self will be altered. For example, in a social situation where conformity is highly valued by a social group, an individual's sense of personal identity will be overpowered by social identity as conformity drives depersonalization (Abrams and Hogg 2004; Onorato and Turner 2004). In other words, the self-categorization theory maintains that the way a person views himself will vary depending on one's social environment (Onorato and Turner 2004).

The concept that the self is fluid and is strongly altered by shifting social surroundings (Onorato and Turner 2004) is pertinent to understanding the experiences of the disappeared Salvadoran children—because as demonstrated by the social identity literature—social identity strongly affects behavior (Abrams and Hogg 2004; Ellemers, et al. 2002).

Relationship between Identity and Well-being

Psychologist Jane Kroger (2004) maintains that identity is a critical component of well-being. Identity, she writes, “Provides one with a sense of well-being, and a sense of mattering to those who count. Identity is what makes one move with direction; identity is what gives one reason to be” (Kroger 2004). Identity formation is a life-long process. As Erikson writes, “each subsequent stage of adulthood must contribute to (identity’s) preservation and renewal,” (Erikson 1975). Taken together, these notions imply that constantly re-evaluating and re-creating a healthy sense of identity is a key to living a happy and fulfilling life (Erikson 1959).

The identity literature teaches that various social and personal factors influence identity (Erikson 1959; Erikson 1968; Hogg et al. 2004; Onorato and Turner 2004). Kroger and Erikson’s argument that identity is central to one’s well-being (Kroger 2004) leads to the question: what happens to identity when an individual is traumatized? This is especially relevant when the trauma is extreme, as befell the disappeared children of El Salvador.

Although copious volumes explore the effects of trauma on one’s overall health—for example through the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) model—there is little research that examines that effect of trauma on identity (Herman 1992). How has the trauma experienced by disappeared Salvadoran children, as a result of their forced, prolonged separation from their families and their subsequent upbringings in orphanages or with adoptive families, impacted their sense of identity? And to what degree, if any, has a

disrupted or pained sense of personal or social identity affected the sense of well-being of these individuals? To lay a framework for addressing these questions, in the following section I will examine the literature on loss of identity, with an emphasis on how war-related trauma and adoption impacts an individual's sense of identity.

Summary: What is Identity?

In Eriksonian terms, “identity” encapsulates an individual's sense of identity, personality, and solidarity with others (Erikson 1968). Though the psychosocial stage of identity formation occurs during adolescence, identity formation is an ever-evolving process throughout a person's life (Erikson 1959). Expanding Erikson's theories, psychologists have rebuilt the term identity to include various sub-types such as ethnic identity and social identity (Arnett 2001; Cole and Cole 1989; Harter 1990). Although ethnic identity is first formed in early childhood (Bigler and Liben 1993), the unique challenges and benefits derived from having a multicultural identity are often dealt with during adolescence (Shih and Sanchez 2005). Formation of a social identity, which is believed to strongly affect behavior (Abrams and Hogg 2004; Ellemers et al. 2002), involves a dynamic interplay between one's personal and social identity (Hogg et al. 2004; Onorato and Turner 2004). Finally, although identity is considered central to an individual's well-being (Kroger 2004), a significant gap in the literature exists regarding the question of how trauma, such as sustained by the disappeared Salvadoran children, impacts identity (Herman 1992).

III. Losing Identity

In this section, I review a multi-disciplinary body of literature to elucidate how the experiences of the disappeared Salvadoran children may have destabilized their sense of identity. I first address how the psychological literature conceptualizes loss of identity. I then examine loss of identity within the human rights framework. Thirdly, I explore how trauma, particularly the trauma of war, affects identity. Next, I investigate what characterized the trauma that Salvadoran communities endured during the civil war and how this impacts the identity of a community. Finally, I survey the literature that addresses how prolonged separation from parents affects the child's sense of identity, especially in the context of adoption. These diverse topics all relate to the common underlying theme of "losing identity."

How does the psychological literature approach loss of identity?

Identity confusion:

The terms *identity confusion* and *negative identity* are laid forth by Erikson in Identity—Youth and Crisis (1968) to describe individuals who have not successfully completed identity formation but rather feel confused about their identity. Identity confusion, the natural antithesis to identity formation in Erikson's epigenetic theory of identity formation, is brought on when a young person faces simultaneous demands of "physical intimacy, occupation choice, energetic competition, and psychosocial self-definition" (Erikson 1968).

In his psychohistory of young Martin Luther, Erikson offers an analytical vignette into the internal life of Luther, through which he illustrates the concept of identity confusion to readers. Erikson writes, “In some young people, in some classes, at some periods in history, this crisis [identity confusion] will be minimal; in other people, classes, and periods, the crisis will be clearly marked off as a critical period, a kind of ‘second birth,’ apt to be aggravated by widespread neuroticisms or by pervasive ideological unrest.”

This excerpt reveals the complex interplay between an individual’s psyche and society. It also demonstrates the tremendous vulnerability and potential for growth that characterize periods of unresolved identity crises. These crises, termed identity confusion, mark the lives of adolescents and adults as they perpetually struggle to achieve identity formation (Erikson 1958).

Negative identity:

Negative identity, also described in Erikson’s Identity—Youth and Crisis, represents a continuum from identity confusion. The antithesis to “role experimentation” during an adolescent’s identity crisis, negative identity is the identity a troubled individual adopts in his last desperate attempt to cling to an identity. This is often expressed in hostility to the proper or expected role according to the values of one’s family or community. In particular, the negative identity that the desperate individual deliberately adopts is, according to Erikson, that identity which he perceives society to be most repulsed by. Erikson explains the motivation for choosing a negative identity as follows: “Such

vindictive choices of a negative identity represent, of course, a desperate attempt at regaining some mastery in a situation in which the available positive identity elements cancel each other.” Thus, the adoption of a negative identity can be viewed as a desperate individual’s attempt for identity when she lacks the strength necessary to assume socially acceptable roles in alignment with her intuition about her identity or, as Erikson puts it, with her “feeling of reality” (Erikson 1968).

Research on Identity Confusion & Negative Identity

Various research tools have been constructed to empirically test Erikson’s theories on identity (Marcia 1966; Marcia 1980). James Marcia (1966) developed an instrument called the Identity Status Interview that grouped adolescents based on what he described as their identity status. Identity achievement describes an individual who has explored various life choices and has made personal, occupation, and ideological commitments. In contrast, identity diffusion (similar to Erikson’s concept of identity confusion) is the opposite of achievement and refers to a person who has neither explored life choices nor made commitments in life (Marcia 1966). A significant finding from Marcia’s work was the observation that adolescents’ identity status tends to correlate with other aspects of emotional development. For example, adolescents in the identity achievement category tended to be rated more favorably in other aspects of emotional development compared to adolescents in the identity diffusion category (Marcia 1980). Given that identity achievement is correlated with more successful emotional development, when considering the experiences of the disappeared Salvadoran children it is important to

realize that difficulties with identity may correlate with other problems in emotional development.

Though very little research has been conducted to test the concept of negative identity, one study by Burke et al. (1978) on identity formation in delinquent adolescent drug users” offers empirical evidence in support of Erikson’s theory of negative identity. The researchers demonstrate that a youth who adopts a negative identity does so with the mentality “at least I’m someone.” However, in contrast to Erikson’s attitude of contempt towards negative identity as exhibited in Identity—Youth and Crisis (Erikson 1958), these researchers view negative identity as a stable identity, one that represents the “best available level of object relatedness” (Burke, Zilberg, Amini, Salasnek, and Forkin 1978).

The theoretical concepts of identity confusion and negative identity as laid forth by Erikson may be useful in understanding the experiences of the disappeared Salvadoran children, many of whom were raised during early childhood and adolescence in extremely challenging circumstances without knowledge of their personal history and without the support of a loving family (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). The ways in which identity confusion and negative identity impacted, and continues to impact, their development remains an intimate, complex question that can only be addressed by listening closely to the voices of these children.

Human rights and the loss of identity

“Article 8: Right of the child to preserve identity” of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), states that the legal elements of identity are nationality, name, and family relations. The United Nations adopted this article in 1985, largely influenced by the movement led by the Argentine *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo* [Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo] in search of their disappeared grandchildren. The *Abuelas* sought the restoration of their grandchildren’s identities and the nullification of illegal adoptions (Arditti 1999). Article 8 acknowledges the importance of upholding a child’s right to identity, provides a legal definition of identity, and outlines a plan for legal recourse should violations of this right occur (1989).

Although the right to identity affects children in a multitude of situations, enforcement of the right to identity (consistent with the *Abuelas*’ original goals) has centered on adoption law reform. For example, a breakthrough in the movement to protect children’s right to identity came in 1994 when Argentina’s legislature drafted new adoption laws that incorporated the right to identity (Arditti 1999). In 2004, the intersex community invoked the right to identity before the United Nations in their campaign against misinformation about medical surgeries of intersex children (Cabral 2004). This recent application of the right to identity shows its diverse applicability, and also represents one of the few instances where the psychological effects of violations of the right to identity are openly discussed. Yet the impact of violations of this right on disappeared children remain largely unknown. Questions on how abrogation of the right to identity affects the psyche

of missing children, family structure, and communities are under-explored (Alvarenga and Láinez-Villaherrera 2004; Andersen and Chen 2002; Arditti 1999).

Trauma and Identity

A study on Central American adult immigrants to the United States who were exposed to war-related trauma found that those who experienced such trauma exhibited high levels of mistrust and identity confusion. Although an association between trauma and identity confusion was shown in this study, the nature of this relationship is unclear (Asner-Self and Marotta 2005). I will now turn to the literature on trauma for insight into how traumatic events affect one's sense of self.

In Trauma and Recovery (1992), Judith Herman states that trauma “erodes the personality” and has long-term damaging effects on one's sense of self, causing traumatized individuals to “feel that a part of themselves has died.” Furthermore, through its destructive impact on the self, Herman writes, trauma also destroys relationships. Traumatic events, “have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community” (Herman 1992).

Herman further addresses the degree to which individuals will be impacted by a traumatic event. “The most powerful determinant of psychological harm,” according to Herman, “is the character of the traumatic event itself” (Herman 1992). Applying this statement to

the disappeared Salvadoran children, one can predict that differing levels of trauma experienced by the disappeared children will affect the degree to which the self is “eroded” due to these traumas. However, it is important to underscore that though the children may have had differing levels of exposure to emotional and physical trauma, all of the disappeared children and their families endured the intense trauma of an ambiguous loss (Boss 1999) during the years of separation when they did not know who of their family was alive or dead (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). Ambiguous loss, asserts Pauline Boss, is characterized by unresolved grief that occurs when there is no closure after the loss of a loved one. Disparate situations, such as forced disappearances or losing a loved one to Alzheimer’s disease, create ambiguity as to whether the loved one is truly gone. Ambiguous loss is, according to Boss, the most difficult kind of loss; it is “stressful,” “tormenting,” and “infinite” because the ambiguity of the loss impedes grieving (Boss 1999).

Trauma and Identity in the Context of Salvadoran Communities

Thus far I have examined how trauma affects individuals. My observations of the disappeared Salvadoran children and their families during the summer of 2005¹ suggest that this movement to locate the missing children is community-centered in that it acknowledges that each disappearance and reunification affects all members of the community. Furthermore, as Salvadoran psychologist Ignacio Martin-Baró asserts, the

¹ Over an eight-week period in El Salvador (June/July 2005) I observed the reunions of four young adults with their biological families and spoke with over 100 disappeared children and their relatives while volunteering on a forensic genetics project for Asociación Pro-Búsqueda.

trauma experienced during the civil war strongly affected communities as well as individuals. The nature of trauma during the civil war, as illustrated by his writings, created “a collective experience of anxiety, terror, and denial of unacceptable reality” (Muecke 1992). For these reasons, understanding the impact of forced disappearances on Salvadoran communities is directly relevant to the experience of the disappeared Salvadoran children.

Psychologists and anthropologists agree that a self-perpetuating feedback cycle exists between the trauma experienced by a group and the group’s perception of its identity (Kinnvall 2004; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997). One psychologist maintains that traumatic events “jeopardize the collective sense of self” (Kinnvall 2004). Furthermore, as stated in the anthropologic literature on Social Suffering, “Trauma, loss and repeated uprooting become part of a new identity that is reshaped to include collective suffering” (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997). Thus, trauma is a social phenomenon that impacts groups as well as individuals and has a transformative and presumably detrimental effect on the identity of a group.

The differential effects of exposure to individual versus group trauma on the disappeared Salvadoran children have not been teased out. However according to Alvarez and Laínez-Villaherrera (2004), Salvadoran psychologists who provided psychotherapy to the disappeared children over a ten-year period, it is clear that these children struggle with their sense of identity. The disappeared children (now young adults) tend to have

difficulty understanding and accepting their own identity, especially with regard to facing their past identity and learning to integrate their roots into their current life. In section two, I will take an ethnographic approach towards understanding how struggles with sense of identity played out in the daily lives of the disappeared Salvadoran children. However, in order to more fully understand the experiences of these children, I will next discuss how prolonged family separation, particularly in the context of adoption, impacts identity.

The Primal Wound of Adoption & Its Impact on Identity

Prolonged separation of a child from his parents is recognized as detrimental to the well-being and sense of identity of the child (Cole and Cole, 1989). Echoing the testimonies of the Salvadoran families separated during the civil war (Sprenkels 2001; Sprenkels 2002), psychologists have recognized that “a more traumatic form of family separation often occurs in times of war” (Burlingham and Freud 1942). As was the case for many of the disappeared Salvadoran children who were raised as orphans, “an extreme form of separation is experienced by children who spend their early lives in orphanages because their parents are dead or unable to care for them” (Cole and Cole 1989; Dennis 1973a; Dennis 1973b).

Testimonies of the disappeared Salvadoran children and their families show that both the children who were raised in orphanages and those who were raised by adoptive families profoundly suffered from the forced separation from their biological families (Alvarenga

and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004; Sprenkels 2001; Sprenkels 2002). Furthermore, though many of the children were *forcibly* separated from their families, most if not all of these children struggle with feelings of abandonment (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). I postulate that as with children who are adopted in circumstances other than war, the disappeared Salvadoran children (both those who were adopted and those who were placed in orphanages) felt challenged by issues that universally affect adopted children such as separation and loss, guilt and shame, identity, intimacy, loyalty, and mastery over power and control (Verrier 1993). Hence, exploring the literature on adoption provides an opportunity to understand how forced separation from their parents may have affected these Salvadoran children's sense of identity.

Although the prolonged separation of children from their families is recognized as traumatic (Cole and Cole 1989), research on the long-term effects of adoption is inconclusive (Mohanty and Newhill 2006). While adoption has been shown to be a protective factor for psychosocial well-being (Bimmell, Juffer, van Ijzendoorn, and Bakermans-Kraunenborg 2003), many studies suggest that adoption poses unique risks and challenges for the adoptee (Mohanty and Newhill 2006; Nickman, Rosenfeld, Fine, Macintyre, Pilowsky, Howe, Derdeyn, Gonzales, Forsythe, and Sveda 2005). Compared to children living with their biological families, several studies indicate that international adolescent adoptees have a lower self-esteem and face a higher risk of developing serious mental health problems (Alstein and Simon 1991; Hjern, Lindblad, and Vinnerljung 2001). For example, Hjern et al. (2001) assessed the mental health status of international

adoptees (N=11,320) as compared to their Swedish-born siblings (N=2343). Their finding that the risk of suicide and psychiatric hospitalizations was increased three-fold for the international adoptees (Hjern, Lindblad, and Vinnerljung 2001) demonstrates the vulnerability of this population.

A growing body of literature examines the relationship between adoption and identity formation (Mohanty and Newhill 2006). Adoptees tend to have difficulty with identity formation (Triseloites 1997), especially if complicated by an international or transracial adoption (Nickman et al. 2005). For children adopted internationally, ethnic identity formation is a critical developmental task as adolescent's view of their own ethnic identity may conflict with how others perceive them (Wilkinson 1995).

A qualitative look at the interrelationship between adoption and identity formation can be found in Nancy Verrier's book, Primal Wound (1993), which describes the inevitable pain of adoption. In this piece, Verrier weaves her professional and personal experience as a psychotherapist and adoptive mother into a theory about adoption and family reunification. She argues that all adopted children feel a pain of abandonment and a pain of broken trust for having been rejected by their biological parents no matter how well-loved and cared for they are by their adoptive parents. Furthermore, she states that the prolonged separation from biological parents that occurs in adoption is detrimental to the well-being and sense of identity of the adopted child. "The severing of that connection between the adopted child and his birthmother causes a primal or narcissistic wound,

which affects the adoptee's sense of Self and often manifests in a sense of loss, basic mistrust, anxiety and depression, emotional and/or behavioral problems, and difficulties in relationships with significant others." Verrier explains that this is because adopted children become insecure about their sense of self and lose trust in their goodness of self (or feelings of self worth. They hold the belief, "If my mother didn't love me, who can?" Although adoptees can be well-adjusted children and adults, at some point in their life they will have to face this primal wound to feel "complete." During adolescence, Verrier explains, all adolescents are searching for their identity, but this period is especially difficult for adopted children because their "sense of Self has been compromised" by the separation from their birth mother, they have an incomplete history with their adoptive family, and they may not fit in with their parents or family because of cultural or ethnic differences (Verrier 1993).

Verrier posits that a primal wound exists for adopted children that shatters their sense of trust and hinders identity formation; therefore, healing from this injury is a challenging yet critical process that each adopted child must go through to gain a sense of wholeness and feel comfortable with his or her identity. Reunification with a child's biological family, which will be the subject of the next section, offers a powerful means of healing and can be a valuable tool for recovering one's "true" sense of identity (Verrier 1993).

The validity of Verrier's claim—that reunification offers adoptees a gateway to healing—will be evaluated in the following section.

Summary: Losing identity

The Eriksonian terms “identity confusion” and “negative identity” describe individuals who have not successfully completed identity formation but rather feel confused about their identity. Although the United Nations formally recognizes the importance of upholding a child’s right to identity (1989), little research has looked at the long-term effects of war on children’s sense of identity (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004; Andersen and Chen 2002; Arditti 1999). The disappeared children may be especially vulnerable to challenges to their sense of identity because of the individual and collective trauma they suffered during the war (Herman 1992; Muecke 1992). In addition, similar to children adopted due to non-war circumstances, these disappeared children likely suffered a primal wound of separation from their biological family that may have injured their sense of identity. This injury may be healed through the powerful process of family reunification (Verrier 1993).

IV. Family Reunification as a Catalyst for Recovering Identity

Scouring the social science literature for information on the concept of recovering identity led me to the following topics: social psychology’s relational self-model, family reunification in the context of adoption, and testimonies of family reunification of disappeared children in El Salvador. How do relationships with significant others, particularly in the instance of reunification, influence one’s identity? How does family

reunification contribute to a recovery of one's sense of identity? Motivated by the preceding questions, I will next explore the notion of recovery of identity.

Relational self-model

The influence of our significant others on our sense of identity can be explained by the relational self-model. This model is a social-cognitive theory that asserts that knowledge of self is linked with knowledge about significant others. Relationships with significant others determine what part of the "self" is active, creating a cumulative effect that forms the basis for personality (Andersen and Chen 2002). In short, the interrelated concepts of self and personality, which as previously mentioned are components of identity (Erikson 1968), are profoundly impacted by one's relationships with significant others (Andersen and Chen 2002). Applying this model to the disappeared Salvadoran children, one can expect that family reunification will re-activate dormant "relational selves," profoundly impacting their sense of identity. How then, will the children's sense of identity be affected by reunification? Will reunification lead them towards identity confusion or identity formation? To explore these questions I present literature on family reunification.

Family reunification in the adoption literature

"Trying to find my mother is connected to trying to find my sense of self," writes an adopted adolescent who contemplates her motivations to find her biological mother in

Verrier's Primal Wound (1993). As previously mentioned, for the adopted child reunion with the biological parent can be a means of healing the injury to the self that occurs due to the wound of adoption. According to Verrier, "Reunions can help all the adoptee's relationships, including that with the adoptive parent." However, reunions can also bring tremendous pain: "Despite the potential for healing which reunions represent, perhaps nothing brings to the fore everyone's feelings so much as search and reunion experiences." For example, at the moment of reunion, the realization is forced upon the biological mother that her child is "no longer a baby (something she of course knew in her head but not in her heart) and that those lost years can never be recovered." Additionally, various barriers to reunification arise on the part of the birth mother, adopted child, and adoptive family before, during, and after the reunion.

In sum, Verrier provides insights into the diverse and profound ways that reunification affects adopted children, including its role in fostering identity formation in adopted children. In considering the experience of the disappeared children of El Salvador it is useful to maintain an awareness of the emotional intensity and complexity of reunification for the participants.

Nevertheless, it is also important to keep in mind that Verrier's claims are based on her own personal and professional experience. Although her descriptions of the emotions that arise during a family reunion are consistent with testimonies of affected families in El Salvador (as will be explored in the following section), the validity of her claim that

reunification with one's biological parents is always healing for adoptees can be called into question. A recent study comparing adopted children to children who were institutionalized and then returned to their biological families found that the adopted children actually fared far better (Miller, Fan, Christensen, Grotevant, and Van Dulmen 2000). Similarly, Tizard and Hodges (1978) discuss their results from their study on eight-year old children leaving institutional care: "One of the surprising findings was that the children who were restored to their biological families did not fare as well as the children who were adopted." The "surprising" nature of these findings elucidates a critical gap in the literature—the long-term course of relationships between adoptees, their biological parents, and adoptive parents remains unclear. The concept of an extended family (or "adoption triad") comprised of the adoptee, adoptive parent, and biological parent has been presented in the literature. With few societal rules to guide us, the emerging custom of reuniting adoptees with their birth parents presents an exciting opportunity for new research (Nickman et al. 2005).

Testimonies of family reunification in El Salvador

In the family reunifications that have occurred in El Salvador, it is evident that each participant in the process may experience a wide range of reactions (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). In *Tejiendo nuestra identidad [Knitting together our identity]* (2004) two psychologists who work at Asociación Pro-Búsqueda in San Salvador, Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera, describe in detail the stages of the reunification process.

The search process involves a constant negotiation between hope and despair for the relatives of the disappeared. The mother searching for her missing child must protect herself from raising her expectations too high, for the most probable outcome is that her child will never be found—or her child may be determined to be dead. However, she also wants to guard against allowing her expectations to become too low because if she gives up the hope of finding her child the mother hinders herself from contributing to the search. Thus, this precarious balance between hope and despair exists for families of the disappeared as they must learn to seek reunification and mourn simultaneously (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004).

Once a missing child (now young adult) is located, there is no guarantee that the reunification will be a positive experience; in fact, the process is often quite painful. Several factors may affect the outcome of the reunification process including differences in social status or ideology between the young adult and his family; the degree of trauma suffered by each participant; the kind of relative (e.g., mother versus aunt) to be reunited with; the role of the adoptive family; and the psychological status of all participants. During reunification, family members of the missing young adult may feel several conflicting emotions such as joy, guilt, shame, or fear of rejection (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). Parallel to Verrier's observations of reunion of adopted children with their biological families, the parents' unresolved guilt for having been

separated from the child may come to the fore of the reunion (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004; Verrier 1993).

The young adult awaiting reunification may tend to feel joy mixed with fear of rejection, and these feelings may be accompanied by a tremendous sense of anger (Alvarenga and Laínez-Villaherrera 2004). These emotions can be felt in the following excerpt describing the reunification of the young adult Carlos with his mother, the second reunification of its kind in El Salvador:

“Al día siguiente, Juan Carlos viajó en el carro del Padre Jon a San Antonio Los Ranchos. Con la cabeza agachada y sin saber que decir, observaba a la comunidad vestida de fiesta, en celebración del segundo reencuentro familiar. Magdalena volvió a correr para abrazar a su hijo. Esta vez, las lagrimas eran también de Juan Carlos, quien lloraba inconsolablemente. Con voz entrecortada logro decir finalmente: ‘Mamá, por que me abandonaste?’”

[“The next day Juan Carlos rode in the car of Father Jon to San Antonio Los Ranchos. With his head down and not knowing what to say, he observed the community dressed for a party, in celebration of the second family reunion. Magdalena began running again to hug her son. This time, the tears came also from Juan Carlos, who cried inconsolably. With a voice cut by tears, he finally was able to say ‘Mom, why did you abandon me?’”] (Sprenkels 2001).

The bitter-sweet feelings of love and anger, acceptance and abandonment, expressed by Juan Carlos through his words and actions have proven to be common for these young adults. However, reunification may also bring an invaluable opportunity for

reconciliation. As one disappeared young adult stated to her parents regarding her reunification, “Forgive me, but I hate you. Today I forgive you.” Although some of the barriers to reunification have been identified, the factors that contribute to successful reunification remain largely unknown (Alvarenga and Láinez-Villaherrera 2004).

I return now to the triumphant words of Armando, the young adult who provided the quote I used to open this literature review:

“When I found my family, my life changed 180 degrees: it was the incentive I needed to try to give meaning to my existence...I had a history, a reason for being.”

It could be argued that Armando, who in his own written life-history portrayed himself as a troubled and delinquent adolescent (Sprenkels 2002), had resorted to a negative identity (Erikson 1968) during his prolonged separation from his family (Sprenkels 2002).

Yet once he met his family, Armando explains that he received the answers and support he needed to have “a reason for being,” which he describes led him to cultivate happiness and achieve a higher degree of internal fulfillment (Sprenkels 2002). How do Armando’s sense of history, sense of place in the world, and feeling of well-being relate to his sense of identity? To address this question, in the following section I offer an ethnographic look into the inner lives of the disappeared children of El Salvador.

Summary: Family Reunification as a Catalyst for Recovering Identity

The relational-self model states that significant others affect which parts of the self are active, suggesting that relationships with significant others strongly affects one's identity (Andersen and Chen 2002). When significant others re-emerge in an adopted child's life through the process of family reunification this can provide a powerful opportunity to heal injuries to identity (Verrier 1993), though the long-term course of reunification is unclear (Nickman et al. 2005). Disappeared young adults in El Salvador who were reunified with their biological families often experienced an amalgam of emotions ranging from joy to grief, anger to love. Though some of the barriers to reunification of the disappeared Salvadoran children with their biological families have been identified, the factors that contribute to a successful reunification remain unknown (Alvarenga and Láinez-Villaherrera 2004).

V. Conclusion: Literature Review

Salvadoran children who were disappeared during the civil war experienced an extreme trauma that was likely injurious to their sense of identity, a critical component of healthy psychological development and well-being. Since the literature suggests that trauma negatively influences identity whereas reunification challenges, hurts, and heals identity, it is important to examine how the processes of forced separation initially, together with the opportunity for reunification decades later has affected Salvadoran youth. Finally, this work will serve the community of disappeared young adults and their relatives by

guiding Asociación Pro-Búsqueda in intervention efforts, Salvadoran society in dealing with and acknowledging the disappearances, and global society as we struggle to understand the long-term impacts of both adoption and war on the psyches of children.

SECTION 2: Ethnography of the disappeared children of El Salvador

I. Study Objectives

In the preceding literature review, I demonstrated that identity is fundamental to well-being and is an inalienable human right of every child. However, several factors, including exposure to war-related trauma or prolonged separation from parents such as occurs during adoption, can jolt an individual's sense of identity. Although there are extensive literatures that separately describe post-traumatic stress disorder and adoption, two factors salient to the lives of the disappeared children of El Salvador, there is a dearth of knowledge about how the subsequent process of family reunification impacts affected youths. In particular, it remains unknown how the combined experiences of forced disappearance and family reunification affect a young adult's sense of identity. Family reunification is relevant to the lives of countless families separated as a result of adoption, immigration, natural disasters, war, divorce, and other causes.

The objective of my research, which I present in Section 2, is to understand the experiences of the disappeared young adults of El Salvador during their processes of family reunification, with an emphasis on how reunification may have impacted their sense of identity. In the succeeding pages, I outline my approach to data collection and

analysis; present my autoethnographic fieldnotes in the form of a non-fiction narrative in order to express the experiences of the disappeared children in family reunification; and conclude by summarizing key findings, limitations of this study, and recommendations for further research.

II. Methods

A. STUDY DESIGN

Participant Observation and Ethnographic Fieldnotes

This study is an autoethnographic² exploration of the disappeared Salvadoran children's (now young adults) experiences of family reunification after forced separation.

Fieldwork was conducted over a one-year period beginning in June 2005, when I entered the field as a participant-observer. In June-July 2005 I carried out eight weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in El Salvador while actively engaged in the search to find the disappeared children as a volunteer on a project to collect DNA samples from the missing children and their close relatives. During this period, as a UC Berkeley Human Rights Center summer fellow, I served as a forensic genetics consultant for Asociación Pro-Búsqueda to assist with the creation of a DNA database (or "genetic bank") of the disappeared children and their families. My role involved facilitating Pro-Búsqueda's collection of 750 DNA samples in El Salvador and bridging communication between Pro-Búsqueda and its collaborating partners in the United States, Physicians for Human Rights and the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center. While simultaneously volunteering at Pro-Búsqueda, I wrote ethnographic fieldnotes to capture the historic and emotionally absorbing movement in which I was participating.

² Autoethnography can be defined as ethnography that "situates the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay 1997). For a fuller treatment of autoethnography, please see my discussion of the "Analytical Approach" for this study, which can be found later in the methods section.

Beginning with my first contact with the organization, I presented myself as both a volunteer and a researcher. Upon arrival to San Salvador, I met with Pro-Búsqueda staff individually and in group office meetings to openly put forth my research intent of investigating the experiences of the disappeared children and their families. Within days of my arrival, Pro-Búsqueda employees, many of whom themselves are disappeared young adults or are in search of disappeared relatives, were eager to tell their stories and flooded me with their poignant testimonies of loss and family reunification. I felt overwhelmed by the gravity of emotion expressed to me, and by what I interpreted as a unique opportunity to document this movement to locate the disappeared children.

As I listened, I focused on the experiences of the *jovenes encontrados*³ [“re-found” young adults], observing how their violent separation from their families as infants and young children still affects their everyday lives. I was attentive to how struggles to accept or understand identity played out in their day-to-day interactions with others, especially with loved ones. Experiences of close relatives of the disappeared were also prominent in my observations as they gave me a context through which to understand the experiences of these *jovenes*.

I gathered observations while at Pro-Búsqueda’s office or while accompanying Pro-Búsqueda staff on DNA collection trips through rural El Salvador. I attended community

³ Literally meaning “re-found young adult,” the term *joven reencontrado* was implemented by Pro-Búsqueda to refer to young adults who have been reunited with their biological families.

events sponsored by Pro-Búsqueda and attended three *reencuentros* [reunions] of *jovenes reencontrados* with their biological families. At two of these *reencuentros*, I was both an observer and I participated as a translator between United States-raised *jovenes* and their Spanish-speaking Salvadoran families. Additionally, during social interactions with employees at Pro-Búsqueda, such as a shared lunch-break or an evening excursion to eat *pupusas* [tortilla stuffed with fillings], fieldwork continued; in this more casual setting people eagerly shared their experiences during and after the civil war. These revelations challenged me to question the boundaries between my role as a researcher and as a friend, an internal dialogue that emerges as a side theme in my fieldnotes. Finally, I was staying in the home of a former guerrilla fighter and social worker at Pro-Búsqueda, and many after-dinner conversations about being a woman fighter and about her work at Pro-Búsqueda enriched my understanding of the events surrounding the Salvadoran civil war. I openly informed individuals of my research interests and conspicuously wrote fieldnotes at Pro-Búsqueda and in the home where I was staying as a reminder to others of my role as an ethnographer.

In the second half of 2005 (August-December), while attending medical school at UC Berkeley, I communicated with staff at Pro-Búsqueda via email and telephone on a semi-regular basis and during that time, I documented unfolding events in my fieldnotes. I continued volunteering for Pro-Búsqueda on an infrequent basis by carrying out tasks requested of me, including notifying a *joven reencontrada* in the United States that her biological family had been located by the organization. I met with this *joven* monthly,

offering emotional and logistical support in the early stages of her reunification process. I also spoke over the telephone with individuals in El Salvador who had become friends, staying abreast of the events that shaped their lives. Writing fieldnotes continued as a natural extension of my involvement with the community during this period and provided an opportunity for me to examine my own feelings about “being between two worlds⁴.”

In December 2005, I returned to San Salvador, arriving at Pro-Búsqueda with the focus of a researcher rather than of a volunteer. I continued writing ethnographic fieldnotes, and also conducted semi-structured interviews that focused on the issue of identity in the lives of the disappeared Salvadoran children.

Semi-structured Interviews

Informed by preliminary observations made during summer 2005, I prepared an interview guide to be administered to the *jovenes reencontrados*, these *jovenes*' close relatives, and key informants. With the aim of eliciting information about the processes of family reunification, I designed questions about the *jovenes*' childhood before and after the forced disappearances, feelings about family reunification, and any challenges related to accepting or understanding the *jovenes*' identity. I obtained approval from Asociación Pro-Búsqueda and from the UC Berkeley Committee for the Protection of Human

⁴ In her autoethnographic piece “A Tale of Two Pregnancies,” Lila Abu-Lughod describes her feeling of being positioned between two worlds, that of her life in the United States and the one she experiences when immersed in the culture of the Egyptian Bedouin women among whom she conducts her fieldwork (Abu-Lughod 1995).

Subjects (CPHS), and then traveled to El Salvador in December 2005, where I began formal interviews.

Salvadoran *jovenes reencontrados* and their close relatives (biological and adoptive) who underwent family reunification were eligible for this study.⁵ Young adults and relatives of the disappeared in search of missing family members were also eligible. I recruited a minority of the participants myself (those who I was already well acquainted with) at Pro-Búsqueda and in the social settings described in the previous section. I explained the purpose of the interviews and asked eligible individuals if they might be interested in participating. Two Pro-Búsqueda employees assisted with recruitment and other logistical aspects of coordinating the interviews. I verbally explained recruitment procedures and provided them with an informational packet with the recruitment and informed consent scripts in Spanish as approved by CPHS, and these two staff members recruited most of the participants. Roughly one-third of the potential participants approached by Pro-Búsqueda had already been acquainted with me through my work on the genetic bank project. To individuals who I had not yet met, Pro-Búsqueda staff introduced me as a “friend” of Pro-Búsqueda who was doing research on the disappeared children and their families for her graduate thesis.

⁵ For reasons of feasibility, only *jovenes* who reside in El Salvador were included in this study. A fascinating direction for future research would be to examine the process of family reunification of *jovenes* adopted internationally with their biological families in El Salvador.

With the assistance of Pro-Búsqueda staff, I carried-out purposive sampling. Individuals were selected by Pro-Búsqueda based on geographic accessibility, anticipated willingness and mental preparedness to discuss their family reunification, and the availability of other family members to be interviewed. I realize that these criteria may create a selection bias towards individuals who had a more positive experience with family reunification and towards individuals who are less geographically and socially isolated. However, given limited resources and time (one month) for fieldwork, the logistical difficulties of coordinating the interviews (e.g., having to drive three hours to reach one *joven* who was unreachable by telephone), and the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, this decision felt appropriate.

From December 2005-January 2006, I conducted 50 interviews in Spanish including 27 interviews with *jovenes*, 20 interviews with relatives of the disappeared, and 3 with key informants. Interviews averaged 30 minutes in length; the shortest interview was 20 minutes and the longest interview was 3 hours. A majority of the young adult interviews were *jovenes recontrados* (N=26: 8 females, 18 males). I also conducted one interview with a young adult who was searching for her family. Interviews with family members included interviews with close biological relatives who had been reunited with their missing family member (N=13) [parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or older sibling]; adoptive parents (N=3); close biological relatives who were searching for a missing child (N=3); and one mother whose children had been located but she had not yet reunited with them.

Characteristics of Jovenes Interviewed

The age of the *jovenes* interviewed ranged from 24 to 34 years old. For some *jovenes*, as many as ten years had lapsed since their reunion with their biological family⁶, one *joven* had been reunited with her family just one month ago, and several *jovenes* anticipated the possibility of reuniting with additional family members in the near future⁷. Seven of the *jovenes* interviewed had at some point since their reunification returned to living with their biological families. At the time of the interview, only two of these *jovenes* were still living with their biological families. Despite being born in the countryside, most of the *jovenes* interviewed currently live in San Salvador and other cities in El Salvador (16 of 27). In contrast, the majority of the relatives of the disappeared children still live in a rural environment (17 of 20), many of them in repopulated communities (*re poblaciones*).⁸

Interview Process

Before the start of the interview, I explained the nature of the research to each potential participant. I asked each participant if they had any questions about the research. Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, I explained to participants that they could decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any point. I was also prepared to

⁶ As stated in Section One, at the time of reunification most of the disappeared children were between the ages of 15-30 and had been separated from their families for at least 15 years (Lovo 2005).

⁷ For example, at the time of the interview one *joven* had reunited with her mother several months ago and was anticipating her reunion with her biological father, which was scheduled to occur in one month.

⁸ During the civil war many civilians fled to Honduras where they lived in refugee camps. Repatriation, which began in 1987, led to the formation of repopulated communities by those returning from exile (Cagan and Cagan 1991).

provide appropriate mental health referrals if needed. I assured participants that the information they provided would be confidential. Each individual was asked to give verbal consent and if they agreed to participate in the study, I proceeded with the interview.

I conducted the interviews at comfortable and convenient locations for the participants. Most interviews were conducted either at the participants' homes or at Pro-Búsqueda. Location was determined primarily by the preference and convenience of the participant. During interviews that took place in a participant's home, often at least one other family member was present during the conversation. During interviews conducted at Pro-Búsqueda, the interviewee and I sat in a private office. Although in some instances it may have been preferable to conduct the at-home interviews in private, I did not feel comfortable asking other family members to leave the location of the interview. Individuals who traveled to Pro-Búsqueda for the interview were compensated for transportation and meals.

I conducted all the interviews in Spanish. As noted, the duration of the interviews ranged from 20 minutes to three hours. During the earlier interviews, I followed the interview guide, which as previously described I had designed to elicit themes about the process of family reunification and identity. However, as I proceeded I realized that the interviewees preferred to give a fluid account of their life story, with an emphasis on how they themselves and their families had been affected by the war. After the first five

interviews, I gradually shifted to allowing the participants to speak freely about their *historia de vida* [life story], which led to a more natural expression of their process of reunification. For consistency with the earlier interviews, once the individual had shared his *historia de vida*, if the issue of identity had not been addressed (in most cases it already had been) I asked a few specific questions about this topic. Although I can not be certain as to how the interviewees felt during the interview, my perception is that most participants were eager and proud to share their *historia de vida*, saddened by some of the emotions they reflected on, and grateful to have an “empathic listener” (Rogers 1951).

All interviews were audio-recorded. A professional transcriber native to El Salvador transcribed all of the audio recordings into Spanish text. Digital audio recordings, interview transcripts, and fieldnotes were stored on a password-protected personal computer.

As a novice qualitative researcher, my limitations in the interview process included a struggle to find the balance between asking questions and allowing the participants to guide the course of the interview; language and cultural communication barriers, especially with rural Salvadorans; varying levels of confidence between the participants and me (in some cases the interview provided the only occasion on which I spoke with a participant); and emotional exhaustion as I packed multiple interview sessions into one day.

Continually writing fieldnotes during the intensive research phase of conducting interviews gave me an opportunity to reflect on my position in the field and to document potential sources of bias. The fieldnotes also helped me to capture the unspoken gestures and setting of the interviews. Merging the interview transcripts with the fieldnotes is the analytical challenge of this study. How do I adeptly understand and convey feelings of terror, grief, rage, and abandonment in an academically crisp fashion while staying true to the words of the Salvadorans? In response to this challenge, I have chosen to employ autoethnographic writing as an analytical “method of inquiry” and mode of communicating the findings of this study (Richardson 1994). The concepts of autoethnography and of writing as an analytical method will be elaborated on in the following section.

B. ANALYTICAL APPROACH: WRITING AS A TOOL FOR DISCOVERY

“I write to find something out,” asserts sociologist Laurel Richardson. “I write in order to learn something that I didn’t know before I wrote it.” In the Handbook of Qualitative Research (1994), Richardson advocates writing as a valuable analytical tool for the qualitative researcher for a number of reasons. Her argument is based on the premise that putting one’s thoughts in writing forces one to relate to the material with depth and complexity. Through the process of writing in different ways, we qualitative researchers “discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it.” This inspires us to become “more fully present in our work, more honest, and more engaged.” She points out that despite “riveting topics” and “carefully executed research,” our books are vastly

“underread.” In response to this, Richardson argues that we qualitative researchers have a moral imperative to create texts that are more engaging and accessible to readers outside of academia. In gaining a wider readership, Richardson explains, there is a greater likelihood that these more compelling texts will “make a difference.”⁹ Her solution to creating “texts that are vital” is to “turn our attention to writing as a method of inquiry” (Richardson 1994).

Richardson does not offer a prescribed technique for using writing as an analytical method. Instead, she encourages researchers to experiment with various processes and styles of writing to find the mode that best suits them and their data as she views writing as a “dynamic, creative process.” For reasons discussed in proceeding paragraphs, I have chosen the writing style of autoethnography for this project.

Autoethnography

The term autoethnography was coined in 1975 to describe an ethnic group’s own concepts of their behavior (Heider 1979). The term was later used to refer to issues that arise when anthropologists study their “own people” (Hayano 1979). The current usage of autoethnography invokes two separate meanings; it refers either to an ethnography of

⁹ Richardson (1994) contends: “It seems foolish at best and narcissistic and wholly self-absorbed at worst to spend months or years doing research that ends up not being read and not making a difference to anything but the author’s career.”

one's own group *or* to autobiographic writing that has ethnographic interest^{10,11}. Though my project more closely fits the latter definition anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay offers a novel description that bridges the split between the meanings of the term. She defines autoethnography as "A form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context." Reed-Danahay's definition, I feel, best encapsulates the method and text I am presenting.

Autoethnography seemed ideal for this research project because, as I previously mentioned, it was the style that my fieldnotes naturally flowed into. Reflecting on this, I can articulate several reasons why this evolving genre appealed to me.

In her autoethnography of her mother's life, Caroline Brettel reveals that her mother "often used her experiences as a prism through which to view the lives of others." Using myself as a lens through which to interpret what I observed, I naturally wrote from the first person, intermingling self-reflection with ethnographic description of the lives of the Salvadorans. My experience is consistent with Brettel's view that "many ethnographies shelter autoethnographies within them" because when conducting ethnographic fieldwork there is an inevitable intertwining of the self and other (Brettell 1997). Examining

¹⁰ Autoethnography is a synthesis of postmodern ethnography, which questions the objective observer position of standard ethnography, and postmodern autobiography, which interrogates the notion of a coherent, individual self (Ashley, Gilmore, and Peters 1994; Reed-Danahay 1997).

¹¹ Autoethnography can also be thought of at the intersection of three genres: 1. "Native anthropology" (people who were formally subjects become authors of their own group); 2. "Ethnic autobiography" (personal narratives written by members of ethnic minority groups); and 3. "Autobiographical ethnography" (when anthropologists interject personal experience into ethnographic writing) (Reed-Danahay 1997).

Patricia Omidian's ethnographic fieldwork with war refugees elucidates a second reason why my fieldnotes emphasized the "self within a social context." Omidian explains that in order to avoid being traumatized through her work, she, like other anthropologists, must also tell her own story (Omidian 1994). In my own words, writing autoethnographically was cleansing for me as it helped me to personally process the tragic testimonies of the disappeared children and their families¹².

Additionally, the genre of autoethnography suited me because it acknowledges the "multiplicity of identity" of the researcher, meaning that a researcher can simultaneously be an insider and an outsider to her study population, a dynamic with which I resonate (Reed-Danahay 1997). As I examined the war-related experiences of daughters and mothers, I was unsettling anthropology's "central divide between Self and Other" because womanhood is a "partial identity" (Abu-Lughod 1995; Behar 1995). Simply stated, I had an identity that was both shared with my female Salvadoran research partners (being a woman) as well as an identity that was distinct. This notion of being a "partial" insider is consistent with my sentiment that as a woman in the field, I was privileged to receive what seemed like rarely divulged information from other women about the emotional and physical challenges unique to being a woman in times of war.

¹² Having acknowledged that autoethnography was cathartic for me, it seems important to distinguish autoethnography from therapy. Unlike therapy, autoethnography does not possess emotional healing as the driving goal (Ellis 2004). However, a blurred boundary between the two lurks in several recent autoethnographic pieces (e.g., Behar 1993; Ellis 2004), a characteristic that arguably detracts from the quality of the work (Frank 1995).

Beyond the gender identity I shared with some of the study participants, as a Cuban-American woman I felt at the same time, culturally connected to and distanced from my Latino research partners. My status as a Cuban and my fluency with the culture and language certainly felt like it enhanced a mutual trust and feeling of solidarity; however, this may have been tempered by the stereotype of Cuban-Americans as adversarial towards socialist revolutionaries. As a well-educated *gringa* [person from the United States] with links to California DNA labs¹³, I was met with simultaneous disdain and respect. As is the case with any study, the degree to which I was trusted to receive people's *historias de vida* strongly affects the outcome of this study. I explored my feelings of acceptance and rejection, connection and disconnection, with the study population in my fieldnotes. These inquiries represent myself the researcher assessing my position as an outsider vs. insider and also myself as a privileged *Cubana-Americana* addressing my own questions about identity. Attentive to the criticism that a narrowly focused autoethnography can distract from reader's understanding of the "Other," I proceeded, blending remarks about myself with observations of the disappeared children and their families.

Limitations of Autoethnography

In the course of conducting ethnographic fieldwork with a Mayan healer, Ruth Behar, a Cuban-American Jew, describes feeling not really Latina and not really (North) American. To celebrate her acceptance that she felt "speechless about who I was," Behar

¹³ The site where DNA samples of missing children and their families were being sent for kinship analysis.

inserts a lengthy autoethnographic chapter in her ethnography of the Mayan woman's life (Behar 1993). Though Behar's self-revelatory chapter "Biography in the Shadow" was a breakthrough for autoethnography, her "confessions" have been criticized as being "embarrassing," "distracting," "too grandiose," and "too shrill" (Frank 1995). Nancy Scheper-Hughes concurs, "Beware the fury of a patronized woman! The two 'translated,' 'border-crossing women' intersect, but the metaphor is contrived and the lesson is clear: the lives of anthropologists are rarely as rich and fascinating as those of their subjects" (Scheper-Hughes 1993). Finally, another critic concludes that although "Behar's rage calls for more empathy and understanding than readers feel...her book is an important effort in the direction of more thoughtful and inclusive ways of knowing" (Frank 1995). As with other autoethnographies, this study is an experiment in merging art and science, in unifying the personal and professional, and an academic exploration of the boundary between the "Self" and the "Other" (Ellis 2004; Reed-Danahay 1997).

Given that autoethnography uniquely stands between artistic exploration and scientific inquiry, and between asserting individuality and relinquishing it, the issue of validity is critical to raise. Autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis rhetorically asks, "How do we put ourselves in our own texts, and with what consequences? How do we nurture our own individuality and at the same time lay claim to 'knowing something'?" In essence, Ellis is calling into question the extent to which autoethnography can be a rigorously defined, scientific method. As of yet there is no consensus on how to approach validity in this context. Ellis suggests that it can be measured as the extent to which an autoethnography

“evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible” (Ellis 2004). While this redefinition of validity may be plausible, given the variety of styles and analytical approaches that autoethnography encompasses, I think it critical to clearly outline the creative process as well as the scientific one that shapes an autoethnographic study. Therefore, in order to address one of the foundations of validity, namely transparency in methodology, I will clearly lay forth the steps I have taken in preparing the results of this study.

Outline of Analytical Method

The precise analytical method I used can be described as follows. As previously mentioned, I conducted interviews and wrote ethnographic fieldnotes. Ethnographic data collection can be considered the first phase of analysis as “data are never pure; they are ripe with meanings and always products of prior interpretive and conceptual decisions.” In other words, an ethnographer creates theory “throughout that prior process of seeing as she writes fieldnotes” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). With the interview transcripts and fieldnotes in hand, I then edited the fieldnotes into a “seamless text¹⁴” presented chronologically. I referenced Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes (1995) for guidelines on the process of editing fieldnotes. The purpose of these edits was to preserve the anonymity of the participants and to create a fluid, non-fictionalized narration

¹⁴ With autoethnography, various analytical approaches are possible. One can choose to apply a traditional grounded theory analysis or to forego traditional analysis all together. Ellis’s preference is to “keep story separate from traditional analysis. I like to take readers deep into emotional detail and hold them in the experience” (Ellis 2004). Her inclination for “seamless texts” (i.e. texts which have an uninterrupted story-like flow that are separate from a traditional analysis) is the approach I am taking.

demonstrating the experiences of the *jovenes* in a language and style accessible to non-academics. I wove excerpts from the interview transcripts into the conclusion so as to bring the voices of the *jovenes* into the research as much as possible. I omitted certain excerpts of fieldnotes so as to underscore segments that most clearly illustrated the themes that intuitively emerged throughout the course of writing. Thus, the very process of formulating a written non-fiction “story¹⁵” of the lives of the *jovenes* led me towards the ethnographic fieldworker’s ultimate analytical goal of “rendering the data meaningful” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995).

Addressing issues of representation was a challenge for me throughout this research project. My efforts to accurately document and convey these testimonies of forced disappearances and family reunification as poignantly and honestly as they were expressed to me demanded that I inventory my own discomfort with facing poverty and violence. I had to curb my tendency to avoid confronting the hard reality that I was seeing while also overcoming the temptation to glorify the experiences of the *jovenes*. Drawing from his fieldwork among revolutionary guerrillas in El Salvador, Philippe Bourgois notes: “Those who confront violence with resistance—whether it be cultural or political—do not escape unscathed from the terror and oppression they rise up against. The challenge of ethnography, then, is to check the impulse to sanitize and instead to clarify the chains of causality that link structural, political, and symbolic violence in the production of an everyday violence that buttresses unequal power relations and distorts

¹⁵ Although autoethnography includes fiction and non-fiction text, the term “story” is used to refer to the “seamless text” created by an autoethnographer. (See the previous footnote).

efforts at resistance” (Bourgois 2001). An honest portrayal of the violence that characterizes the lives of the disappeared Salvadoran children demands a sincere, non-censured, and not over-dramatized examination of both the extraordinary moments as well as the everyday ones that define their lives.

Throughout the process of editing the fieldnotes, my emphasis was to create an accurate and accessible portrayal of the experiences of the disappeared children. For this reason, I strictly minimized my “tampering” with the original fieldnotes to making only the changes necessary to preserve anonymity, to promote accessibility and artistic appeal of the material, and to make the notes grammatically sound. As recommended by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) I was especially conservative with editing interview transcripts, and I presented unadulterated excerpts of interview transcripts as much as was feasible. My goal was to make this creative writing as close to the truth as it was expressed to me as possible.

In short, as I reworked the fieldnotes into a creative, non-fiction writing piece, I enjoyed writing both as a method for discovering theory (Richardson 1994) and as a means to presenting the experiences of the *jovenes* and their families in a text whose meaning can be uncovered by each of its readers. The Salvadorans who I encountered through Pro-Búsqueda were eager to share their stories with me and have them told to a North American audience. Their courage and resiliency has impressed and transformed me—I only hope I have done justice to their *historias de vida*.

III. Results: An ethnographic sketch of the disappeared children of El Salvador

CHAPTER 1—Arriving

30 May 2005

Monday: Departing from SFO

It's close to midnight when I arrive at the TACA ticket counter. I join the 200-person line-up of Latin Americans preparing to go home; my eyes become wide and light up as if I too am going home. Yes, while in Central America, while among Latinos, there is a part of me that will always feel more at home.

31 May 2005

Tuesday: Nonstop SFO to San Salvador

On the overnight flight to San Salvador, I converse with Jocelyn, a 32-year-old Salvadoran single mother who is making her first trip home in seven years, a surprise visit to her ailing father. She invites me to sit next to her instead of encouraging me to leave the seat between us empty. So we sleep seated beside one another and when the

sun comes, we admire together the verdant volcanoes, blue lakes and ocean, and red-brown farmland of El Salvador.

An Ecuadorian *abuelita* [granny; diminutive of grandmother], also on her way to visit loved ones that she no longer lives with, sits in the row behind. Sometime while I was sleeping she must have placed this doll with blonde hair and blue eyes in the seat beside me. It's spooky to open my eyes now and see this doll in its plastic-cardboard packaging buckled in the seat beside me, staring at me, haunting me. This synthetic, brainless doll represents the USA to me, the one I am glad to leave behind for a bit. What has the USA done to El Salvador? What I am to discover in hearing the war stories? I wonder if the child who receives this ugly doll will actually like it.

From shivering on the plane to sweltering, stagnant airport air—it's 8 AM—I'm in San Salvador. I splash, splash water on my face and cruise through customs with Sebastian, the Chilean genetic analyst who has traveled here with me. Through a turnstile and automatic glass doors, and into the humid country we go.

Two employees of *Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos* [Organization In Search of the Missing Children], the human rights organization Sebastian and I have come to volunteer with, greet us at the airport. Sebastian will stay for four days to offer his services as a geneticist to this organization. Pro-Búsqueda's

mission is to locate children who were “disappeared” during the Salvadoran civil war and to reunite them with their biological families.

I am a 25-year-old medical and public health student. I will be in El Salvador for two months and the purpose of my visit here is two-fold. As a volunteer at Pro-Búsqueda, I will assist with the construction of a DNA database of the missing children and their relatives. Additionally, I will conduct preliminary research for my master’s thesis. I seek to understand the experiences of children who were disappeared during the Salvadoran civil war. These children are now young adults, roughly my age.

This is my first visit to the country and I’m slightly nervous for I’ve heard that San Salvador has the highest murder rate in the western hemisphere.

We are greeted with the welcoming smiles of Yessenia, Pro-Búsqueda’s office manager, and Jaime (Don Jaime), the driver, among the “*Taxi, taxi, do you want a taxi?*” chaos at the airport. On the ride from the airport, they praise the natural beauty of the country and the deliciousness of *pupusas* [stuffed tortillas]. And they gripe about the increasing culture of violence, the nation’s absolute dependence on remittances sent by Salvadorans working abroad and the Salvadoran government’s failure to comply with the Interamerican Court of Human Rights’ sentence on the case of the disappeared Serrano Cruz sisters.

We drop Sebastian off at the Holiday Inn. “Yessenia, here’s the address of my guesthouse.” I hand her the piece of the paper that I am proud to have printed out.

“We had thought...” she speaks slowly, delicately, and craning her neck towards me in the backseat, says, “...to take you to the house of a friend, a social worker at Pro-Búsqueda.” Okay. I am grateful for Pro-Búsqueda’s arranging a place for me to stay and never do make it to Casa Ximena’s.

Jaime, the driver, tells the guard behind the heavy, metal gate that he is dropping me off at the home of Reina Mendoza. I am taken to house #67 in the *Residencial Santa Barbara*, a gated community of 12 houses. Reina’s not there, but her friend welcomes me into the home. Inside, I futilely attempt to phone my worrying mother to tell her of my safe arrival in San Salvador. I shower before the tap stops flowing (water here stops running at noon) and fall asleep on the mosquito-net-wrapped bed. I realize after I’ve wandered into the kitchen that the smell of tortillas being heated has awoken me. Yumm. Reina’s friend tells me that Yessenia, she thinks, is a relative of a disappeared child. I should be prudent though, she warns, and not speak of these things outside of these walls...

At 2 PM, Jaime transports me to Pro-Búsqueda’s office. He presents me to Lucio, an investigator for disappeared children, and Carol, the organization’s human rights attorney. I immediately am seated in the conference room to share introductions with

Lucio. Having read Lucio's testimony in Pro-Búsqueda's publication *Historias para tener presente* [Stories to have present], I am aware that he is a *joven encontrado*. This term, literally translated as "youth who has been found," is used by Pro-Búsqueda to refer to young adults who were disappeared during the civil war and who were later reunited with their biological families. I tell Lucio that I have to come to volunteer on the DNA project and to conduct research for my thesis, so I'll be taking notes if that's permissible. I request that he be honest with me about offering guidance on how I could be most helpful to Pro-Búsqueda. I interpret the underlying meaning of our conversation as "Let's be as honest with each other as possible. I am a friend."

Now it's time for the great unveiling. Sebastian will momentarily present the preliminary results of DNA analyses from the first batch of DNA samples collected by Pro-Búsqueda and processed in his lab in California. Pro-Búsqueda employees eagerly await the results of the analyses. Sebastian and seven of his colleagues at the California Department of Justice (DOJ) volunteered after hours to carry out genetic kinship analyses of these DNA samples from missing Salvadoran children and relatives of the disappeared. This is one step of many in the joint effort to build a genetic bank that will hold DNA profiles to facilitate matching of disappeared Salvadoran children with their biological families.

This collaboration between Pro-Búsqueda and the genetic analysts at the DOJ was spawned in 2002 when Pro-Búsqueda sought assistance from its U.S. affiliates

(Physicians for Human Rights and the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center) for the construction of a DNA database.

I have received a Human Rights Summer Fellowship from the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center to assist with the creation of the genetic bank. We face a monstrous task—in two months time I must support Pro-Búsqueda in collecting 712 DNA samples throughout El Salvador. Because of changes in California law, the *pro bono* facilities and after hours staff time of the DOJ will not be available after this summer.

We sit at a round table for a meeting in the office of Father Jon, the director of the organization. The participants include Sebastian, Yessenia (office manager), Lucio (investigator), Margarita (investigator), Ramona (administration), and myself. The purpose of the meeting is to present the report prepared by the DNA analysts at the California DOJ and to discuss obstacles in DNA sample collection. Most of the meeting consists of Sebastian's teaching, sometimes in the form of question-answer, sometimes by going through the report page by page. Then a fascinating moment captivates all. It is plausible that there is a match between a mother and a disappeared son.

We have printouts of the genetic profiles for a disappeared boy and for two females that could be his mother and sister, though further analysis is needed to test this. So, Sebastian and I, using only the profiles as presented in the report, a piece of paper, and a pen, conduct a back-of-the-envelope maternity analysis by hand. It is actually extremely

simple to perform. We begin by verifying that the purported sister is truly the daughter of the woman who was stated to be her mother. (We do this by verifying that each of the daughter's pairs of genes includes a gene contribution that could have come from the purported mother. The genes chosen for this analysis are infrequent enough that such a match has an infinitesimal probability of occurring by chance alone.) The staff present at the meeting stands behind us, looking over our shoulders in suspense. It is a brilliant moment. Sebastian achieves his goal of demonstrating the power of genetic analysis and makes his point about the importance of having sufficient genetic material available from multiple family members. Locus by locus we discover that the disappeared boy does not match the mother. Yet the enthusiasm in the room remains.

At 5:30 PM, Lucio is volunteered by his colleagues to give me a ride since where I am staying is "on his route home." He quietly attempts to refuse but is too shy to say no in an audible tone. He turns to me and says, "I have to run an errand. Do you want to come or would you rather I do it and then come back to pick you up?"

"Whatever is most convenient for you is what I prefer." Exhausted, I join Lucio on the errand.

I get into Lucio's 1987 Nissan sedan and he tells me we are going to the "public hospital to pick up my nephew." His nephew is a 28-year-old man who, while working as a security guard, was shot in the arm and across the forehead last week. Lucio and I have

known each other for about three hours. I have been in the country for about ten hours. And I'm going to the hospital to check on a gunshot victim! I meet Lucio's nephew and he appears to be recovering well. He is well enough for discharge but faces hours of paperwork so we end up not taking him home after all.

As we leave the hospital, Lucio introduces me to the layout of neighborhoods in San Salvador. This one, the one that we are in (starts with T...) is "very dangerous," he tells me. We are driving through this "very dangerous" neighborhood, so of course I have to ask questions about violence. What happened to your nephew? What is safe? What could happen to me? What should I be aware of? Lucio responds that no one would seriously injure me (kill me) "because those are different laws, the ones that apply to Americans."

I am not sure if what he says is true but nevertheless, I reply, "That's not right, every life is worth the same."

"*Qué* [What]?" he smiles and asks me to repeat myself as if he had not heard me. My intuition tells me that he did hear but he wants me to say it again. I sense that it's healing for him to hear an American say these words. (Reagan sent one million dollars a day for the civil war, Lucio recites, testing my allegiances.)

So I repeat it for him. “Every life is worth the same.” We’re rounding a corner, in the traffic of San Salvador, as I say this.

Now our conversation switches course. He asks me if I have communicated with my mother since my arrival. “Yes, I sent her an email.” Then I say, “She worries about me too much. I am the baby of the house.”

Lucio responds, with eyes fixed on the road, “My mother worried about me...” And then after a pause “...*quizás* [maybe].” I know what his response means. He is saying to me, you are lucky to have a mother who worries about you. Yes, I know how Lucio’s mom died. She died early during the civil war. Before coming to El Salvador, I read Lucio’s testimony in *Historias para tener presente*. I still remember his words, “My story is the story of my dad, and how my dad took care of me.” It was Lucio’s father who enabled Lucio to survive the long *guindas* [flights of civilians] during the civil war. His father also died in the war.

We reach the house where I am staying and I thank Lucio for the ride. Merely being in his presence stirs my thoughts about the civil war. He is the first *joven encontrado* with whom I have had the opportunity to speak personally. Having read his testimony of terror, anguish, loneliness, and desperation, and now just seeing him alive and well, working at Pro-Búsqueda, smiling, and offering me a chocolate bar, gives me plenty to think about.

Ravenous, I sit to dinner at Reina's house, and just as I've taken a seat, my mom calls. "I'm doing great, Mom. Everything is excellent." 40 minutes later, my boyfriend Mark phones. "...And then we went to the public hospital to see his nephew who was shot last week...and and and..." Violence everywhere. I'm a little, let's just say—overwhelmed.

"You'll just have to trust people," Mark calmly replies. "Trust the people who you are working with...Goodnight."

Before going to sleep, I speak with Emily, a New Zealander who is staying at Reina's house. Emily whispers that the father of Reina's 14-year-old daughter Jazmin died during the war. She also introduces me to the idea that the Salvadoran government is unhappy about foreigners doing political work with NGOs. They have even gone so far as to deport activists and prevent them from re-entering the country. Oh, a little Fidelesque? I will ask about this disconcerting and intriguing dynamic at Pro-Búsqueda tomorrow. For now, sleep!

1 June 2005

Wednesday: Meeting Reina

It's amazing how refreshed I feel after a sound sleep. At 7:30 AM, Lucio picks me up from Reina's to shuttle me to Pro-Búsqueda. When I arrive at Pro-Búsqueda, I meet

Ofelia, the woman who does the cleaning. She stands in the hallway holding a broom. The 4-foot broom is chin-high on her. I am struck by the sweetness of her smile, which is widened by the deep wrinkles on her lightly freckled face. She wears a light blue dress, and her ropes of thick, gray hair are tied back in a loose ponytail. After a few minutes of talking, she volunteers the information that she is the mother of two disappeared boys. Both of her sons are in Italy but there has not yet been a reunion. She makes a face as if she had just sucked on lemon, and then goes back to her sweeping. I am amazed by her dedication to her disappeared children—working at Pro-Búsqueda to help the cause of locating other missing children and to be privy to information that might help her find her lost boys.

While I sit on a dusty rose-colored couch in the foyer of Pro-Búsqueda, I meet Eduardo, the receptionist. Since I am Californian he wants to hear about all the celebrities I have sighted in my life. He is most impressed by my account of my 3-sentence conversation with Kurt Cobain. Eduardo and I talk about a mutual passion—music. A woman in the office now starts talking to me about Eduardo in his presence. “Eduardo is a *joven encontrado*.” After she uses the photocopy machine that sits on Eduardo’s desk, she walks away. Eduardo and I do not talk about his history; our conversation quickly drifts back to the comfortable realm of rock and roll. And then he tells me about his baby who has a mild throat infection. He shows me a photograph he took this morning on his cell phone of his febrile infant sleeping in a hammock.

Sebastian and I have a brief exchange in the hallway. “So, you are staying with Reina,” he says with interested eyebrows. “Very good for you. How is it working out? Father Jon told me about her. She is a very interesting woman,” he adds.

“Yes? She has not told me anything.”

“She was an FMLN [leftist revolutionary group; acronym for Faribundo Martí Liberación Nacional] fighter,” Sebastian reveals.

Sebastian invites all of us at Pro-Búsqueda to a tasty lunch. Mostly, I take a break from ethnographing, but I do overhear Margarita, one of Pro-Búsqueda’s investigators, talk about the disappearances of her four brothers. She has the inkling that the disappeared boy for whom we did the maternity test by hand yesterday is her missing brother.

Back at Pro-Búsqueda, we have a second formal office meeting to discuss the genetic bank. Among other topics, the staff shares obstacles that they face in the collection of DNA samples when they do house visits. Buccal cells are collected from each donor with a plastic *palito* [little stick] that has a piece of paper to retain the cells. Apparently, some of the elderly relatives of the disappeared are reluctant to scrape the stick against the inside of the cheek because they are afraid their teeth will fall out. Another problem is the fundamental issue of trust. Although Pro-Búsqueda has been working with these communities for over 10 years (in fact, the organization was birthed by these

communities) shadows of the terror that reigned during the civil war seem to impede the willingness of some individuals to donate samples. In that time, affiliating with “dissidents” bore consequences as extreme as torture and death.

A second topic raised by Sebastian in the meeting: what is the identity of the disappeared boy whose genetic profile we examined yesterday? Might he be Margarita’s missing brother? “I have to catch the bus before it’s too late,” Margarita hurriedly says. I have a hunch that Margarita flees because she does not want her hopes to be dashed by finding out it is not her brother. Who knows? The 5 minute rough kinship analysis is postponed.

At the close of the workday, Reina and I walk together from Pro-Búsqueda to her home. In between daring street crossings, and buying tamales, oranges, and pineapples, Reina tells me about raising Jazmin. “Jazmin’s father died in the war,” Reina reveals. “Jazmin suffered a lot.” When Jazmin started kindergarten she underwent a crisis. She saw that her classmates had fathers and wanted to know where her father was. Little Jazmin became furious. Friends at Pro-Búsqueda did their best to calm the 5-year-old but, according to Reina, nothing would console her short of meeting her father. To this day, I think, Reina anguishes over her daughter’s sorrow.

After a satisfying dinner at Reina’s, she and I find ourselves in the living room continuing to talk. “I am a survivor of the Massacre of Sumpul,” she divulges in a voice slightly more audible than a whisper. “That is why they call us survivors, because the conditions

we survived were incredible. There were gunshots everywhere...Jazmin was born in a bed that was lent to me. I did not even have my own bed because of the war.” She closes her eyes and shakes her head. “Jazmin almost died when she was 6 months old. She was sleeping in a room on a hammock. I heard gunfire and I ran in to get her. I grabbed her. A bullet passed directly beneath where she had been sleeping.”

Reina then proudly tells me about the heroism of her father. After the shooting of the Sumpul Massacre had ceased, her father went back into the open field to search for injured civilians. If someone moaned or called out then he would know that they were alive, Reina explains. “My father took a huge risk by going out to look for people to be rescued. Someone moving could easily have been shot,” Reina emphasizes. Her father was later honored with a plaque and a cash award for his heroism at Sumpul. He felt that the money belonged to all of the survivors of Sumpul and to all those who did not survive, so he used the money to create a memorial at the Sumpul River. Unfortunately, Reina conveys, nobody lives in the village anymore and the memorial is deteriorating. Swimmers use it to hang their clothes on while bathing in the river.

Reina relates that her father was a political leader with the FMLN, the leftist guerrilla network that converted into a political party with the 1992 Peace Accords. She too could have had been a political leader for the FMLN, she tells me, but chose not to because she detested the factionalism that was destroying the party. She is furious and frustrated that

because of internal differences within the FMLN, the conservative party ARENA that has ruled since before the civil war continues to dominate the country.

I tell Reina that I believe in supporting social movements and that I want to keep myself alive to do so. “Or maybe someday you will find a cause worth risking your life for.”

The simplicity and ease with which she speaks that line jolts my reality a little. She is a woman who has risked her life over and over again.

The conversation turns as if ready to end. Reina has not yet given me a copy of the key to the home so I ask how I will get in tomorrow after work. “Jazmin will be here. She comes home everyday after school at 2 PM.”

“Doesn’t she go out?”

“NO!” Reina briskly answers as if she is surprised that I would even ask. “Terrible, terrible things are done to young girls on the streets. And those young girls are defenseless. Jazmin knows that she is defenseless without me,” Reina asserts. She launches into a story about being assaulted in downtown San Salvador. The thief demanded coins and threatened to stab Reina and Jazmin. Terrified, Reina yanked a dollar bill from her wallet. And the thief, after turning a profit, gave her change!

Reina confides that she has nightmares that Jazmin is taken away from her. She attributes these nightmares to trauma from her war experiences and to her exposure to kidnapping through her work at Pro-Búsqueda.

“The death squads have not ended,” she goes on to tell me. “It is easy to make a calculated death look like a result of gang violence, like an ordinary assault. The death squads are still here and...”

Ring. Another phone call from my mother. Everything is great, Mom. Goodnight.

2 June 2005

Thursday: Meeting Luzecita & Agustin

I awaken feeling refreshed and even a little cold (a welcome feeling in the tremendous heat here). Bright light pours in through the window between the mango tree leaves. Water only runs from the tap in the mornings so I receive the splashy-dribblish fountain of the shower as a blessing. I hand wash clothes, douse myself with sun-block and mosquito repellent...the doorbell rings...

Relief. I slip into Mateo’s taxi and tell him that I’m “*bastante cobarde* [very cowardly]” and we talk about arranging regular rides. That way I can avoid the hazards of the bus

(assaults, getting lost, butt pinchings) or walking alone. His taxi represents security to me. I tell him, "I am going to Pro-Búsqueda."

"More or less, what work do they do there?" he asks. And, after my two-sentence answer he says, "My mom was disappeared." So we talk about that. It happened in 1981 when he was 12. She's gone... There's a lull in the conversation and I ask him about his living children. That brightens the tone of our ride. We arrive at Pro-Búsqueda, and in a mutually friendly manner say to each other "May you be well."

It's an exciting day at Pro-Búsqueda with a press conference scheduled to begin at 10 AM. When I walk into the office I feel as if I am greeting friends. Fairly quickly I find my way to the available desk and computer in the psychology office and I begin to take care of details having to do with the genetic bank. Father Jon Cortina, the 70-year-old director of Pro-Búsqueda, stops in to give me a good morning kiss on the cheek. He is chipper and bright like his cloud-white shirt, and when he moves there is grace in his step, free and loose like his cotton clothing.

"Are you ready for the press conference?" I ask him.

"Yes," Father Jon replies, "I just will read a bit and then I'll see how I'll bite them [the government...for not complying with the sentence agreed upon in the international human rights court]."

I'm still at the computer composing an email to a forensic mathematician, one of the collaborators on the genetic bank project, when I overhear a fascinating conversation. Carol (the lawyer) and Yessenia (the office manager) speak with a middle-aged Salvadoran woman who wears a vibrant red-flowered skirt and a plain blouse. "Today is the 23rd anniversary of the disappearances of the Serrano Cruz sisters," I hear Carol say. These are the disappeared sisters on whose behalf the Serrano Cruz family has emerged victorious in a case before the Interamerican Court of Human Rights. This marks the first instance where the Salvadoran government is being held accountable in a human rights court for human rights violations committed during the civil war.

Oh...Now I understand! Carol and Yessenia are speaking to a sister of the disappeared girls, briefing her before the press conference. Ismael, in charge of public relations at Pro-Búsqueda, enters the psychology office and says something to the effect of "Shame the government but not the people." The sister says that all her mother wanted before she died was to find her missing girls.

I avoid the press conference as I have been advised to "keep a low-profile." I peek in to see Father Jon and the sister of the disappeared girls speaking before newspaper reporters and three TV channels including Telemundo. And there are donuts. That's my experience of the press conference. Oh yes, and during the press conference, Dora, Pro-Búsqueda's accountant, helps me sew a button on my lime-colored blouse because today

I'm going with Sebastian to the laboratory of the Supreme Court. (Okay, the truth—Dora sewed the button on for me).

Back at the psychology office, yet another meeting caught by my ears. Sebastian and Carol discuss statistics. Carol reports that an estimated 7000 children were indiscriminately disappeared during the Salvadoran civil war. For example, in El Mozote, Carol cites that three helicopter sweeps were made to snatch children. She also mentions that Pro-Búsqueda receives 3 to 5 new “cases” per month.

Sebastian generously invites us all out for lunch again. Besides the predictable talk about whether the *horchata* [a sweet drink of rice or almonds] is tastier than the blackberry drink, I stumble into an intriguing conversation about Dora's family. Dora is the petite, lovable, accountant at Pro-Búsqueda. Before I can realize what initiated the conversation, I hear Ramona say, “Dora is a ‘case’.”

Dora begins to tell me about two brothers in Italy. I combine this information with the gestalt of her face. “You are the daughter of Ofelia?” I ask a little excitedly because I had loved meeting Ofelia and I am pleased to have made the connection.

“Yes.” Dora says a few sentences about her missing brothers, and then I tell her how much I enjoyed meeting her mother.

I tell the ladies that the taxi driver that drove me to the office this morning told me that his mother was disappeared during the war. Their eyes open wide but not too wide—it seems that they are used to hearing information of this type.

“How do you ask questions about that?” I ask the women.

Ramona answers matter-of-factly, “You have to ask him how his mother died.” She explains that there is a memorial in San Salvador with the names of civilians who died in the civil war. Not everyone reports the death of a loved one due to the war but it would be good to make him aware of this option, they tell me.

When I return from lunch Eduardo is excited to show me a photograph that Lucio had composed on Eduardo’s cell phone. It’s the same photograph of his baby sleeping in a hammock that he showed me yesterday. “It’s the same picture,” I say, handing him back the cell phone. The baby’s peaceful eyes are closed.

“No, look again,” says Eduardo. On either side of the baby’s closed eyes are two eyes, opened wide, feminine, and elegant, in black and white. Lucio had photographed the black-and-white photo of Eduardo’s assassinated mother that Eduardo carries taped to the cover of his planner. It is moving to see the baby’s closed eyes, and on either side of his face a protective, graceful eye of his grandmother looks out at the viewer.

Sebastian, Father Jon, and I have a 2 PM appointment with the forensic geneticists at the Supreme Court. At 2:15 PM, Father Jon is still smoking a cigarette at Pro-Búsqueda, unbothered by our late departure. Among the tall shadow-casting buildings of the Supreme Court complex, White Coats with PhDs greet us; we have reached the DNA lab. While touring the sterile rooms, my attention is caught by the modernity of the machines. Two Salvadoran women are setting up a PCR [polymerase chain reaction, done during genetic analysis to amplify DNA] and in an adjacent room an automated genotype sequencer is chugging away at full force. I now understand that this lab is El Salvador's equivalent of the U.S. Department of Justice's genetics branch. The purpose of our visit is to build rapport so that the Supreme Court lab professionals will be more willing to do genetic analysis for Pro-Búsqueda in the future.

Back at Pro-Búsqueda; 5 PM, the "go home while it's still safe" time, draws upon us. We organize an outing for *pupusas* [tortillas stuffed with cheese, beans, and/or meat] in celebration of Sebastian's last night in El Salvador. Yessenia tells me to wait at the office until 7 PM, when I will be picked up for the *pupusa* outing.

In the frustration that my afternoon field notes were erased due to a failed Internet connection (and lack of precaution on my part), I, grumbling, wander into Ismael's office. We give up on the Internet and, in the meantime, talk a little about our lives...

I share what it has been like for me to be here in San Salvador—in a fragile state of dependence on others. I still don't even know how to get from my home to the office without someone delivering me. We discuss violence in El Salvador and the inevitable risks of being here. In a roundabout way, I express that I want to be alive to help improve children's health; I aspire to be a pediatrician. Ismael listens then eventually cuts me off—"It's more concise to say that you are afraid." With an ironic smile, he continues, "Being afraid of El Salvador's violence serves you. It serves to humanize you." This is the gem that I carry from our conversation: Vulnerability leads to humanization. American privilege ends sharply and rapidly when a bullet pierces the cerebrum. We are all equally human, and fear can help teach people that.

7 PM. *Pupusa* time! A group of us are in Pro-Búsqueda's driveway, loading into vehicles. "Go in this car. It might interest you," Ramona says. "There are *jovenes encontrados* in the car." Ramona piles into the passenger seat. As I plop into the backseat, I'm introduced to Agustin, the driver, and sitting behind him, with her armless side closest to the backseat car door, is Agustin's wife, Luzecita. Luzecita was the first *joven encontrada* to be found by Pro-Búsqueda. Her testimony comprises the first chapter of *Historias para tener presente*. And Agustin and his brother constitute chapter three. What an honor to meet Luzecita! Her story is an inspiration. On Luzecita's lap sits Pablito, their adorable 3-year-old son. The child with the mischievous, dimpled grin sports a red and white horizontal striped t-shirt and red shorts.

I am amazed by Luzecita's persona. She constantly bubbles over into laughter. We introduce ourselves. Giggling, Luzecita asks me, "Did you read my story?"

"Yes."

"Did you enjoy it?"

She waits expectantly while I fish for words. "Enjoy does not seem like the right word," (pause—how do I say this—her testimony shook and enlightened me) "but I appreciated it very much and found it inspiring."

Luzecita smiles. Driving up the winding road to Los Planes, the conversation is light and fluid. Agustin tells me about his job as an airplane mechanic and about his impressions from visiting Boston.

"Is Pablito named after someone?" I ask.

"Yes, after my brother who died during the war," Agustin briskly responds. Oh, I was not expecting that answer. Then we share jokes and laughter, and I talk about my plans for my thesis. We arrive in Los Planes.

We are about 20 people gathered for *pupusas*. It's a fun occasion. I sit next to Dora. Across from me is a precious 2-year-old girl with high cheekbones that present delicious, chubby cheeks. Her black, silky hair is carefully braided. Her name is Rosita and she sits between her parents, Lucio and Julia. Julia was also one of the first *jovenes* to be found.

Pablito climbs on stones and benches, all the while holding his father's hand. Agustin's graying hair leads me to estimate that he's in his late 30s, though his faded jeans and loose TACA airlines t-shirt hint at a child's abandon. The gentleness of his smile, warm and full, makes it hard to believe his history—that he was raised in an army base after witnessing the assassination of his mother and brother. Perhaps those challenges are what make him appreciate the tenderness in life. Pablito takes to picking tiny flowers and giving them to the adults at the table. He hands me three. Now Agustin walks holding Rosita's hand; it's her turn to play with him. He attends to her as if she were his daughter, or at the very least, his niece.

After cheerful conversation and a greasy satisfying dose of *pupusas* and hot chocolate, Agustin, Luzecita, Pablito, and I pile into their car as they will be taking me home (though I don't know exactly where I live so Lucio draws Agustin a map on a napkin). In the car, I feel compelled to thank Agustin and Luzecita for their tremendous contribution to humanity—sharing their testimonies. I also tell them more about my thesis. It's a little *pesada* [heavy] of me but I say that in the U.S. there is a lack of awareness of what

our country did to El Salvador during the civil war. So, I would like my thesis to tell a story so that people in the U.S. will listen. Luzecita is excited about inviting me over for dinner. I look forward to it. I comment that the *jovenes encontrados* seem like a family. Agustin surprises me with the forcefulness of his response, “There is nothing like being with one’s own family.”

I absorb his potent words and the conversation breezes on. “Tomorrow I will go to Guarjila,” I tell Luzecita.

“That is where my parents are from,” she excitedly says. (I knew that. It’s strange to meet them for the first time though I feel I already know them from having read their intimately articulated testimonies). We joke that my thesis will be the unwritten chapter in *Historias para tener presente*, the one about the romance between Agustin and Luzecita. We chuckle.

They drop me off at the gate to the *Residencial* Santa Barbara. I walk to house #67. Oops, it’s 10 PM and two mothers are upset with me. Reina was slightly worried and my mother had called and grown worried because Reina could not say with certainty why I was out late. My mom will call at 10:30 PM. With my eyes closing from exhaustion, I sit by the telephone. Brrrrring. “Hi, Mom...We went out for *pupusas*...Guess who gave me a ride home?”

“Luzecita...wow!” My mom and I had read Luzecita’s testimony together and she, like I, was astounded by Luzecita’s strength, courage, understanding, and ability to triumph despite dire circumstances.

“Maybe you can meet her when you come to visit, Mom. Goodnight.”

CHAPTER 2—Swimming in testimonies

3 June 2005

Friday: Guarjila with Father Jon & Dora's story

I meet Father Jon and Sebastian at 7 AM at Pro-Búsqueda to tag along on a day-trip to Guarjila, Chalatenango. We will tour Jon's home and get a taste of the Salvadoran countryside.

On the highway, I stare out the window as the volcano of San Salvador grows and then shrinks again. As I rest in the backseat, I listen to Sebastian launch questions about the *jovenes encontrados*. He asks, "How did Luzecita lose her arm? Was it because of the war?"

"Yes," Father Cortina explains. "Her hip was damaged too. She was one of the first *jovenes* found. I care about her a lot, and for a little chubby one named Isabel. She was also one of the first *jovenes* to be found." Then the Father tells us, "When Luzecita was having her baby, Julia, who was also in the Aldeas SOS [an orphanage in San Salvador] and was one of the first found, wanted to be close to Luzecita to help her. Julia is Lucio's wife and they were living in the countryside. So Julia and Lucio moved to San Salvador and we gave Lucio a job at Pro-Búsqueda." Wow. The family-like network of the *jovenes encontrados* amazes me.

Accelerating up the steep cobblestone roads of the main city in Chalatenango, we eventually roll into dusty Guarjila. Our first stop is the community medical clinic, which Father Jon, an engineer by training, helped to construct during the war as a care center for the wounded. We walk through a narrow hallway past sniffing, coughing patients, through the microbiology lab equipped with centrifuge, microscopes, and dyes for Gram staining, and around back to the supply room, which we find nearly empty. “It used to be full,” Father Jon tells us. During the war, he would smuggle medical supplies past military checkpoints into the zone, hiding them beneath the loose garb of a priest.

Father Jon drives us to his home. The best view from Guarjila! Ripples, ripples of mountains, in which the Sumpul River is tucked away; I gaze at rows of mountains that stretch all the way to Honduras. The powerful sun glazes the gardenias, orchids, pineapples, banana trees, and sensitive plants in his garden. A little boy comes by and deferentially addresses Father Jon. “May I take a few chili peppers?” the boy asks.

“Take a fistful,” Father Jon tenderly says. He knows all the villagers in Guarjila. They convey a deep respect and affection for Father Jon. He has been their priest since the years of the war. Hurried, humorous, extremely competent, and infinitely dedicated to his work, Jon lives what I consider to be a three-pronged life.

To me, the flashdrive that dangles around his neck symbolizes his versatility and chaotic flurry of accomplishments each workweek. Monday through Friday, he wears the hat of

engineering professor at the University of Central America (UCA), the Jesuit school in San Salvador. He teaches in the morning and sleeps at the professor's quarters at the UCA (the site of the 1991 massacre of his six Jesuit colleagues—the event which awoke the international community to call for an immediate end to the civil war). In the afternoons, Monday thru Friday, Father Jon serves as director of Pro-Búsqueda. He created and built the organization, and is a spiritual leader to the disappeared children and their families. Each Saturday morning, without fail, he makes the pilgrimage to his parish in Guarjila, where he presides over mass and rests in this gorgeous country home lovingly built for him by the community.

As I sit now on the porch and listen to the silent language of the countryside, I become inaugurated into the Father's peaceful way of life on the weekends. This stands in sharp contrast to the hectic, chain-smoking pace I've witnessed Father Jon keep at Pro-Búsqueda.

Father Jon shows us shrapnel that he has decorating his porch. A memory. A souvenir. A token to say, "I will never forget." I attempt to fathom how many tons of bombs were dropped on the Salvadorans. TONS.

On our way out of Guarjila, we pay a visit to Suyapa, the older sister of the disappeared Serrano Cruz girls. She has appeared on national TV many times next to Father Jon, including at the press conference earlier this week. I listen to Suyapa's melodious voice

as she absently twirls the corner of her t-shirt and ties it in a knot, unties and re-knots it again, again. She is talking about her two sisters, and sings about her baby boy that was with her when the soldiers came. She feared that the infant would cry and would reveal the location of the four of them so she hid her young sisters in bushes away from herself and the baby. Disappeared—the sisters were never seen again. Sebastian asks to take a photo and looking down, Suyapa notices the t-shirt knot she has tied and insists on changing her shirt and putting on sandals for the photograph. After a pose and a hug goodbye, we're on our way to San Salvador.

It's 2 PM when we arrive at Pro-Búsqueda. Sebastian's flight departs for San Francisco today at 5 PM. We at Pro-Búsqueda race to complete the final paperwork and packing of the 139 samples that Sebastian will be delivering to the DNA lab in Richmond, California. At 3 PM he's out the door carrying a suitcase loaded with samples that represent the hopes of mothers and fathers to find their missing children.

3 PM and I have not had lunch. Dora has not either, I am told (everyone keeps track of everyone else here at Pro-Búsqueda). Someone in the office tells her to go out for lunch with me. Dora and I walk together to "Soobway" [Subway].

The six punctures in a row on her right arm indicate why Dora lunches late. She went to an allergist to investigate the cause of uneasiness in her body. When I ask her about the source of her calamity, she begins to tell me her story. "It's that..."

A year ago Dora was hospitalized because of breathing problems. Despite normal pulmonary function tests, her difficulties with breathing persisted. “I was asthmatic as a child,” she says, explaining the physical burden she feels she carries. I listen without interjecting my opinion. “People have talked to me about the possibility of psychological causes for these kinds of symptoms.”

“And what do you think?” I ask.

“It’s possible. I have not had the psychological attention that I need.” Dora, a dedicated daughter, a reliable co-worker, a kind woman with a soft smile, appears fragile in stature yet eats, works, and laughs heartily. What is the source of her *dis-ease*?

I give 100% attention to the precarious adventure called crossing the street, and moments later, Dora and I are seated in the Subway with 6-inch sandwiches in hand.

“So, you were telling me about your brothers?” I say, gently prodding her to continue with her story.

“My mother,” Dora says, “was very sick. She was hospitalized and had surgery.”

“Is she better now?” I ask.

“Yes, but she will have another operation.” Dora’s eyes gently look to mine as years of feelings quietly unveil themselves in this cafeteria. “I am the one responsible for her.”

“Are you the youngest?” I ask, thinking that birth order might explain her role as caretaker.

“The youngest—of the girls,” she says with hesitation, breaking the sentence in half as it rolls off her tongue. My puzzled eyebrows straighten. Now I understand the dramatic pause in her response.

“I feel sorry that I was a little girl and I could not save my brothers,” she tells me, referring to her two younger brothers who were disappeared. “I know that it’s not right to feel that way but I wish I could have been older.” Dora’s self-blame for the disappearances of her brothers is heightened by her sensitivity to her mother’s yearning to embrace the missing boys.

Dora’s story: “What we lived in the war was not pretty but what has come after has been very difficult also. We were desperately running from bombs, barely surviving. A lawyer, Rico X, came and told my mother that if she gave the youngest to him, he would keep them safe. He said that he would bring them back while they were still minors.”

Sadness forces Dora’s words into a pause. After a deep breath, she continues. “And I am

sorry to say that was what she did. My two brothers were taken to Italy. It was said that the families were given money for the children but we did not get anything. The lawyer kept it. And my brothers did not come back. It was a lie.”

“We have located the older of the two brothers. We have a friend, Stefano, who is Pro-Búsqueda’s contact in Italy. He spoke with the adoptive parents of my brother Inocencio three years ago but they did not want us to find Inocencio. At that time, Inocencio may not have even known he was adopted. The laws in Italy are very strict in favor of adoptive parents. It was an illegal adoption but according to the laws in Italy, those people are his parents.” (She repeats this point a number of times). “We do not want to cause problems for him. He is happy in his life there.”

I convey to Dora that it amazes me that she and her mother suffer daily for having lost the boys yet they prefer to maintain a distance from Inocencio and suffer themselves rather than cause him grief. “That is love,” I tell her.

“That’s how it is,” says Dora, crossing her arms and sighing through fretting lips.

“But there has to be a *reencuentro* [Pro-Búsqueda’s term for family reunion; literally means “meeting again”]. He has to come to El Salvador,” I cry. “I wish I could call him myself.”

“Things happen slowly,” she tells me. “The laws in Italy...” Dora repeats.

“One year ago, Stefano called Inocencio. And we had the luck that Inocencio himself answered the telephone. That was the last contact. I wrote him a letter, a very pretty letter. We have a photograph of him. I will show you the photograph.” She continues, “My youngest brother has not yet been located but we know that he is in Italy. It is the hope of Pro-Búsqueda that Inocencio will want to know who his brother is and will go out and find him. There was another case of two missing brothers who were located in Italy. And it turns out that the two brothers were living in the same town and were actually friends. They were close before, but since learning that they are brothers, they go everywhere together.”

Dora’s abrupt “*bueno* [good]” indicates that it’s time for the sharing of life history to close.

As we walk back to the office together, I bring up the issue of Dora’s health. “Not as a medical student but as a friend,” I say, “I perceive that you are healthy. The doctors have not found any illness in you because you are well and you know it.” She smiles.

Dora’s story is laced with a silent emphasis of guilt because she believes that she should have prevented the disappearances of her brothers. She feels that the only thing that would make her mother well, make her mother complete, is to see the missing boys

again. And Dora feels responsible for that. What I see is Dora's body calling out that she is not taking care of herself because she is focused on the impossible task of alleviating her mother's sadness. I hope that Dora will give herself the spiritual and mental rejuvenation that her body seeks. I hope that there will be a *reencuentro* between Ofelia, Dora, and Inocencio. I wish that the Salvadoran government would open the archives belonging to the nasty lawyers that they sponsored in the sale of children. This would help reunite families and promote reconciliation in Salvadoran homes and the international locations to which these families now extend. Regardless of these external conditions, I wish for the healing for my friend Dora, for her to forgive herself and her mother. I wish for Ofelia to walk into Pro-Búsqueda at 7 AM on Monday and be there with the purpose of sweeping, not with the hidden need, hunger, to sponge up any detail that might bring her closer to her missing boys. What has happened to Dora and her family was clearly, indisputably UNJUST. Yet I believe that beyond the international, national, and local forum of social reconciliation, the most important act of forgiveness happens within. I close this by restating a sincere prayer for the inner reconciliation of Dora, Ofelia, Inocencio, Inocencio's adoptive parents, and all of the individuals that this case represents. May they find forgiveness and peace within themselves, and eventually, in their relationships with others.

4 June 2005

Saturday: Human Rights Workshop at the Nunnery

This morning I will attend a workshop organized by Pro-Búsqueda, which aims to disseminate to the community news of the victory at the Interamerican Court of Human Rights in favor of the disappeared Serrano Cruz sisters. The workshop is held at a nunnery in Los Planes, a hilltop plain that scrapes the skies of San Salvador. The humble church, with grey cement walls and rebar rafters, serves as an auditorium for the event. To reach the toilet, I discover, one has to trek through the nun's ascetic dormitory, which contains three tidy beds and a portrait of Jesus. Shortly after I arrive at the event, I meet 45-year-old Reina, a woman who searches for her disappeared nephews. She awoke at 3:15 AM to catch the bus from the eastern corner of El Salvador so that she could attend the workshop. The dedication of those around me to the cause of reuniting families separated by the war continues to amaze me.

Ismael, the emcee and organizer of the event, briefly gives welcoming remarks, and then the workshop is kicked off with a song delivered by the brown-robed sisters. We observe a moment of silence in appreciation for the government of Uruguay's recent decision to carry out an effort to find their disappeared.

Now Father Jon presents additional opening remarks in which he elaborates on the history of Pro-Búsqueda. "In 1992, three mothers who had lost children in the *Guinda de*

Mayo [May Flight of Civilians] united to find their children.” Father Jon pauses behind the podium, with microphone in hand, and warmly addresses a chubby young woman in the audience. “One of them was your mother, Isabel.” He continues, “In 1993, a man from Chalatenango recognized a [missing] relative when passing by the Aldeas SOS [an orphanage in San Salvador]. He obtained permission to work as a gardener at the orphanage to be closer to the child, and this marks how the first disappeared child, Luzecita, was located. The orphanage did not receive the families but promised that they would take the children to Guarjila to meet the families on January 26, 1994. On the day of the reunion,” narrates Father Jon, “the soccer field was full of people to see the children, curious and hopeful that the *jovenes encontrados* would have information about their missing children. With this event, hope was born, and requests for assistance with finding missing children began to pour in. From this hope, Pro-Búsqueda was formed. In October 1994, Pro-Búsqueda found three young adults, the brothers Agustin and Alfredo, and one other. Agustin and Alfredo had been living in the infirmary of an airforce base of the Salvadoran army among the injured and the dead.”

With passion and intent, Father Jon shares statistics to demonstrate what Pro-Búsqueda has accomplished and what remains for it to accomplish. He reports that to date (June 2005), Pro-Búsqueda has facilitated 162 reunions. Reunions signify that the *jovenes encontrados* have personally met their biological families. Whether they decide to live with their families, and the extent to which relationships are cultivated among family members is not the focus of Pro-Búsqueda’s work, Father Jon clarifies. Rather, the

mission of the organization is to offer disappeared children the opportunity to meet their biological families and to learn the truth of their history. In addition to the 162 reunions, the cases of 29 children have resulted in the determination that the missing child is dead. In 90 cases, the contact information of a missing child is known but a reunion has not yet occurred.

“In 1993,” Father Jon recounts, “Pro-Búsqueda was comprised of three mothers searching for their children.” To illustrate the scope of the movement, he articulates the following statistics detailing the whereabouts of the *jovenes encontrados* at the time they were found: El Salvador 139, United States 50, Italy 28, France 15, Honduras 13, Costa Rica 2, Spain 2, Guatemala 1, Mexico 1, Belize 1, Canada 1.

“453 cases presented to Pro-Búsqueda remain unresolved.” Father Jon reminds us, that these are “children of *campesinas* and *campesinos* [farmers].” His voice rises at the microphone. “This is unjust,” he emphatically declares. He calls for the indolent government to assist with the search for the missing children. “This situation,” assails the Father, is “absolutely outside of God, absolutely outside of a plan for democracy, and absolutely outside of reconciliation. 453 young adults remain robbed.”

Father Jon speaks about the recent victory at the Interamerican Court of Human Rights in favor of the Serrano Cruz family. The Serrano Cruz sisters, Ernesta and Erlendina, were 3 and 7 years old when they were disappeared 23 years and 2 days ago. The court

decreed that the Salvadoran government must publicly apologize to the Serrano Cruz family for the disappearances of the sisters and actively assist in the search for all the missing children of El Salvador. The government claims that they are cooperating with the sentence but Father Jon disagrees. Jon reports that President Saca stalls by saying that the administration is “studying the sentence.” As ruled by the court, Jon tells us, the government has four months to comply.

Father Jon shares the Interamerican Court’s statement that the government hides behind the country’s amnesty law, using it as an excuse to avoid complying with the sentence. “Yes,” he concurs, “El Salvador should be catalogued as a human rights violator before the Organization of American States.” He continues, “The sentence brings hope to the families of the disappeared.” Jon calls for the archives of the military and Red Cross to be opened so that the whereabouts of missing children can be known.

The Father’s passion is still building at this point in his speech. He calls out to the families of the disappeared, the *jovenes encontrados*, and the university students that comprise the audience. “We have an individual and a collective right to Truth.” Jon bitterly points out that despite this “era of pardon, nobody has apologized to me for anything. For example, no one has apologized for the murders of my friends, the Jesuits.” Pacing between the podium and the audience, he says, “I give the human rights violators my moral pardon but not a legal pardon.” His closing words are a plea for justice and peace to prevail.

“Hello to those who listen via radio.” Ismael takes the floor again. “Any questions for Father Jon?”

An impassioned social worker, an advocate for Pro-Búsqueda, finds her way to the microphone. “Why would disappeared children want to return to El Salvador, a country full of violence and poverty?” she asks the audience rhetorically. “We (at Pro-Búsqueda) do not want to do what the (Argentine) *Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo* did,” she says. “They were our inspiration, but Pro-Búsqueda’s approach is different. The *Grandmothers* took children away from thieves—the adoptive parents—but this could cause another trauma to children. Pro-Búsqueda’s approach is to help children to find their families, their roots, and in some cases their country, and then they can choose what follows.” She closes by declaring that the military knows where many of the children are and that they have an obligation to divulge this information.

A question is asked from the audience about Pro-Búsqueda’s strategy and another question—but wait, I can only concentrate on her arm. She appears about my age. Glasses. Articulate. Wearing a white t-shirt. I see where the stump meets the metal cup, just above where the elbow would have been, and a long skin colored glove, pretending to be a hand, a wrist, a forearm, extends medially to meet the cup... A question about pressuring the FMLN, in addition to the military, to also divulge information about missing kids... Yes, this is a struggle also.

Ismael, the emcee, animated and fervently standing before the audience, will give us a summary of Suyapa's testimony, an older sibling of the disappeared Serrano Cruz sisters:

“Among soldiers of the state, the operation is known as *Operación Limpieza* [Operation Mop-Up]. Amongst civilians, it is referred to as the *Guinda de Mayo* [May Flight of Civilians]. The military's code of conduct, *tierra arrasada* [razed earth], was to assassinate all civilians who could possibly be supporting the guerrillas. Farmers had to *guindar* [flee], to hide in tree trunks, caves, and beneath bushes. In this *guinda*, Suyapa's mother says goodbye to the children. Suyapa is with her baby boy, her father, and her two sisters. After hiding for three days without water, her father sets off to find a drink for the family. While Suyapa is staying with the children, the army arrives. Suyapa, holding her baby, hides her two sisters (away from herself) to protect them from the danger of being beside their nephew, who if he cries will reveal the sisters' hiding place. From her hiding place, Suyapa hears that soldiers have discovered her little sisters. ‘We have found children. What do we do? Do we kill them or not?’ Suyapa hears one soldier calling out to the other. ‘No, don't kill them’.”

“The soldiers take the children with dozens of other children via helicopter. Testimony exists from other children to verify this. It is known that the children were transported in a vehicle with the emblem of the Red Cross. Whether this was the

national or international Red Cross remains unknown by Suyapa. It is documented that 52 children were taken by the army during the *Guinda de Mayo* and received by the Red Cross, which then placed the children in orphanages.”

Pro-Búsqueda, Ismael informs us, has received requests for assistance in locating 46 children who disappeared in the *Guinda de Mayo*. Of these cases, 15 have been resolved and it is believed that the remaining 31 children survived. Where are they?

The message that Ismael most fiercely conveys is that these children were “kidnapped not abandoned” as the military would have one believe. He introduces Isabel Minero and Jacobo, two children who were disappeared during the *Guinda de Mayo* and who were found in the same orphanage in San Salvador.

Now Isabel, a chubby, charming, *joven encontrada* in her early thirties, is invited to the stage to give her testimony:

“This is a testimony of war. I lived with my parents and my five siblings in a humble home. Because of the war, we had to leave our home. I was the second to youngest of the children. Because I was a child, I did not understand why we had to leave. We walked by night. My mother was in charge of the older children and the baby. My father was in charge of me. We spent a few months in different places. Then the intensity of the war increased. They began to burn

farmland and kill our animals. We realized that we either had to leave or be killed. We walked by night and would occasionally rest and hide. The five of us [children] and our parents were hiding. Nobody would have believed that that would be the last moment we would be together.” (Isabel begins to cry now. Father Jon quietly walks to the front of the room, pulls up a plastic chair, and sits beside her). “We ate tortillas and salt. The soldiers came and started killing people. My mom ran with my brothers and got out. I was out getting food with my father and we got lost. My dad and I reached a place where there were two paths and one lone house. They shot my father.” (Isabel is crying again and Father Jon puts his hand on her elbow. She takes a sip of water to allow herself a break). “Being a little girl, I could not understand what was happening. I shouted, ‘Don’t die, Daddy. Don’t die!’ In my presence, they tortured my dad. They took off his shirt. They took a knife. (Isabel puts her hand on her throat motioning that his body was cut). I went crazy and shouted. And these guys acted like crazy with what they did with my dad. It did not matter that I was there.”

“There was a bomb [dropped] from a helicopter around 11 AM. That was a sign that people [civilians] were still there. I was taken to a place where I was kept for 15 days. There were many children there. They took us to the Red Cross. We slept on little mattresses. There were many children. We were taken to an orphanage. There I was with Julia, Luzecita, and Jacobo who was the baby of the group. There was a little girl named Marinita that I took care of. One day I woke

up and she was not there. I was told that she had been picked-up by her parents. They [the soldiers] even took a 15-day-old girl. I was taken to *Aldeas SOS*. I was there for 13 years. I spent my adolescence there. I wanted out. I did not get the support that I needed. I did not get the psychological attention that I needed. I was never told that I had a family.”

“I was married on June 12, 1993. On January 25, 1994, my mother found me. It was hard to be in contact with my family. It was hard to see my mom. There were a lot of people at my reunion. Upon seeing my mom, I went directly to her. I recognized her right away.”

“The war marked our lives. It separated us from our families, from our own lives. We were discriminated against. We were discriminated against in school for being orphans.”

“Now I have three children. I live a peaceful life. I have a good relationship with my mom. I have two birthdays but that does not matter. Now I have my family. Thank you.”

Isabel gives a brief and tight smile and quickly retreats to her seat. The Father also returns to his seat in the back of the room. Stunned into silence, the room has no questions for Isabel.

Now, Ismael, our emcee, is back on the microphone. “What we have heard is very sacred. It’s part of Isabel’s life but it’s also part of all our lives. We are one people. We are testimonies to history and we are called so that this history does not repeat. And so that this history was not lived in vain... We must do our best to live honest lives... Not to strive solely for economic gain.”

And now a break from the program to eat *pupusas* and empanadas!

While in line for snacks, I speak with Carol, Pro-Búsqueda’s attorney, about her experience in Costa Rica at the Interamerican Court of Human Rights. I tell her that I cried during Isabel’s testimony. “Each time I hear it, I cry,” Carol replies. “And Isabel cries each time she tells her story.”

I greet an elderly woman whom I met two days ago on the street in front of Pro-Búsqueda. At first she does not remember who I am and asks me, “Are you a *joven encontrada*?” I experience a mental freeze because for a moment I realize that some people may wonder or believe that I am a *joven encontrada*. And what does that make them think of me?

In the late morning programming of the workshop, Carol reports on Pro-Búsqueda’s dealings with the Interamerican Court of Human Rights. The organization currently has

eight cases before the commission and they believe that one will go to court soon. At the trial for the Serrano Cruz sisters, Father Jon testified about the work of Pro-Búsqueda. Isabel also testified as she disappeared in the same *guinda* as the Serrano Cruz sisters. Suyapa gave testimony as well. Despite the government's defense that the sisters never existed, the court ruled that El Salvador had abrogated three fundamental human rights of the sisters. The sentence, Carol explains, outlines nine activities that the government must carry out:

1. Assist in the search for the Serrano Cruz sisters.
2. Create a national commission to search for the disappeared children.
3. Maintain a web page with the names and physical characteristics of the disappeared children.
4. Create a genetic database of the disappeared children and their relatives (which Pro-Búsqueda, with the help of collaborators in the U.S. such as myself, has already begun to carry out).
5. Publicly apologize to the Serrano Cruz family.
6. Publish parts of this sentence.
7. Declare June 2nd as a national day of commemoration for the disappeared children (the date the sisters and a number of other children were disappeared).
8. Provide medical and psychological attention for the Serrano Cruz family.
9. Pay reparations to the Serrano Cruz family and reimburse Pro-Búsqueda and partnering NGO's for legal expenses incurred during the trial.

Father Jon posits that he would not mind if the jails became filled with all the criminals of the war. Ismael gives thanks to the nuns, to the cooks, to the audience, and the workshop is about to close. Then Juan Pedros, a *joven encontrado* who disappeared in the *Guinda de Mayo*, stands and brings himself to the podium. Following is a paraphrase of his laconic testimony:

“I am Jacobo. I was 9 months old when I was taken. As I grew, there was doubt in me about my roots. I would ask for my family. It was as if I had a hole that I could not fill because I did not understand my history. Grain by grain, we make progress. The love, the roots that one comes from, nobody can invent. Many nights in bed I would ask for them, my mother and father. Thanks to God, I now know my mother. We get along well. I consider her *púchica* [gosh], my best friend. I think about other people who are waiting for that hole to get filled. If we do not know our roots we are a people without history.”

Applause.

The nuns close the event with a song.

11 of us pile into a jeep for a ride from Los Planes back to Pro-Búsqueda. I share the front seat with a 40-year-old woman who partially sits on my lap so the driver can

maneuver the stick shift. Isabel is in the back. She gregariously volunteers to the woman in the blue jeans and red sweater beside me, “You were at my reunion. You asked me if I had information about your son?”

“Yes,” replies Alba. She reunited with her son 2 years ago after 21 years of separation. Her son is 27.

“What was your son like when you reunited with him?” I ask.

“Tall.” She tells me about the gift he brought her on the day of the *reencuentro*, a little ball with two plastic fish in the middle. She will see her son this Wednesday. Maybe Isabel could come over, Alba suggests, since they were both disappeared in the same *guinda*. Isabel and Alba joyfully make plans. Alba tells me that the workshop was “pretty;” and comments that it is important to hold these kinds of events.

Isabel, giggling between sentences from her position in the back seat, tells us about her experience testifying at the Interamerican Court of Human Rights. She said that the president of the court asked why she was hiding in caves. It was a rhetorical question because he aggressively answered his own question, ‘Your parents were *guerrilleros*,’ he fired. “I told him,” says Isabel, “that I didn’t know, because I was little.” After the trial, this man complimented Isabel on the power of her articulate testimony. She beams as she

tells us, “I was at the court as a symbol that the Serrano Cruz sisters are still alive. ‘I,’” Isabel told the court, “represent all of the *jovenes encontrados*’.”

I return home and throw myself into writing in the privacy of my bedroom, accompanied by the mourning-dove nest and mango tree outside the second-story window.

In a break from writing, I wander into a conversation with Reina about safety, and receive another account of her being assaulted in San Salvador. Reina explains to me that the men who guard the *Residencial Santa Barbara* are not from a security agency. She prefers this because “the men who work for security agencies,” Reina emphasizes, are “ex-soldiers.” The ex-soldiers’ method of security is “simply to kill.”

I then ask Reina a question about social class in El Salvador, which had been prompted by the presence of university student volunteers at the workshop today. “Are all people who attend university in El Salvador from the upper class?”

“No,” Reina replies, “But a student from the upper class would not be doing her social service work at Pro-Búsqueda. She would probably study capitalism in the United States for her social service project.” Reina is certain that the bourgeoisie lives in an isolated upper class world, in fear and denial of the reality of El Salvador.

I return to my room for another bout of writing. What I find myself focusing on in these fieldnotes is the impact that the war had on individuals and families. Questions of identity—whom do *jovenes encontrados* view as family? What change came to their lives when they were reunited with their biological families? What obstacles do people face in reunion? What factors contribute to nurturing close relationships following reunion and what factors detract from it? I am currently focusing the broad lens of my academic investigation on questions such as these.

This is academic research yet the people that I write about are quickly becoming my friends. The “data” that I gather are a collection of emotional experiences endured by individuals that I am growing fond of. Arriving in San Salvador has been a whirlwind experience and I am grateful that writing these notes provides me with a calmness and sharpness of mind necessary to internalize and accept the difficult human experiences that I am exposed to.

Over a typical Salvadoran egg dinner, I mention that eggshells are rich in calcium. “I ate egg shells during the war,” I hear Reina mumble, “but you have to grind them very well otherwise the graininess of the eggshells can cause problems with the intestines. During the war,” she says, drawing in a breath, “I was pregnant so I would consume teaspoons of ground egg shells as a dose of vitamins.”

“What else did you eat during the [twelve-year] war?” I ask.

“Tortilla and salt. There was very little food, very little food.”

“Were you ever hungry for many hours at a time?”

“Yes, for example there was a *guinda* that lasted one month. There was no possibility to buy food. One time, I almost poisoned myself I was so hungry. We were walking in the night and one holds onto the trees when walking. I grabbed leaves and they smelled like guava and so I ate them. Soon after chewing them, I almost fainted.”

Once again, discussion of the war transitions to Reina’s lament on the factionalism-induced decline of the FMLN. “That (the factionalism) is why I stopped being an FMLN militant.” Now Reina tells us about how Arena, the conservative political party, “bought” the recent election. “The last campaign was the filthiest one yet. People sold their vote for a container of gas. Arena uses the poverty that they created to get people’s votes,” Reina explains. “Individuals are bribed according to their ability to think. A poor person is given \$20 for his vote while another man is given \$500. And people known to vote for the FMLN are threatened that they will lose their jobs if the FMLN wins the election.”

5 June 2005

Sunday: To the Theatre & Reina the *Guerrillera*

On this Sunday morning, Emily and I go to the National Theatre to see her friend in a dance performance. The sweetness of the little upper class girls in their tutus brings tears to my eyes, especially in their stinging contrast to the testimonies I heard yesterday at the nunnery. In Emily's words, we are seeing the "other side" from the social class that I associate with through Pro-Búsqueda. The modern dance performance, a beautiful expression of the human spirit combined with the elegance of the human body, mesmerizes me. A society must continue living, even after it has endured such a terrible war. Even while so many of its people suffer such an extreme poverty?

When I'm back at Reina's house she mentions that she wants to make yogurt because making it would be cheaper than buying it. So many struggles every day...

A dinner, yet another opportunity for Reina to share her views on U.S. imperialism. We talk about the rising levels of cancer, TV dinners, and the phenomena of families not eating meals together. "Do you have any hope that the situation in the world will improve? What can we do?" I ask.

"This capitalism thing is getting so huge," she replies. Then, as if struck by a bolt of clarity, Reina says, "Our role is to make people conscious of it."

“How do you know about what is going on? How do you stay informed?” I ask.

“I read. I live. I analyze reality. It’s free to just look and see what’s happening around us.”

Reina reflects on the meaning of the civil war. “Do you know what makes me angry?” she says with a rising, quivering voice. “Do you know what makes me angry? We lost all that we had and now others are benefiting.” She shakes her head in disgust. “Some people even lost children and now others are benefiting. We fought for 12 years in vain.” She closes her eyes and repeats, “We fought for 12 years in vain.” Then, chewing on her bottom lip, she solemnly says, “My husband was killed. Jazmin never knew her father.” 14 years ago is today.

“Was Jazmin with you when you were fighting?”

“Jazmin was born in 1990, at the end (of the war).”

I take a risk and ask what I feel is a daring and probing question. “Did you have time to mourn?”

“Well, I chose to stay single,” is her answer. “Most of the rape in this country occurs within families. So for Jazmin (I remain single).”

She shares a little more about being a woman in the war. “Women were traitors (to the FMLN) much less than men.” Reina explains that *guerrilleros* would become traitors if they wanted to desert. Then a confession, “I am sorry to say this but women had another way of getting out of the guerrilla—becoming pregnant.” They would return to village-life to birth and raise their infants.

Reina continues, “The FMLN committed violations [of human rights] as well. The FMLN would remove children from their families, placing them in a house of *guerrilleros* in order to establish the illusion that the house belongs to a ‘regular’ family. *Campesinos* were forced to give up their children. That is what happened in the case regarding the child in Honduras that I was telling you about. There is a woman who is in Congress now who molested children in these houses.”

“Do people know about this?” I ask.

“I know,” Reina responds, exposing her bitterness towards corrupt FMLN politicians.

Elaborating on the theme of unethical actions of the FMLN, Reina tells me Pedro’s story:

“Pedro’s father was in the *guerrilla*. Pedro’s mother became pregnant [with Pedro]. When Pedro was born, the FMLN ordered the father to separate himself from the child, to basically toss the child away. Pedro’s father refused, resulting

in the assassination of Pedro's parents. The [orphaned] baby was given for adoption to a couple in the countryside. The couple did not have children. They used Pedro as a slave. 'Milk the cows at this hour', 'get firewood,' so many chores. At age 9, Pedro could not take it anymore and ran away. He got a job running the tire-swings of the traveling carnivals. Do you know about the carnivals? Usually the people in charge of them are involved with drugs. By age 9, Pedro was doing drugs. He became involved in gangs. He has a child, but his wife was murdered. Who knows what happened? One day she was found dead. She was involved with gangs. The child lives with his grandmother. Pedro cannot help them. He cannot get a job. He cannot read. He sleeps at Pro-Búsqueda. I don't like to give money to the *jovenes* at Pro-Búsqueda but when it gets to lunchtime and I know Pedro is not going to eat because he could not afford food, *púchica* [shucks], I give him money. Virginia and sometimes the Father give him money. One day, I took him for a job interview at the UCA. I took another woman too. She got a job. She was smart. The interviewer saw the scars on Pedro's face and asked him if he had been involved in gangs. He said, 'no'. What was he going to say? He wanted a job but the scars show his past gang activity. He cannot keep a job. But he is so talented at carpentry..."

The culmination of Reina's point about FMLN involvement in disappearances: "The FMLN could locate disappeared children. They could have done a much better job than Pro-Búsqueda, but too many of them are implicated [in the disappearances]."

Reina is back to telling war stories. “The biggest disadvantage women had during the war was menstruation. Can you imagine? There were no sanitary napkins. The worse was crossing rivers. Can you imagine how that would feel?”

“Do people know that you were a *guerrillera*?” I ask.

“No, not everyone. The government has not changed. I tell some people. But at the Spanish language school where I teach, for example, if people don’t get *it* [the U.S. imperialism/the how the U.S.-wreaked-mass-destruction-on-El Salvador-thing], I don’t tell them.”

“Do you have friends from the war that you keep in touch with?”

“They killed all my best friends, you know. They killed all my best friends.”

“Before coming to El Salvador,” I reflect aloud, “I had the misconception that it was simpler, that all the disappearances happened in the same way. The army taking the kids and...”

“NO.” I am listened to and interrupted. “They are all connected. Ofelia, she was so thin, all bones, from walking with five children. I interviewed a woman last week. The same *cabrón* [asshole] lawyer sold two of her children in Italy. Took two little ones.”

The telephone ring signals the end of this conversation. Later, in the solitude of my room, I compose a group e-mail to family and friends in California:

Hello *Compañeros*!

I hope that you are enjoying the beautiful month of June. Besides the mosquito bite itches, I am doing quite well. I am overwhelmed by the kindness and warmth that I have been received with. I am staying with Reina, a social worker who works at Pro-Búsqueda, and her 14-year-old daughter Jazmin. I have a room to myself and am lucky to have such wonderful neighbors as a mango tree and a lemon tree. The lemon tree has a mourning-dove nest and its residents give me a wake-up call every morning. I also have a bit of a view of the volcano of San Salvador from my bed. What do I eat? Mangoes, pineapple, rice, tortilla, *frijoles*, and *pupusas*. Also staying in the home is Emily, a kiwi who works for the BBC in London. Today, Emily and I went to see *danza folklórica* and then to the National Art Museum. It was curious how the civil war was depicted and was not depicted in the art exhibits. I am actually enjoying the warm weather. I shower lots, but hey—I guess I'm making up for lost time.

Now that I have talked about the important aspects in life (mangoes), here's a bit about what I have been doing: My "day job" is to assist with the establishment of a genetic bank at Asociación Pro-Búsqueda. The purpose of the genetic bank is to establish a database of genetic profiles to help disappeared children find their biological families. By far, the most rewarding aspect of my work is sharing in the community of human rights workers, many of which are family members of disappeared persons or are "jóvenes encontrados" (located youth). These individuals form a vibrant, loving extended family of sorts that I am privileged to witness. I admire the people that I work with. Also, I am glad to be here as an ethnographer. It makes me feel encouraged to slow down and write lots. Mindfully observing and writing helps me to appreciate the power of the inspiring and tragic stories that I hear. It has been inspirational to meet Suyapa Serrano Cruz, a *campesina* who lost her two younger sisters and baby boy during one of the largest massacres of the civil war. She filed a case before the Interamerican Court of Human Rights against the government of El Salvador and won!

Of course, it would be nice if there was running water after noon in the home where I stay, if I could see all of you who I miss, if I could ride my bicycle to Lake Anza... but I must admit that right now I feel like I am doing exactly what is right for me. I love the simplicity of my life here and I love spending time with my best friend.

I hope that you too are enjoying yourself in whatever you are doing. And if you feel like sending an email to tell me what you are up to I would love to hear from you.

Salud,

Liz

"Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto. Me ha dado la risa y me ha dado el llanto. Así yo distingo dicha de quebranto, las dos materiales que forman mi canto, el canto de ustedes que es el mismo canto, y el canto de ustedes que es mi propio canto."

[“Thanks to life, that it has given me so much. It has given me laughter and it has given me weeping. That is how I distinguish happiness from crushing, the two materials that comprise my song, the song of you all, which is the same song, and the song of you all, which is my own song.”]

Violeta Parra

6 June 2005

Monday: Margarita’s story

7:30 AM, Monday morning. My legs, glistening with repellent, take refuge from the devilish mosquitoes. I sit upright in bed, my back leaning against the cement wall. I have entered into something of a routine... My primary purpose here is to support in the collection of DNA samples to locate the missing children. Even if no matches are made based on our team’s work, establishing a genetic databank serves an important human rights value, especially when considering what kind of evidence is useful in a human rights court...

I dance out of bed and walk with Reina to Pro-Búsqueda.

At Pro-Búsqueda, I busy myself with translating the manual for DNAView, the forensic genetics program that we are using. Ramona enters the psychology office to give me an avocado from her house. She said it fell from her tree yesterday and she thought of me. Sweet! 30 seconds later Sancho walks into the office holding four lemons, a gift from the mother of a disappeared child.

At lunch, Ramona and I sit at the small wooden table in Pro-Búsqueda, placing our plates on dishtowels laid out over the wood. We have pleasant conversation while I gobble avocado, tortilla, and cheese. I tell Ramona, who is Dora's office-mate and close companion, that Dora had shown me a photograph of her brother Inocencio. "Wow, if she talked about him that is amazing. She never talks about him."

Margarita comes into the kitchen and joins us. Margarita is in charge of investigating the whereabouts of the disappeared children who originate from Chalatenango. This summer, she is also busily engaged in collecting DNA samples throughout the country.

We discuss women's rights. Ramona disapprovingly says that when a girl becomes pregnant, the girl is blamed. "No one ever asks 'Where is the father?'" I ask about the use of condoms here and they tell me that many people don't use them because men say they feel less pleasure AND so they refuse to use them.

Margarita is eating a corn tortilla. I am told that what we are fed in the city is mixed dough of corn and flour. “Here, try Margarita’s tortilla.” Ramona rips me off a piece.

We talk about rain and landslides. Margarita has to leave work early (promptly at 5 PM) because she has a “bad piece to walk.” During tremendous rains there can be dangerous landslides. Her journey home from work involves two buses and a half-hour walk until she reaches her community.

“Her community?” I echo, confused and curious.

“Margarita lives in a community of repopulated people,” Ramona replies, “people that were displaced during the war.”

A North American, Margarita explains, donated a lot of money to the church when she died. The church used the money to buy land and then sold the land to people for a symbolic amount.

I begin to understand the context behind the formation of Margarita’s community. During the late 1980’s, this community was founded to give a home to people displaced as a consequence of the war. But something is not making sense—I have not heard Margarita mention anything about living in exile. “Margarita, where did you go when you were displaced?” I ask.

“I was in the *guerrilla*” she says laughing, and playfully slaps my knee. Oh, that is the piece about Margarita’s story that I was missing. Her community is comprised of people who were displaced during the war including exiled civilians and former *guerrilleros*. Margarita was in the *guerrilla* until she became pregnant. By 1987 she had two daughters.

War stories. The first thing Margarita tells me is the difficulty of being a *guerrillera* while menstruating, an echo of Reina’s words from the night before. “There were no sanitary napkins. There was nothing.” One just had to keep walking with the stain. They were constantly hiding from bombs, she tells me, more specifically, from the shrapnel. “The planes that dropped the bombs were relentless. They would go on for hours.”

Margarita reflects aloud on a recent interview she conducted with a relative of a disappeared child. “This woman had not talked much about her experiences during the war.” It stung Margarita to hear the woman’s testimony. She told the story of a little girl whose buttock was cut off by shrapnel. “She said,” Margarita narrates, “that the little girl was screaming, ‘Put my *nalga* [buttock] back on! Put my *nalga* back on!’ And a young boy who lost his leg cried ‘Put my leg back. Put my leg on!’”

Ramona now shares a glimpse of her story from the war. “I was living in San Salvador close to where you stay now, Liz. From there, four blocks straight and...” (Wow, the

war was here. Where I sleep peacefully, the war was here.) “As I was always looking for something to do, for ways to help people,” Ramona says, “I went to help the children who had been displaced by the war. I was myself a young girl. The man in charge of caring for the children asked me what age group I wanted to work with. I said ‘2- to 5-years-old.’ So he gave me a group of 2- to 5-years-old to take care of. When airplanes flew overhead the children wanted to hide in the floor, to run to any corner. I would hold them and say, ‘they are not going to shoot here. They are not going to shoot here’ but these children were inconsolable. It was incredible to see the trauma that these tiny children were living with due to the war.”

Margarita adds more of her story. “We were running at night. Running over rocks and thorns. I was upset because I had lost my shoes. There were so many thorns. That was when I lost my brothers.”

Margarita shares more about her new community. She married a man that she has known since childhood. There are a few people in the community that were her neighbors in her native village. She tells me that they eat better, healthier, more naturally in her community. They still grind their own corn by hand.

It’s time for lunch to end. “I have a lot more to tell,” Margarita says looking me directly in the eye.

“Thank you for sharing. I appreciate it.” Despite talking about such difficult, painful memories, Margarita appears alleviated rather than depressed by our conversation. And I think Ramona feels proudly reminded of the importance and meaning of her work at Pro-Búsqueda.

That was the avocado-tortilla-with-lots-of-salt lunch.

In the foyer, I notice Eduardo reading the leaflet of socialist propaganda given to me by Silvio, the fanatical grey-bearded Swiss guy who took up arms to fight alongside the FMLN. “Silvio gave that to me,” I say. Do you like it?”

“Yes, Silvio always writes great stuff. Are you Socialist?” I dodge the question by reflecting it back. “Yes,” Eduardo declares, “it’s an inheritance from my grandmother and mother.”

In the afternoon, I meet with Yessenia, the office manager, to plan how I can best spend my time at Pro-Búsqueda. We schedule a training session in which I will teach DNAView and plan field trips during which I will assist with DNA collection. We discuss my goals as a researcher and I raise the issue of informed consent. She reiterates Pro-Búsqueda’s consent for my research and agrees to assist me in continuing to present myself as both a volunteer and an ethnographic researcher.

It's 4 PM. Margarita and I are working together at the computer to determine which relatives are priorities for DNA sample collection. "Margarita," Eduardo announces, "there is a mother of a disappeared child and she wants to talk to someone." Margarita sighs regretfully because she suspects that she won't be able to help the mother. She goes to speak with her and 10 minutes later, returns.

"And?" I ask her, questioning how the interaction went.

"It was the mother of a boy who was 15 when he was disappeared. This is not really a case for Pro-Búsqueda. At the beginning, we took cases like that but now not really. A boy that age..."

"He was murdered," I interject.

"Yes. And family of the mother has been living in the same area and of course he would have come back by now if he were alive."

"And she believes that he is alive?" I ask.

"Yes, she thinks he might be alive but..."

The mother looked like she weighed 95 pounds and was less than four feet tall. She had medium length grey hair, a small brown face, and a simple, faded, blue-flower-patterned dress. She misses her son

Later I re-explain to Margarita that I am doing an ethnographic study. Right now, I am in the preliminary phase, which means that when I go home at the end of the day I take fieldnotes about things that grab my attention. I tell her that any information that I used would be anonymous. She thanks me and says that if there is an opportunity to use names that I could. She wants this information known. She then starts telling me about atrocities committed by the military. Soldiers would cut open the bellies of pregnant women; they would kill civilians and cut off the penises of men and insert them in the vaginas of corpses. The *guerrilleros*, she contrasts, would not kill civilians. Of course, the *guerrilla* “did things” too, to the soldiers they captured, but not to civilians, Margarita insists.

6 PM. I am gathering my 20 cents for the bus when Lucio offers to give me a ride home. We usually have about 5 minutes to talk in the car. I thank him for the offer of a ride and he tells me that whenever I see his car at the office I can wait until he returns from collecting DNA samples and he will gladly take me home. I thank him again and respond gratefully. Knowing that he can give me a ride has helped me to feel more tranquil. (Here I feel safe in the office and safe in the home. The moment of vulnerability is transport between places but I’m steadily learning how to get around.)

Lucio was out most of the day collecting DNA samples around San Salvador with Dora. In the car, we talk about how we spent our weekends and about his precious little girl, Rosita. I relate to him that I spent a good deal of time this weekend writing fieldnotes. And then I tell him why I do it, “to tell the story of the disappeared children because

many people in the United States do not realize what happened in El Salvador.” He compliments me, and in a way thanks me for my dedication. Then, for some reason, I decide to say, “I cried today for the first time since my arrival.” I knew it was an odd comment but my intuition told me that Lucio would appreciate a revelation of empathy. Seeing a photograph of Dora’s brother, I tell him, and reading a letter that Inocencio wrote to his sister brought tears to my eyes. “Dora does not know that she made me cry.” A few quiet tears. It felt so good to cry.

“Well, I guess it’s better,” Lucio responds, “If we don’t tell you more of what we’ve been through.”

“No, that would be worse,” I reply. “It’s important that you tell the story of the disappeared children, that people hear what happened.”

He pauses. He seems to be thinking hard about something that is hurting him. So I wait. “Today, doing interviews,” says Lucio, “I met a woman who knew my grandmother. She told me that my grandmother was a good woman. They used to go shopping together. I never thought I would meet someone right here in San Salvador who knew my family.” He continues, his voice inching towards anger, “What am I going to tell Rosita when she asks me where her grandparents are? EVERY CHILD HAS THE RIGHT TO HAVE GRANDPARENTS.” This is the most emphatic statement I have ever heard him say.

“What other stories did the woman tell you about your grandmother?”

He learned that she was “given over to the military” and killed. “In any case,” Lucio says, “it affirmed what I have always suspected.”

Bye. See you at 7:30 AM tomorrow.

In the evening, I have a sweet conversation with Jazmin, Reina’s daughter. We even make a bet—if my mom calls AGAIN tonight then I have to wash everyone’s dishes after dinner.

When I tell Jazmin about my intentions for my thesis she responds that I’ve chosen a “powerful and important” topic. She does not wince when I talk about war or disappearances of children.

“Jazmin, does your mom tell you stories about the war?”

“Yes, once in a while.”

“How does it make you feel to hear them?”

“Impotent (pause) and pained,” she says while her touching her sternum “for not being able to help and for the people who suffered.” What amazing words to come out of the mouth of a 14- year-old! Amazing. What is her world like?

It also intrigues me to hear Jazmin's thoughts on safety. We compare San Salvador to Mexico City, where she visited an aunt in 2003. "Do you feel that San Salvador is dangerous?" I ask.

"Not really, but maybe that's because I don't go out much, so I don't get assaulted."

7 June 2005

Tuesday: People-searching

Rain – 3 AM

The fierce sound of rapidly moving water awoke me abruptly from a dream. I thought that I was in the middle of a rushing river moving quickly on either side of me. I sat up, opened my eyes, and saw the silhouette of the mango leaves between the window slats. Rain. Each drop sounded so heavy, fast, large, and there were so many of them. Sleep again.

Morning – 6 AM

It's a race this morning to get myself awake, showered, clothes soaked in soap, breakfasted (refried beans & boiled plantain), clothing scrubbed, teeth brushed, go!

Lucio picks me up at 7:30 AM. I promise myself that I won't talk too much in the car. I want to see where the conversation takes itself and I want to keep the morning as it is—

fresh. The space that we opened up yesterday when talking about his grandmother is no longer there. Let it settle. I tell him that I'm leaving San Salvador on July 22, a week earlier than I had previously planned. From July 22-29, I'll be in Santa Ana, El Salvador's second largest city, volunteering beside a medical school professor on a health education project. I explain that I have twin passions, human rights and the health of children, and that I am going to spend my last week in El Salvador attending to the latter issue.

"That's good," Lucio comments. "It's more practical than human rights." His attitude reeks of pessimism.

"Things are changing," I say.

"For the worse. Everyday it gets harder to find the disappeared children. The elderly die and we lose their testimonies; people move, get married, and change their names."

"Do you feel good about your work? Do you feel good at the end of each day?"

Without hesitating, he says, "Yes." But the pessimism is still in the air.

I remind him that 20 years ago people did not speak of the concept of "human rights."

He acknowledges this but neither of us is smiling when the car reaches the office. I

suggest that we start the day with a smile. And I get a huge fake smile in response. “Not a false smile,” I say. And although Lucio at first resists, a true smile is returned.

In the morning, I help Ismael look for disappeared children living in the United States. We use “modest methods,” a U.S.-based free Internet people-finder. I feel like I’m nibbling at crumbs, taking scraps of untrustworthy clues here and there. Into the office walks Joseph with his girlfriend. Joseph is a young adult who was who adopted in the U.S. and came back to El Salvador to find his biological family. Ismael helped him locate his mother, a woman who “lives in a cardboard home,” Ismael later tells me. Ismael was impressed that “Joseph did not get frightened by his mother’s poverty.” Recalling the *reencuentro*, Ismael privately says, “It was nice. His face looked exactly like his sisters’.” His face is flat, light, with lots of freckles. Joseph has returned to El Salvador three times since meeting his biological family. A university student in Cincinnati, he recently changed his major to Spanish Literature. He helps Pro-Búsqueda locate missing children in the U.S.

“Will you take a picture?” Joseph asks me. Joseph and his Salvadoran girlfriend are “documenting for immigration” that they are “really in love.”

“Oh, then a picture of you kissing,” I, the photographer, declare. I snap a shot of the kissing couple with the man who brought Joseph to his mother, Ismael, as the third person posing in the photograph.

Eduardo, Sancho, Ismael, and I head out for lunch at a local eatery. As much as I love food, my stomach is learning to dread digestion; the greasy food and foreign microbes feel like rocks in my stomach. I spend most of the meal observing the businessmen (and businesswomen) that come to dine for \$1.50 a plate.

Cops lunch at a nearby table. After we've each eaten our pair of tortillas, I ask the group, "Do you feel more safe or less safe when you see police?" I have been carefully examining the contents of their equipment belt. Water bottle, flashlight, I can see the gun! I can really see it. There is a gun right there. The ability to kill a human being instantly, easily, is here in this restaurant. I realize that policemen in the United States carry guns as well, but somehow, in this violent El Salvador, lunching in a room with guns readily visible startles me.

Ismael makes a face of yuck. "Less safe." More face of yuck, "I don't trust them." As the cops walk out of the restaurant, I want to hate them. To let them represent the war and simply hate. But then I see the pink-tender mosquito bite just beneath a rolled up sleeve. The fatter one, and then his partner become real to me, human, and I am far from hating them.

Back at Pro-Búsqueda, I haven't yet made it to the psychology office when Yanira questions me in the hall. "You can write in English?"

"Yes."

“Come help me,” she says, leading me into the office she shares with Ismael. Yanira, I admit, is a woman I rarely talk to. She has a dark complexion, sharp eyebrows, is 22, and studies law. I know her to be a *joven encontrada* with a tough skin. She pulls up a chair next to her computer. She enlists me to translate an application for a scholarship to attend a Christian youth conference in Brazil. As I translate “Money is being re-concentrated in fewer hands,” I realize that my clacking at the keyboard is partly fueled by my feeling of *guilt-of-a-North American*. What was it like for Yanira to lose her parents? To be alone? To find them again? The least I can do (after what my country did to her) is help her to have this wonderful opportunity of being among other young leaders at this international conference. I dislike this burdensome feeling. I don’t think this guilt is healthy, but regardless, I carry on with the translation.

Yanira is brilliant and in my opinion, her views are clear. Her essay addresses the topic, “What problems do youth in your country face today?” Her response is a scintillating example of the role of the church in Latin America. In the U.S. today, the church is often equated with Christian fundamentalism. Here in *El Salvador* [literally meaning, “The Savior”], The Catholic Church lives up to the country’s name as the haven, the community through which individuals are lifted into grace.

As I plow through Yanira’s essay, it strikes me that the values she treasures in the Church are the same ones that I strive for—Truth, Dignity, and Peace. Only I do not talk about them in the name of the Kingdom of God. I, a quiet, sporadically observant Jew who

feels safer wearing a cross than a Star of David in this anti-Semitic nation, feel immense gratitude towards liberation theology for what it has given to Latin Americans. Yanira's essay demonstrates how the Church has sanctified her, empowering her to transcend the horrific in her life and be the brilliant (and beautiful) woman that she is.

"Do you like dancing? Let's go dancing?" the woman of fire and grace asks me.

Yanira's thank-you comes in the form of this invitation.

"What kind of dancing?"

"Salsa, techno, cumbia, rock. Let's go."

I stumble onto the cover page of the application. "Maria del Carmen, who is that?" I ask.

"I'm a *joven encontrada*. Yanira is the name they gave me at the orphanage."

"Oh, so Maria del Carmen is your name from birth?" Yanira grins widely, the corners of her mouth curving like the white sliver of a moon. I think she feels glad I understood her mixed-up-identity. "And Ra?"

"It comes from Yanira. That is what they call people named Yanira."

Many at Pro-Búsqueda have multiple names. Ismael told me that Yanira was 18 when she found her family. She was living in an orphanage at the time.

In the evening, I enjoy a pleasant dinner and stimulating conversation with Reina about women's rights and prostitution. It's my turn to do the dishes because I lost the bet I placed with Jazmin yesterday about my mom calling again.

Around bedtime, Emily drops on my bed a printout of an email she received regarding travel to El Salvador from a person she met online. The email addresses the issue of gang violence. Two parts strike me:

(1) The author of the email characterizes gang members as “dispossessed kids who have no family and who sort of decide it would be cool to be in a gang.” No family.

(2) “They are responsible for murder rates right now in ES [El Salvador] that are on par with the worst years of the civil war.”

8 June 2005

Wednesday: Custodia's nostalgia

Ofelia comes in to clean. It's early in the psychology office. I show her a photograph of my boyfriend Mark. “He's very, very handsome,” she says. She then confides that she feels nervous that Dora does not have a partner.

“One day, her moment will come,” I promise. I believe that Dora’s burrowing away from relationships has to do with war memories and with feeling responsible for her mom.

What can I do for Ofelia except smile, listen, and reassure?

I spend the day doing computer work, acting as a bridge between Pro-Búsqueda and the California collaborators. It’s wonderful to explain the DOJ results from DNA analysis with Don Jaime and Reina. I believe that the people doing the sample collection have the right to enjoy the elegance of the science and celebrate in the results. (For example, that zero samples of 156 were contaminated. Go team!)

Just as I am ready to depart via bus for the peace of Reina’s house, Lucio and I realize there is more work to be done today. Not much to say, except that while engaged in the tedium of searching for interview number that matches sample number, that matches DNA profile, that matches DOJ code, that matches the spreadsheet, that matches the file in the cabinet, that matches the Pro-Búsqueda database, a lot of self-reflection occurs. I am reminded that there is an entire context behind these buccal cell swabs that I do not grasp. For example, Reina has told me that in many cases we only have maternal DNA. Often the mother’s side of the family does not even know the names of those related to the missing child’s father. This is because people met in the war. Children of *guerrilleros*. Reina said she would not have met Felix’s family (note: this is the first time that she says his name) except by chance. And she and Felix shared tenderness. They were special times. Deceased, disappeared, disappeared. So many relatives are dead. Or have emigrated to the United States. Yet another moment of contextualization.

Reina and I walk home together. I tell her of my visit to the Museo de la Palabra, a museum about the rebel radio station, Radio Venceremos. As we cruise past the tamale vendors, past the pick-up trucks packed with fruit, and dodge traffic, I ask her about her role in the war. I mention that the rifles on exhibit in the museum were huge. Did she carry one? Did she shoot one? I can't imagine it. She says that in the FMLN she was not a fighter though she did run around with them, and she carried a rifle. Her role was with Radio Venceremos, writing propaganda to keep guerrilla motivation up up up by providing critical analysis of international politics. Unveiling topics such as, "What is the situation in the Cold War? What is happening in Nicaragua? Guatemala?" I am learning of Reina's talent of sharp, penetrating, political analysis. And I have yet to see her pick up a newspaper. She told me that it took a long time for news to reach the far-away pockets of the countryside that she operated in. Information dissemination was the main thrust of her role. *Guerrillera* from 1978 to 1990.

I telephone Alexandra (Ali), a fellow Californian and friend of a close friend. She's been living and volunteering in El Salvador for 10 months. It's relieving and fun to talk with her. "I understand," she says calmly into the phone. "I didn't go out for the first two weeks I was here because of all the things people were telling me." I hope to see her on Saturday.

After dinner, Reina, Jazmin, and I are talking about Spaniards' accents and somehow we stumble onto discussing how names sound... And, this was this person's war name.

"And Reina what was yours?" I ask.

"She knows," Reina says, pointing to Jazmin with a dip of her chin and index finger.

We wait for shy Jazmin to answer. "Custodia." Reina beams at the sound of her daughter saying her name, her name from that era.

I used to feel shocked about what Reina suffered in the war. It is shocking. After all, she is the survivor of a horrendous massacre. Yet, I am beginning to see the glory of the war for her. It was the time in her life when she was young, in love, at war yet maybe in some ways freer than she will ever be. It is important not to romanticize war, not to glorify it because I believe that perpetuates it. It's the trick that American culture sells on us via Hollywood. But I can sense that Reina's war years were a sacred time for her... I cannot imagine loving the man you love by loving his daughter, your daughter, as you watch her grow, and one year she looks more like him and one year less. It is unfair that Reina cannot be with her husband, that Jazmin has never met her father. Loving Felix through loving Jazmin. Loving Felix by hating USA. Not giving up the fight. I think we humans feel obligated that way when our heroes die.

9 June 2005

Thursday: DNA collection trip to Morazan

Tamale wrapped in a paper napkin in hand, I speed out the door behind Reina to meet Don Jaime at 7 AM. By 9 AM we are in Lolotique where the cousin of a disappeared girl who lives in Canada guides us on our scavenger hunt to Don Juan, the coconut vendor, so we can collect a DNA sample from him.

Unbearable heat. Sweaty sun-baked clothes stick to your skin; the thick, hot, yellow light makes you squirm. We have arrived at the home of the family of a *joven encontrada* who was found five years ago living in France. Don Jaime's sweat drips from his forehead onto my leg as he leans over to put the DNA-sample bar code sticker on the envelope I am holding. My joking that I love the heat in this furnace makes it ridiculously bearable for Jaime and me. Clarisa is the only one present who is a full sibling of the disappeared girl, though Camila, the youngest, remembers the most about the disappearance of her half-sister. This is the first time that I observe Pro-Búsqueda's DNA collection process. It's precious when Don Jaime puts a ball-point pen in his mouth and scrapes it against the inside of the cheek to demonstrate how the collection is done. At one point during the interview, Clarisa goes inside her home, retrieving a pair of sandals to demonstrate her sister's shoe size at the time of the disappearance. The "found" sister has sent photos to her Salvadoran family, but a reunion has not yet occurred. "Our mother only knew her through a photograph," Camila laments. Now the mother is dead. Mayte shows me a photograph of their mother and I can see how the mother lives on in her daughter's face. Smoke from the fire invades my nostrils, my arms sun-caked, my feet avoiding stepping

on farm animals and their excrements, a dozen people crowded outside this nowhere to sit one-room earth-floored house—what prevents the sister in France from meeting her biological family? And what would she feel if she met them?

After driving another hour we reach the home of the parents of Martita, a *joven encontrada* who lives in Italy. The elderly parents take turns sharing details. For example, when the mother does not remember which hand her daughter's mole is on, the father jumps to respond, "It's like mine. It's on the right hand." Like many relatives of the disappeared, he's a thumb-printer on the consent form because he does not know how to sign his name.

Now the magic really begins! We drive way way way way out on a road rarely traveled by vehicles in search of a *joven encontrado* who we believe to be living with adoptive parents in the Petronal of Morazan. I gasp at this snake of a road, steep and curvy, which, for much of the way is 4-wheel drive traversing over pure rock. Steep S-curves that tilt so much you see whole valleys as you wind down the bends and descend. Eventually, we reach a barrier—a pile of lava rocks too heavy to move is blocking the road. We park the jeep and decide to look for the *joven* on foot when out pop eight children from the nearby house. One of them monkeys up a mango tree for us, climbing so high that I'm below with arms outstretched to catch him because I'm sure that the branches will break. He shakes the tree from among its limbs and rains sweet yellow mangoes upon us.

We set off, Reina is carrying the DNA collection kit, and we walk 50 meters. At the first house we come across, a quietly radiant 70-year-old woman comes to the barbed wire fence of her remote and tidy country home. The backyard of the home gives way to a valley, the front yard forms part of a mountain ridge.

“Do you know a fellow named Rufino,” Reina asks the woman, “who was adopted? He was separated from his parents as a result of the war.”

“Rufino left for United States two weeks ago,” the gentle lady replies. She knows his adoptive parents but they have moved, she tells us.

War. The kind elderly woman vividly remembers the war. “Here passed the soldiers,” she recalls, pointing to the rock path they walked on through her property when climbing out of the valley and onto the ridge. They would have walked right next to me, maybe even grazing my shoulder, if we were present in the same dimension of time. “They came with sticks,” she recounts. Sticks she had called them at the time, not knowing what guns were! “They asked for food. ‘I don’t have enough,’ I told them. ‘Well, give us what you have,’ the soldiers said.” So the precious woman native to this seemingly untouched land gave to the soldiers what food she had. And she fed the guerrilleros when they came through, too. She gave to both of the warring sides in an era when a neutral kitchen meant surviving. Anyway, she narrates, the boy we are looking for was first placed in her care. She took him in for three months but as she had 10 children of her own her home was “overstuffed” so she suggested that neighbors who were childless take care of

him. “And they did a good job,” she proudly tells us. “Rufino is educated and humble. He’s a musician.” Sometime during the course of our conversation, the elderly woman’s daughter plays a CD of Rufino’s band. “And you won’t come in?” she graciously invites us to enter her home. Rain is coming and we have that crazy road ahead of us so we must go.

Rain. Rain. Rain. Exceptional landscape. Hens, wild horses, cows, donkeys. Mango trees. Epiphytic bromeliads. Leaf cutter ants. Vines. Papaya. Stop to pick guava.

On our third stop I meet a woman, Margot, who is 70 years older than I. Date of birth: January 5, 1910. She, a grandmother of a disappeared boy, would not let me arrive at her home without a hug just as she will not let me leave without a hug. She is quick to understand the procedure for DNA collection; it’s the swiftest collection I have observed. Jaime compliments her for this to which she replies, “One does not have gray hairs for nothing.” The grandson Fulgencio lives in Italy. There has not yet been a *reencuentro*.

As we scramble down the hillside from Margot’s home back to the jeep, Reina and I land in a fiery political discussion. Frustrated that we spend time collecting DNA for cases of young adults who have already been located, Reina asserts that she would rather focus DNA collection on finding children who are still missing. I tell her that courts listen to the language of science. And in full Cuban-political-opinion-expressing-form, I shout my point to her. We must use the DNA primarily to find children and secondarily to scientifically document the disappearances, for the samples serve a critical forensic value.

The governments of the U.S. and El Salvador denied that a massacre at El Mozote had occurred; in fact, they labeled the testimony of the massacre's sole survivor a "guerrilla trick." It was not until the Argentine forensic anthropologists arrived to measure bones (and point out that the majority of the bones were from the skeletons of children) did the U.S. and El Salvador admit that a massacre at El Mozote had indeed occurred.

We have dinner at San Jose Las Flores, a repopulation village. I was told that it was drained of dollars by an FMLN scandal; someone who was supposed to be "for the people" got rich off a development scheme and left the village dry. The restaurant owner's daughter just arrived in the U.S., making the trip in 13 days, which is considered amazingly fast. Usually it takes months, Reina says. The girl paid \$5000 for coyote transport. Motivation for departure: To send money home.

Western Union ads, billboards and radio commercials drown the countryside. We also hear a radio show to teach people how to read. The letter of the day is "D."

By nightfall, we reach the jungle mountain village of Perquín, a community completely depopulated during the war. "You wouldn't believe the bombs that fell here," Jaime tells me as we drive through rain, night, around cows and horses, into the town's hotel.

I am grateful for the goodnight sleep I will have. We will leave here tomorrow at 6:45 AM, when we go back to tonight's dinner spot, where the lady is expecting us for French bread and coffee.

With time to myself in the hotel room, I reflect on today. I am left with this question: as the relatives of the disappeared scrape the palito [little stick] against their cheek eight times, I see their eyes drift into a distant stare. Yes, in each sample we collected, I observed this. What are they thinking about and what do they feel?

Closing thoughts on today's DNA collection: it's fascinating to listen to how Reina explains the DNA bank to the families. "I tell them it's an archive so that they think of it as a library." Finally, snug in bed, I ruminate on Reina's revelation to me as we drove through the dark half of dusk along the cobblestone streets of Perquín. "I fought for 12 years without pay. When I demobilized myself, I had no clothes except for the olive green uniform." And now I am starting to see (not with mind but with heart) why Reina would have spent her youth, risked her life like this. For many Latin Americans war seemed like the only option that offered Dignity and Hope for Survival. And maybe they were right. I detest war. And yet I am growing to feel a tenderness and a deep sense of appreciation for the dedicated souls of the rebel movement. Goodnight.

10 June 2005

Friday: Morazan, Day 2

The rain provides pleasant music to accompany me as I write these notes. I had a rough night of sleep. I awoke mid-slumber to a pop sound that I thought could be a gunshot. But when I checked with the young hotel owner who was sitting at the computer, she said that she hadn't heard anything. In my dream, I had seen a line-up of soldiers standing

shoulder to shoulder, so it makes perfect sense that the sound could have arisen from my imagination.

In full and ripe morning light, we drive to the eatery of Doña Martina, where we had dined the night before. I watch her heat tortillas by firewood over a mud stove. We are finishing our meal when a *campesino* arrives. He looks confused, but we verify that he is in the right place for DNA collection. With his straw sombrero, knife in an adorned leather satchel attached to the belt holding up beige cotton pants, and a white shirt worn thin, he humbly sits to breakfast. Don Jaime and I arrange the materials for today's DNA collection gathering on the far side of the restaurant, leaving the *campesino* to breakfast in peace.

This man has come to give his DNA in search of two missing children, his daughter Nicolasa and his son Juan Miguel. He has substantial trouble recalling information such as the full names of the children, their birth dates, or ages at the time of their disappearances. This seems to be due to the combined effects of the forgetting induced by trauma, the forgetting that comes with old age, and disorientation from having spent nine years in prison (from the late 1970's into the 1980's). He tells his tragic story: One of his sons was a soldier and two were in the guerrilla. Soldiers murdered his wife and hung her mutilated cadaver by vines in a tree, presumably to instill terror in other *campesinos*. "Do you see how sad this is?" he says, directly addressing me. Two children remain disappeared. Nicolasa, the girl, was 6 months old when he entered jail; he only saw Nicolasa and Juan Miguel twice during his nine years in jail and then they went missing.

(Reina surmises that he was probably unjustly arrested during the years of political repression that preceded the civil war.) His eyes, cloudy with cataracts, reflect the scattered state of his mind. Two of his children, Marcia and Jose Ramon, both high school-aged and from a second marriage, also donate DNA samples today. They gently correct their father when he incorrectly states the surname of the missing children. He seems to vividly remember his heartache, and yet can expertly block it away as well. His eyes seem to want to cry but because of *machismo* he strains to hold himself together.

Maria de Jesus Chiquilla will donate the fourth DNA sample of the day. May God protect her; she is 34, mother of a disappeared girl. She was a *guerrillera*. The FMLN forced her to give up her baby girl when the baby was 40 days old threatening the 15-year-old mother that both would be murdered if she did not comply. So Jesusita's baby was put into another's care and to this day the daughter, who reunited with Jesusita several years ago, remains with her adoptive parents. Jesusita smiles as she tells her story. The smile is at once beautiful—refreshing and unbearable—because it forces me to imagine how much pain she is covering up. The daughter's adoptive family invited Jesusita to celebrate New Year's with them and stay at the home where her daughter lives but Jesusita declined because she didn't feel truly welcome. Jesusita and her son, a half-brother of the disappeared girl, donate DNA samples.

Maria Noelia is the last donor of the day. We are still at Marlene's restaurant, on the backside of the eatery near the mango tree, near the latrine, close to the hens, and with a short enough distance from the house that we can hear the blaring TV. Maria Noelia

stuns me with her little-girl beauty and elderly-woman strength. She arrives to meet us breathless and thirsty, having walked one hour, and having ridden two buses. A tiny woman, she wears a light pink blouse and a hot pink flowered skirt. A single ponytail holds her waist-long hair, brown with strands of gray. Her cheeks shine and her skin is tight on her face. I estimate that she is 65 years old but her huge, sparkling brown eyes, so calm, large, and bright, make one easily feel that it is a child that speaks.

Reina interviews Doña Noelia. I, resting on a hammock, fix my gaze on Noelia's face, eager to hear her story. She comes in search of two of her sister's children. "When did the children disappear?" Reina asks. Noelia does not know the date. "Well, let's think relative to the Massacre of El Mozote, December 14, 1982," Reina suggests. Noelia pulls out a tiny handkerchief. Those wide eyes water, and she dabs the cloth on her cheek. Reina tenderly pauses the interview. "We'll go little by little. We don't want to ask you anything that hurts. Only tell us what comes. Have you eaten? Do you want coffee?" Reina stands up to massage Noelia's shoulders and to stroke her back. Two of Noelia's children were killed. Her sister, pregnant, was also killed, along with her two children. Noelia donates a DNA sample. In the meantime, I have an incredible experience. While listening to Noelia's interview, I am caught off guard by an overwhelming tension and fatigue in my body. Fading, I stand to do yoga stretches. The middle-aged 12-toothed daughter of the 6-toothed 95 year-old woman I met yesterday rises from a hammock and walks over to me. Attentive to my unsteady composure, she takes my hands and tells me I am cold. She stands with me, firm grip on my hands, wrist, forearm, wrist, hands, forearm, until I am warm. Even my belly and face are cold. It's been about six minutes

and she's still massaging warmth into me. She says, "You're cold. I think it's because you feel alone." She then tells me that she attends Pro-Búsqueda's workshops on psychology and has "learned some things."

So, of course I say, "Tell me something you've learned."

"I have learned to watch people. To pay attention to their expressions, to see what feelings they are having." She adds, "You turned a different color when Noelia started to cry."

"I didn't notice," I say. When Noelia had dabbed her handkerchief at those child-wide eyes I had sat and watched from the hammock, perhaps losing myself in her tears.

"I did," she says. And after warming me for a while, "You are a different color now." She directs my attention to my cuticles. Yes, even the beds of my fingernails are pinker. "*Te proteji*. I protected you," she says again.

After the words from her interview have settled onto the dusty patio, I approach Noelia.

"I never talked about the war," she tells me. I congratulate her for her courage today and we discuss the possibility of Noelia attending workshops sponsored by Pro-Búsqueda as a way to find support from other relatives of the disappeared. I would love to see this precious and brave woman again. I cannot imagine engaging in a search for a missing

nephew and niece so many years later, so many years after I had lost my sister and children to brutality.

I say goodbye to the hand-warming lady who eats most of my raisins, to Noelia, and to the others who I met today, and then we drive off.

Reina, Jaime, and I stop at the office of *Radio Ecológica*, a local radio station, to check up on the announcement paid for by Pro-Búsqueda that broadcasts the date and location of the next DNA collection gathering.

Driving a while... Now we're in scorching San Miguel. We find our way into *La Linea* [The Line], a dangerous neighborhood built along an abandoned railroad track. During our 10-minute drive in, I notice the unmistakable signs of extreme poverty. A naked, muddy 3 year old and his family stare at us as we climb out of the parked jeep.

Reina is nervous that she will get chastised for wearing shorts as we are entering the home of a pious woman. Mud walls and earthen floor; one huge room with sheets hanging from the low ceiling to separate the bedroom (bed and mosquito net) from the living room (chair and two hammocks), which blends into the kitchen. I see the stove but do not see any food in the kitchen, except for a banana. The bicycle with large baskets that leans against an outside wall of the home suggests that Doña Consuelo, her son, and grandson survive on the son's work selling coconuts. Doña Consuelo, 80 years old, wears a blue-and-white-checkered dress.

I dislike how our interaction with her unfolds. Reina's explanation of the purpose of DNA collection to Consuelo rapidly degenerates into a shouting match. Consuelo, petrified by Reina's proposal that Consuelo donate a DNA sample, relives the terror of the war right before our eyes. Reina relives her own trauma, too, as she yells at "stubborn" Consuelo. Now, Jaime joins in the shouting.

"You look like the woman who took the children away!" Consuelo bitterly remarks to Reina.

This pains Reina into relating her experience as a survivor of the Massacre of Sumpul, the event that shook her life (and nearly took it) at the young age of 13. "Consuelo, you say that you believe in God," Reina scolds, "yet you are not even willing to help with a sample." Frustrated Reina spits at Consuelo, "You should reflect on that."

I push myself to observe longer without interfering, and then I gently ask Don Jaime if I may intervene. "Might I explain to Consuelo about the DNA samples? I can try to answer her questions and explain what happens to them?"

I pull a plastic chair next to Consuelo's frightened body. I reach for her hand (and the angry terrified woman gives me her stiff hand without hesitation). I tell her that I'm from the USA, that I will be personally delivering the samples to the genetics lab in California, and I briefly explain the procedures for DNA collection and analysis. Mostly, it is the

hand-hand touch (giving back the kindness of touch that I had been given when Noelia cried) that makes the difference. Eventually, tremulous Consuelo agrees to give a sample. Her daughter lives in Los Angeles, has two children, and is struggling to make it, she tells me, still holding my hand.

Don Jaime feels it important that we stay with Consuelo to talk, to answer questions, and soothe the sharp edges of this encounter.

Consuelo is ashamed to let me use her latrine, which is just to the left of the well, because I asked for the “bathroom” and they do not have a “bathroom.”

“Do you want to see a picture of the mother of the disappeared children?” Consuelo asks me.

“Yes.”

Consuelo clucks over to the sheeted-off bedroom area and comes back with an old, tiny hand-sized bible. She unzips it open. Safely guarded in the pages of the bible is a black and white photograph of her murdered sister. Reina and I look at the photo. “She was pregnant. They murdered her and cut open her abdomen like this and this.” (Hand motions trace abdomen left to right, belly up to down.)

I visibly shake with chills. “It is chilling,” Reina says in response to my shiver. “The soldiers did barbaric things.”

“What was your sister’s name?” I ask. Consuelo’s lips clench and purse. She wants to answer but her intent turns to shiver, overcome by fear and sadness.

DNA sample in hand, blessings and gratitude exchanged, we leave.

In the car, Reina shares her amazement that we obtained the sample from Consuelo. Ismael had told Reina to not even visit Consuelo because he thought it would be a waste of time. Consuelo is “evangelical,” Reina explains, and her priest proclaims it sinful to donate a DNA sample, which is why at first Consuelo had truculently refused. Yet when she understood that donating a sample was a step she could take towards finding her missing loved ones, she agreed. According to Reina and Don Jaime, I had made a difference—that sample would not have been obtained had I not been there holding her hand and stroking her back while she scraped buccal cells onto the “little sponge.”

We stop by Reina’s home, the committee member for San Miguel and aunt of a pair of disappeared boys. Reina hands her invitations for a workshop to distribute and asks her to please visit Doña Consuelo once a month. Reina knows Consuelo but responds that she’s too frightened to go to The Line, Consuelo’s neighborhood, as there can be assaults against outsiders.

On the ride to San Salvador we relax and eat junk food. We stop at a gas station because I have to pee. After putting gas in the jeep, Don Jaime remarks about one of the young gas station attendants, “Reina, doesn’t she look like Mrs. Gonzales’s?” They ask the girl’s age, make other small talk with her, and both leave the gas station convinced by green eyes and the shape and tough affect of her smile, that they have solved a case. They believe the gas station attendant to be a daughter of a mother who searches for four missing girls. Reina scribbles the age, location, name, and appearance of this girl in her notebook.

After two long days, we make it back to San Salvador. As soon as I arrive home, I plop on the bed where Reina sees me lying, still wearing my clothes filthy from the countryside. “Get up. You contaminated everything!” she bleats. She then confirms what I instinctively knew—her obsession with showers and for cleanliness is a response to what she lived during the war. A group of *guerrilleros*, she tells me, would all wash with the same bucket of water, carefully conserving each drop. And she was so full of fungus during the war that she had a big ulcer in her buttocks due to fungal infection. I should shower immediately when returning from the countryside, she insists, because I can.

I generously drench myself with the cool cupfuls of water that I dump over my shampooed hair. *Ahh...* Refreshing. I am surprised that after two days in Morazan and less than two weeks in the country, returning to San Salvador feels like a coming home.

11 June 2005

Saturday: Green eyes & resting

I enjoy a peaceful Saturday morning at Pro-Búsqueda, where I busily sketch fieldnotes.

At the office, I see Margarita who is just returning from an overnight DNA collection trip. She asks me about Morazan and I casually tell her about bumping into a green-eyed girl at the gas station who Don Jaime and Reina thought were a disappeared girl. With the brief description that I give, Margarita immediately deduces the name of the suspected mother, Melisa Gonzales. “One of the disappeared Serrano Cruz sisters has green eyes,” Margarita reasons aloud. “That is the only other case of a missing girl with green eyes but you would have remembered that name.”

Margarita and I chat. She tells me about her struggles to fund her daughter’s university education. “That’s the way it will always be,” says Margarita. “The children of the rich will always get an education and the poor will not.”

I hop on the 30B bus and ride home to Reina’s.

I find Reina sipping coffee at the kitchen table. We check in and I wonder aloud if any cases have been resolved by chance as the one involving Melisa Gonzales’s daughter would be if the investigation proves them to be correct. Reina tells me that one year ago, upon visiting her sister, a nun in Mexico, she found two disappeared girls originally from

Chalate [nickname for Chalatenango]. Her cousin, also a nun in Mexico, was director of an orphanage. Because Reina is her cousin, she revealed a few details about the history of the orphans. It immediately became clear to Reina that these children were in the orphanage because of the armed conflict in El Salvador and by knowing in detail the history of the military operations, Reina deduced that these children were from Chalate. One of the two girls, aged 14, was about to leave for Spain to be adopted. Within a week, Pro-Búsqueda investigators arrived to collect blood samples for DNA testing. Yes, there turned out to be a match but by the time the results from the DNA analysis were obtained, the girl had already left for Spain. No *reencuentro* has occurred.

A twilight walk reinvigorates me. I fall asleep listening to music.

12 June 2005

Sunday: A day with Ali

Ali, a friend of a friend from California who happens to be living seven blocks from me in San Salvador, meets me at Reina's at 10:00 AM. She generously pampers me with a care package (mosquito repellent, post cards, a map with bus routes penciled in, and Trader Joe's almonds) and we have an amazing day sharing stories and admiring flowers (especially that purple crumpled orchid) at the Botanical Garden.

The expatriate *gringo* [North Americans] community that Ali describes is alluring. It certainly offers an attractive break from my intensive quest to experience the footprint of

the civil war. Yet I can't resist talking to Ali about the war. What has she heard? Does she ever feel like she's swimming in testimonies? She tells me a little of the little she has heard over her 10-month stay in El Salvador. She knows a person through her volunteer work in Morazan who witnessed his father being tortured and has not spoken since. Even the poorest residents of the village, Ali says, dislike the FMLN because they saw members of the FMLN commit some of the same atrocities as soldiers.

At the end of our outing, Ali cheerfully walks me home.

In the evening, over a vegetable soup dinner with Reina and Jazmin, Reina asks me about my new friend. "With whom does Ali live?"

"With two *gringos*," I reply. "They used to be in the Peace Corps."

Reina scowls. "The Peace Corps is linked by governments as a way to infiltrate and to gather information about people."

Reina's scorn and extreme suspicion regarding the USA is a rough return from my break with Ali. In my mind, I had actually temporarily left El Salvador—Ali and I had even stopped at Blockbuster to drop off a film. Salvadorans do have a right to be bitter, but Reina's constant stream of anger at once informs me and exhausts me. She had told me yesterday that had she stayed in the FMLN, she would have been a Congresswoman for

the party. She has an incredible talent for independently analyzing and expressing her version of the political and social reality.

And her version of reality, I find, can be burdensome. And her version of reality, I find, can hold more truth than I care to accept. For, swimming in testimonies, hearing them, even empathically, actively listening and absorbing them as I've been doing, takes a kind of courage. Yet the acts of Surviving, Mothering, Searching, Fighting, Reuniting, Loving in the nights of bullets and stars—and Still Surviving—command a bravery and grasp of reality that arrest me with the force of their dimensions.

What if I had walked around in Reina's skin? Would I be one of the women lucky enough to raise my own child? I bow to the living and the fallen who have endured and who continue to endure the terror of war.

CHAPTER 3—Making Friends

13 June 2005

Monday: Violence today

2:17AM

My sleep is ruptured by the sound of

Gunshots shouting in the darkness of night.

This time I am sure it is not a dream.

The 20 evenly spaced shots are a violation of another human being,

Which translates into a violation of me.

Feelings swirl around my umbilical cord

I am safe in the bed where I lie.

Silence rises above my clamor of emotion

As I realize that some blocks away, a man is dying.

I can see the wounds in his chest.

He is breathing his last breaths.

A car speeds away. Turns. Faster now.

I pay my respects to the life that was

And return to a semblance of sleep.

Yet the bullets have jolted my spirit,

“Surrender yourself to a higher being”

This thought calls me—

Is the only thought that can calm me,

And suddenly I realize why

I have come to El Salvador.

To find my god.

Because only through god

Could this pueblo endure

Barbarities of massacres and their aftermath,

Transcending.

It is the only way to remain intact in this chaos.

Resiliency through communion

With a Divine—

This is what I have come to learn from these strong people,

This is what I have come to learn from these humble people

The pueblo Salvadoreño teaches me to embrace my Divine.

7:12 AM

Reina did not hear the gunfire. (I am imagining?).

I exit the gates of *Residencial Santa Barbara*. “Good morning,” I say to the armed security guard whose eyes are red with tiredness. Walking past him, and then pivoting on my feet, I turn and say, “Excuse me, sir. Did you hear gunshots last night?”

“Yes, it was on the street Antonio Abad,” he says pointing to the street one block above us.

“At about what time did it happen?”

“Around 2 AM.”

“And do you know what happened?”

“No. But police cars passed by here on this street.”

7:16 AM

Ali and I meet in front of Cuscatlan Bank to walk to our respective works together. She is sorry to hear that I had heard gunshots, and even sorrier to say that she has grown accustomed to them.

8:30 AM

I sit for breakfast in the kitchen at Pro-Búsqueda. Ofelia pulls up a chair beside me.

“Tell me about your trip to Morazan.” And tenderly, she asks, “Did you rest this weekend?”

“Yes, but I heard a gun battle at 2 in the morning and it woke me up. It’s the first time that I’ve heard one.”

An hour later, while I’m steeping myself in work, Ofelia brings me a chamomile tea to soothe me. Nerves and sadness for humanity are the feelings that predominate.

Any news of the murder? No, nobody has bought the *La Prensa* newspaper today.

It’s fascinating to observe how my co-workers at Pro-Búsqueda try to shelter me from the reality of the violence. I hear many alternative explanations of what the sounds could have been: fireworks, military practicing (since I live near the military hospital), someone shooting into the sky. Others normalize it: “Oh yeah, you heard a *balacerito* [little gun battle].” They are entrenched in a culture of violence, and trying to protect me from it.

In the afternoon, Ismael, handing me a manila folder from Pro-Búsqueda’s archives, delves into the details of the case of a disappeared girl who was adopted in the U.S. A polaroid of a joyful child riding a tricycle over fallen maple leaves grabs my attention as I peruse her file. Her family, loyal to the *guerrilla*, endured the assassination of three

boys. Her parents were fighters and her two older brothers, messengers for the FMLN, died at the ages of 11 and 13. Her third brother was also killed, though I'm unsure how he died.

The FMLN demanded that the parents give their fourth child, the girl whom Ismael now seeks my assistance in locating, to the FMLN security houses. Recruiting children to create a facade of family, the FMLN used the security houses to carry out covert activities right under the nose of the military. One security house could be a clinic, Ismael explains, where the wounded enter in the night, another a workshop to make bombs. Well, the army "fell on top of the house where the girl was living." She was hospitalized in the Bloom Hospital for children.

Turning the page in her file, which is usually locked somewhere in Pro-Búsqueda, I come across a clipping from a Salvadoran newspaper. It contains a photograph of the missing girl. She is smiling. "It's bait," Ismael explains. "Whoever comes for her will be caught for being affiliated with the FMLN." Turning the page again, I see a second newspaper ad. She is thin, her hair cut short. More bait?

I also find photograph of her as a baby, chubby and content, taken by the girl's parents, years before the disappearance. Somewhere in the file I read "mentally retarded."

As we continue leafing through her file, Ismael asks me to read aloud in Spanish e-mail printouts written in English by a volunteer with Physicians for Human Rights. The

volunteer writes, “I found J. Smith’s (the adoptive father’s) name associated with a church... We spoke with the church and gave them Pro-Búsqueda’s contact information but they would not give us the family’s address... We consider this case closed, although unsuccessfully.” It hurts to read. Four other files that Ismael pulls out for me to peruse contain similar messages.

At Ismael’s request, I again assist him with using the Internet people-finder, a modest method to attempt to locate this girl, who is now in her twenties. Ismael has spent hours navigating these pages, and has actually hit on phone numbers and addresses of a few Salvadoran missing children living in the U.S.

I plug the information from the girl’s file into the search engine. With each keystroke, I wonder about the blurred lines of the legality/illegality of adoptions and the legality/illegality of the investigations that Pro-Búsqueda pursues. Do the human rights to identity and to family trump the rights of privacy of adoptive parents? Which family is more important to protect, the adoptive family in which the child lives or the biological family that the child lost?

While clicking away in Ismael’s office, I hear Ali and her house-guest in the hallway just outside the psychology office. They have come to retrieve me for a walk home. Sancho, the psychologist, greets them in the hallway, indulging in the opportunity to speak English with these two attractive American women. This vexes me because I know he should be in his office attending to a *joven encontrada*. I had stopped in the office earlier

to grab my belongings and had seen the *joven*'s eyes, pink with tears. She deserves the full attention of the resident psychologist. I rarely get angry but today I am angry. Sancho is still conversing with the pretty Americans in the hallway. The *joven* waits in his office. Eventually, I realize he's going to keep talking so I decide to introduce myself to try to make her feel more comfortable. I bubble into Sancho's office and make small talk with the *joven*. She has a 7-year-old child and is preparing for her *reencuentro* with her mother in Morazan. We enjoy jokes in a light exchange. "How old do I look?" We swap ages and a little bit of history. All is well until I ask, "When is your birthday?" Oops. The one question I wish I hadn't asked because as soon as it came out of my mouth I knew the answer.

"Well, I have two, you know," the *joven* responds, miraculously still smiling. "The one that they are finding out for me makes me older."

"They made you older!" I playfully exclaim, and the tone returns to light-heartedness.

In the evening, when at Reina's house, I finally catch the headlines for the day. Eight people murdered in San Salvador today. I learn that the San Antonio Abad gang descends from the notorious *Dieciocho* [Eighteen], one of El Salvador's bloodiest gangs.

14 June 2005

Wednesday: To Sonsonate with Dora & Lucio

Dora, Lucio, and I head out in Pro-Búsqueda's red pick-up truck for a DNA collection trip to El Salvador's two westernmost departments, Sonsonate and Ahuachapan. I take advantage of the opportunity, as we coast along the highway, to gather ideas for my thesis. I ask them if within the theme of the experiences of the *jovenes encontrados*, there is a particular question that I could research that would be useful to Pro-Búsqueda. Lucio has a similar idea to mine—that I explore the 150 or so cases where the *joven* has been located but there has not yet been a reunion. Yesterday's futile searches on the web-based people finder inspire me in this direction.

Exploring the obstacles to reunification “would be useful,” Lucio asserts, and he suggests that I read about a case in progress to understand how they play out.

“Do you think that *jovenes encontrados* would be willing to or would even enjoy speaking with me?” I ask.

“You tell us who you want to talk to,” Lucio replies, “And we will tell you how ready they are to talk.”

This reminds Lucio of a woman he encountered through his work with Pro-Búsqueda.

“None of her children are disappeared,” Lucio tells Dora and me, “But her story affected me the most.” He narrates, “She was in the *guerrilla*, hiding in a cave for 14 days with

her son. She was pregnant and ended up having to give birth in the cave. There was nothing to cut the umbilical cord with so she cut it with her teeth. And there was nothing to clean it with. The baby died of infection. Her other child was badly bitten by insects but did survive.” He continues, “She told me this in tears.” Lucio’s voice is still, and then rushes with emotion again. “And there was no water to drink so she had to urinate in her boot and drink that.” After a pause he adds, “She would probably be willing to talk to you. She helped us [Pro-Búsqueda] resolve some cases.”

At 9 AM, we reach house #1 in a village in Sonsonate for DNA collection in a village. A protective neighbor demands an explanation for our visit and then confirms that the lady we are calling on is not home. Lucio mentions that the woman that we seek is the mother of two disappeared children. She sells fruit preserves in the open-air market, the neighbor tells us. We search for her there, but to no avail. 40-minutes later, we return to her street and find that the chain of gossip has already mushroomed—a second neighbor relays back to us that the woman “sold her two children.”

“That is not true,” Dora who is in the car to hear this, and has lived this, says.

In the car, Lucio and Dora sing *Sombreros Azul* for me, a guerrilla song calling for the *Yanquis* [Yankees] to get out of El Salvador.

“When did you learn that song? Did you learn it during the war?” I ask.

“Yes,” Dora and Lucio respond in chorus.

“Was it dangerous to sing then?”

“Yes,” says the chorus.

Now we are in Ahuachapan, less than a day’s walk from Guatemala. We will collect a DNA sample from the aunt of a *joven encontrado*. I have never seen so many farm animals in such density as are in this front yard. 8 pigs, and rabbits, dogs, and hens all populate the walk between her front door and the latrine. One of the pigs is exceptionally large and has a bandaged leg. Her leg was broken by a neighbor who hit the pig when she escaped onto the street. The bandage is stuck on with honey. The piglets have to be slapped away as they are licking the bandage. The huge pig limps pathetically on three legs. Why not just sacrifice her now? Because, the aunt explains, she is *seca* [too thin].

Once the aunt feels that she sufficiently understands the DNA collection protocol, Lucio puts on a plastic bag over his hand and scrapes the inside of her cheek with the collector. The aunt gives us soda and cookies (too much soda!), warmly asks when we will return, and then waves until our pick-up truck is out of sight.

On our way out of Ahuachapan, Lucio takes us to meet the parents of his buddy from the orphanage. When I ask how it is that someone living in an orphanage would have living parents, Lucio explains that the parents placed the friend in the orphanage because the

youngster was using drugs. The portly dad grins and chuckling happily, welcomes Lucio into a warm hug. Lucio reminds the father how he had looked at Lucio with eyes of anger when they had first met. The father laughs more. “Lucio remembers every detail,” he says to Dora and me. I request that he elaborate on the story. “My son was involved in gangs so I assumed that Lucio was involved with gangs.”

It fascinates me that Lucio is constantly labeled as a *pandillero* [gang member]. For example, when Lucio was dating Julia, the woman in charge of her orphanage assumed that he was involved with gangs because of the way he dressed. “Please do not judge me for the way that I dress,” Lucio had told the director of Julia’s orphanage. I too had assumed that he had been involved with gangs. I found myself sprinkling questions such as, “What drugs have you tried?” to test the extent of his involvement. He has never tried drugs nor belonged to a gang, yet he is associated with that lifestyle. Even colleagues at Pro-Búsqueda objected to hiring him on the grounds that he was a *pandillero*. Being an orphan in some ways was equivalent to being a pariah, and I am observing the after-effects of that.

As we sit on the patio bathed in yellow sun, and thumb through stacks of photographs of children gone off to USA, Lucio gratefully explains to Dora and me that this family took him in for four months when he first left the orphanage. It is not that the *jovenes encontrados* do not have family. As Lucio demonstrates, many reconstruct their families out of the motley group of people that touch their lives.

The father of Lucio's friend mentions that he read Lucio's chapter in the copy of *Historias para tener presente* that Lucio had given him. So, the conversation turns to Lucio's fame from appearing in the book, including his trip to Sweden and Spain when the book was first released. "This boy has become famous," says the father of Lucio's friend. He relates this story: "Once Lucio was seen on television talking about the book and someone who knew Lucio's mother telephoned. It was a man who had looked on Lucio's mother as his own mother. He had written a poem for Lucio's mother when she died and after seeing Lucio on television he got in touch with him and shared it with him."

In the shuffle of handshakes, hugs, blessings, and goodbye kisses, Dora's farewell to the family sticks in my ear. "Thank you for your tenderness towards Lucio," Dora says. "Bye!"

En route to San Salvador, we drive through Ahuachapan and La Libertad along the coast. It is the Salvadoran equivalent of driving on Highway 1 near Big Sur. Gorgeous! And the light begins to drop towards the green-blue sea. I savor every vista of this magnificent sunset. Riding beneath the tangerine sky, Dora says "*tatu*. We just passed some *tatus*."

"*Tatu*? What does that mean?" I ask.

She explains, “They are what we hid in during the war. They were dug into the ground. I have been in two kinds. One kind you sit in. The other is shaped like an *L*. You put wood on top and cover it with earth. That is the kind that you can stand in. We heard the footsteps of soldiers walking over our heads when we were in that kind.”

“How did you know when it was safe to get out?”

“They were always people there to let us know.”

Now Lucio talks about hiding in a cave with his Dad. How when they came out they were covered with insect bites.

“For how many years did you live in terror?” I ask. Neither of them answers. It’s true. This question has no real answer. So I focus the question, “Lucio, what year was it when you taken to the orphanage?” His life as an institutionalized orphan began in the mid-80s. “You were not in the countryside anymore. Did you feel safe then?”

“No,” he answers. “The orphanage was across the street from a military headquarters.”

“And did you think they might kill you?”

“Yes, that. And I had the desire to poison their food. But it never happened,” he adds.

Dora left the countryside in the mid-80s as well. She does not wake up screaming anymore, she says. But the nightmares persist “depending on the experiences and the stress of that day.”

We move from the discussing the terror of war to the topic of friendship. Dora has never had a friend, she tells us. “I would like to someday, but I have never gotten to that.” She is 32-years-old. The bombs shattered her sense of trust. Then we talk about Dora traveling to Italy, to meet her brother, of course. “But now is not the right moment,” Dora explains. “Things happen slowly. Inocencio is having problems for having spoken with us.”

Graced by the sunset and gorgeous ocean views, we sing the refrain of a popular *Mana* tune. “*¿Donde estan los desaparecidos? ¿Y porque es que se desaparecen? Porque no todos somos iguales.* [Where are the disappeared? And why is it that they disappear? Because we are not all equal].

I joke with Dora that I can read her mind. This gets us into talking about the invisible stuff. Lucio shares that he can feel his father with him “when I (Lucio) am doing work in the house.”

We are joyful together driving home to San Salvador. Lucio points out a restaurant that makes tasty *paella* [rice with seafood]. “If you come to visit me in California, I will ask my mom to make you *paella*. She makes the best *paella*.” A stone shatters glass.

Frustrated and angry, Lucio responds, “Liz, we will never come to California. We would never get permission to come.”

It is a brave and difficult conversation that follows about coyote lifestyles and immigration to *el norte* [the north].

“I don’t believe that life in the U.S. is superior. I understand that it (immigration) is an economic choice,” I say.

Lucio remarks, “When people go they know they are going to suffer—to suffer discrimination and exploitation.”

And Dora adds, “I would go to help my sister.”

Lucio had two good opportunities to go to the U.S., he tells us, but his daughter Rosita had recently been born, so he declined. “I was separated from my family once and I will not let it happen again.” Memory of losing his first family to the war is the glue that bonds his current family together. Similarly, Dora feels that she cannot leave her mother, her mother who suffers so much for having lost her two sons in the war.

We take Dora to a convenient bus stop and at 7 PM, are nearing my home. I am appreciating this day of sharing. “I hope that today will serve you for your fieldnotes,”

says Lucio. I respond by reinforcing that I am not here just to take “notes.” I hate the idea of the mosquito researcher, taking and leaving. I tell him that writing the notes help to humanize me. It helps me to process, to understand what I am seeing. It teaches me lessons for life and will hopefully teach me how to serve others better. In receiving medical education in California, I tell Lucio, I have the opportunity to serve Latinos. I look forward to the day when I am attending to a Salvadoran man in the hospital. And if he tells me that he is from Morazan, I will warmly ask, ‘Where in Morazan? I was there.’ In short, writing fieldnotes helps me to understand people better and helps me feel connected to my Latino heritage.

Now, our conversation shifts to discussing Lucio’s father. He confirms what I already felt. “If my father had survived the war, then I would have died. He gave up his life for me. The shrapnel that cut off his leg...”

I interrupt. “Yes, I was thinking about that earlier when you were talking about him. I was thinking about how he gave you life twice.” We let silence talk. Then, I say, “It must help you in life to know that he loved you so much. And it must hurt you—”

“To not be with him,” he finishes.

15 June 2005

Wednesday: Telephone reunion to Italy & Lucio's house

I am computer-busy in the office, coordinating details about DNA collection when I meet Sancho's friend, a pregnant woman and former volunteer at Pro-Búsqueda.

Time has passed. Pregnant woman returns to the psychology office where I type. She plops into a chair, letting out an impressive sigh as she relaxes. "That woman took out tears from my eyes," she says to me. Her eyes are pink, wet.

"What woman?" I ask.

"The woman who just spoke with her son who lives in Italy for the first time since his disappearance."

I step into the foyer to have a look. Gathered around the telephone at the receptionist's desk is Ismael excitedly leaning his arms onto the desk, the psychologist Sancho, an Italian lady who must have been the Italian translator, a 40-year-old Salvadoran woman, Carol, and Lucio observing the event from a nearby doorway. The telephone conversation has just finished. The woman who has just spoken with her son is FLOATING. JOY. JOY. ENORMOUS Smile. Beaming. Joy personified. JOY tempered by the sadness of the distance—distance in miles, in years, in experience.

"That was wonderful when he called me 'mama'," she sings.

Sancho hugs her. He tells her to relax, take it easy. Does she want to talk? She goes with Lucio to donate a DNA sample. The crowd disperses. Only Sancho and I remain in the foyer. I can see that he is carrying a mix of Emotion. “Sancho, tell me what happened.” He begins to respond. “Wait, tell me in the office,” I say.

I sit myself temporarily behind Sancho’s desk to get a disk out of his computer. “Just stay there,” he says. “Now you be the psychologist.”

I ask him again what happened. His response: a big sigh but no words. “What was the first thing she said to him when given the telephone?”

“Hello son, I love you. I love you very much.” He tells me that her eyes teared. My eyes tear too, as Sancho relates these words to me.

“And what did the son say?”

“Hello, mama,” he replies, rolling the word “mama” with an Italian accent.

“What else did they say?”

“He told her that he would try to come visit. He has been studying Spanish. Pro-Búsqueda found him in 1998. His sister, Celia, also lives in Italy. She recently found out

that she was adopted and she is in the process of discovering the truth. He would like to come with his sister. He knows her address. He can visit her in Italy. He will tell us when Celia is ready to receive a phone call from her mother. I think it will be soon because he will tell her how this phone call was for him. He is in the Italian Navy. He is coming to America soon and would like to visit El Salvador. The mother offered to pay for their plane tickets.”

“Can she afford that?”

“She has a son in New York,” Sancho replies, “I am certain that he would pay for it. Her clothes are too nice, too nice for someone from Morazan. It shows that she receives remittances.”

Sancho shares more of his observations. “These people (the relatives of the disappeared) are so strong. I asked her if she wanted to come to my office and talk. She said no, that she wanted to go with Lucio for the DNA collection, and afterwards she had to go home and cook dinner.”

Then after thinking to himself he adds, “She is the same height as my mom. That’s why I hugged her. Because I cannot imagine being in Italy and finding out I was adopted. I would not understand.”

“What else did they say?”

“She told him that she hopes that they can celebrate his birthday together on August 2nd. She understands if he can’t come right away but to please make it only a few days that she has to wait. He replied, ‘but August 2nd is not my birthday’. And she said, ‘Yes, you were born on that day. I was there’.”

In the hallway, I see Lucio who has just interviewed the mother and collected a DNA sample. I ask how the woman is. “Excited,” he says. “Excited.”

Then I see Ofelia. “Did you see what happened here? Did you hear about the phone call to Italy?” There’s A BIG FAT FOOT IN MY MOUTH.

“No, I took myself away. When one is so emotional it’s good to go away.” I respond (trying to crank my foot out of my mouth) by telling her how strong she is, while offering a hug. “Yes,” she says, and sweeps by.

So I stop to see Dora who has no doubt heard the whole interaction with the Italian boy. “Dora how are you doing?” I ask, wanting to show my concern, but not too much. Now Dora and her mother are in the same room, Dora working at her desk, Ofelia sweeping. Dora’s response: a scowl, scrunched nose, curled lip. It tells me all that I need to hear. I offer support in the simple way that I can, a pained and understanding smile.

After donating a DNA sample, Fernanda, the mother of the *joven* in Italy, comes into the psychology office where I am working at the computer. Huge smiles and SIGHS. With

each SIGH she is DEFLATING, but then she fills with emotion again. SIGHS.

SMILES. SMILE SMILE SIGH SMILE. We discuss the possibilities: of travel to Italy, of her children coming here, of a telephone call (soon we hope) with her daughter Celia.

Little by little.

Over lunch, Ismael and I talk about Dora and Ofelia. I don't know if I misunderstood Dora but contrary to what she had told me, Ismael informs me that her youngest brother has been located. Pro-Búsqueda contacted the adoptive father and he has since taken measures to hide the boy from Pro-Búsqueda. He is an Italian policeman who, according to Ismael, threatened Pro-Búsqueda, changed his home telephone number, and removed his contact information from the Internet "because I found them via the Internet," Ismael tells me.

At the end of the workday, I am rewarded with a treat: Lucio invites me to his home for a visit with his wife Julia and their daughter Rosita. As we drive up to the home, Julia greets us with a smile from the doorway while Rosita and Luzecita's son Pablito await on the patio. Inside, Luzecita giggles as Rosita and Pablito take turns handing me toys (dolls, plastic cars, a squeaky chicken chew-toy that probably belongs to the dog). I have a wonderful time. Pizza Hut delivers our dinner and I see that Lucio has ordered 7-UP not coke because he saw that coca-cola has a strong effect on me (it makes me dance and sing).

I'm at a funny junction between the boundaries of being a researcher and being a friend. I am honored to be a guest in this humble home; to witness the family created by Julia and Luzecita's sisterly bond; to watch Rosita and Pablito interact as brother and sister; and to view Lucio's artwork. I suppose that the heart of the researcher and the heart of the friend are one. So, what else to do, I figure, except be myself.

Julia and I stand in the living room, where she cuts my hair to repair a bad haircut by a friend in California. As she combs and snips, Lucio places bombs in my hand, artifacts from the civil war. *Guerrillas* had removed the gunpowder from the un-detonated bomb and reused it, Lucio explains. "One like this, but bigger, is what took off Luzecita's arm," Lucio remarks, in an astonishingly matter-of-fact tone.

"Julia, is it painful for you to have these items in your home?" I ask my hair-stylist.

"No, I don't remember anything."

Lucio continues, "Rifle bullets make two explosions. One when they leave the barrel and one when they explode." I am surprised that the bomb is shaped more like an arrowhead. It doesn't look like the round bombs that the bad guy in the Pink Panther cartoons was always trying to explode. I reflect on the world of difference that separates my hosts and myself, in this home where destructive relics are souvenirs.

Rosita and I “play” together. This involves me sitting on the floor while she combs my hair with a tiny doll-sized pink brush. She has the adorable accent of a 3-year-old. She puts gobs of doll shampoo in my hair. This ends when Rosita, two feet from the bathroom, pees on the floor. She was having so much fun that forgot to get to the bathroom in time! At this exact moment, Pablito is still handing me toys. “Who wants a big doll?” he gleefully asks, placing a sixth toy in my lap. And while Rosita tracks pee across the living room to tell Julia about her accident, 3 ½-year-old Pablito is handing me a tiny toy piano “*Para que le cante a su mujer* [So that you can serenade your woman],” he tells me sweetly and with confidence. I erupt in laughter. It feels so good to laugh. Thank goodness for children. For all the sadness that Lucio carries, he has such brightness in his life.

Julia, Luzecita, Pablito, and Rosita pile into the backseat of Lucio’s car to drop me off. 9:08 PM. I see that Lucio is concentrating, and barely stopping at stoplights. “Why isn’t there anyone on the street?” I ask. The roads are as quiet as a New Year’s Eve at 11:50 PM.

“It’s because they know it is better to be at home. People are in their homes now.”

Hopefully we’ll celebrate Julia’s birthday together, which is on Monday. I have already picked out the plant that I want to give her as a present. It was a beautiful evening. I am glad that I opted to be a person above being an investigator. I find that for me, academia is an easy place to hide. I feel friendship growing.

Each day the question “Why did I come to El Salvador?” becomes more profound, and each day, the answer is more enriching.

16 June 2005

Thursday: Listening to *Innocent Voices*

I recharge from a frustrating morning at Pro-Búsqueda by joining Dora and her supervisor Ramona for lunch. While I gobble tortillas and fresh cheese, I verbalize my admiration for their dedication to their work. “It’s because of what we lived through in the war,” Dora humbly says.

Ramona’s response is a brief telling of her experiences during the war. As a university student in San Salvador during the most violent years of the armed conflict, she was involved in the resistance movement. Safety was her top priority because she knew if she was captured it was not just she who would suffer; they might torture her family, as well. After about five minutes of storytelling she slips in, “They killed my boyfriend.” Dora listens, and shrinks in her chair as she eats her chicken.

“And you were very in love?” I ask.

“Too much. In fact we had made plans to leave. We had requested permission to go to Cuba or Nicaragua.” Ramona, 30-something, no children, not married, is a generous spirit who leads a life of service.

Ramona tells me a cute story. She is recalling the farewell dinner hosted by Pro-Búsqueda when the volunteers from the California Department of Justice visited last summer. “Only three people did not dance,” she says, counting on her fingers. “Myself, Father Jon, and one other. I asked the Father if he wanted to dance and he said, ‘Ramona, what are you proposing? And in public!’” Father Jon then told her that he only danced once in his life, “In 1992, when the Peace Accords were signed. With the people of Guarjila, he danced.”

In the evening, Ali and I watch the film *Innocent Voices* together. Poignant and disturbing, this movie about the experience of a Salvadoran boy during the civil war provokes in me feelings of appreciation for the work I’m doing. I have the opportunity to lend a hand to ameliorate, even if just a little bit, the limitless pain here. I think about what an honor it is to be working with Father Jon. He is a figure of history, a legend that walks with us today.

I see in the movie that Chava, the young protagonist, sleeps with shoes and clothes on. I remember that Lucio had told me that he always slept with shoes on, and fully dressed, because you never knew when you would have to run. And, Ali tells me, many people

slept under their beds to hide from bullets. And it was years, I imagine, until people could restfully sleep at all.

In the film, Chava, an indigent child from an aluminum village, constantly evades the draft (which was enforced at gun-point) as any boy 14-years or older could be called to duty by the military. I think of the soldiers. Who tells the story of the soldiers? Who helps the soldiers, the CONSCRIPTED CHILDREN TRAINED TO BE MURDERERS? Who helps them to heal their wounds?

I also realize that I believe in “leftist” ideals. Yet I am afraid of people who are too radical. They challenge my comfortable illusions. I do want to have two jackets. I am selfish. And I fear violence. Violence ravenously swallows villages whole in times of armed rebellion, whereas poverty kills insidiously.

17 June 2005

Friday: Father’s Day celebration

Dora brought me five mangoes. Eduardo takes one. With one I pay my debt from the bet that I lost with Margarita. Something else about Dora: For about a week now she has been using a new image as her screensaver. It’s a photo of her handsome brother Inocencio, leaning against a tree, smiling. She had dug the photo “out of the depths” to show it to me. Three days after showing it to me (the day after we went to *Subway*, I

think) Inocencio's smile has become the first image that grabs my attention when I walk into her office.

Dora is upset; I don't know why.

Today is Father's Day.

I love the way that Father's Day is celebrated in El Salvador. Each father receives a hug and congratulations from all. It's a collective duty to honor all fathers, rather than the obligation of each family to purchase a gift for the father of the household as is customary in the United States. I am touched that Father's Day is a joyous occasion at Pro-Búsqueda; a handful of fathers of disappeared children have come to the office to celebrate with us.

Father Jon, who Yanira lovingly deems as "the father with the most children," takes the first cut at the celebratory cake. He has literally helped reunite scores of fathers with their sons and daughters, and, in essence, he devotedly fathered the movement to search for the missing Salvadoran children. The *jovenes encontrados* look to him with eyes seeking paternal affection. And the relatives of the missing children, unashamedly and wholeheartedly, place their faith in him.

Two fathers of disappeared children honorably follow Father Jon's slicing of the cake. Then the fathers who work in the office proudly slice their pieces, and receive gifts of T-shirts from the organization.

About 15 minutes before the workweek ends, Virginia approaches me to request that I translate an urgently needed document for Pro-Búsqueda. Sure, I'll do it first thing on Monday. She skillfully suggests that I would prefer to do the translation on Saturday. Oh, I understand. This is her way of communicating a request. Father Jon would like me to translate this solicitation to the U.S. Senate appropriations committee. How symbolic it would be if the U.S. government were to grant Pro-Búsqueda financial assistance! In essence, it would represent an apology. I slip the pink floppy disk into my purse. Tomorrow, I will do the translation.

Now it's really the end of the workday. I am speaking with Ramona about a spreadsheet to keep track of the DNA samples but she races out the door. To do what? To eat *pupusas*. "You are coming to eat *pupusas* too, Liz," Dora informs me.

After the delicious *pupusas*, Lucio and his family drive me home. Even though it's only three blocks, it's a dark and lonely walk, which means, "may be dangerous." It's good to make fun of yourself before people make fun of you so in the car, I jokingly share Cuban wisdom: "*Es mejor que digan que por aquí corrió un cobarde que aquí murió un valiente*. [It is better that they say, 'Here walked a coward' than 'Here died a courageous one'.]" They laugh. I thank them for the ride and settle into being home.

I enjoy reading in the evening and stumble across this sentence: “The poet is intimate with the truth, while a scientist approaches it awkwardly.”

18 June 2005

Saturday: Good old Saturday

I live today at my own leisurely pace. I do the translation requested by Father Jon until mid-afternoon. Then, I trek to Ali’s through a storm with a mini-mountain of laundry bundled in my arms. After spinning one load of laundry in her washing machine we discover that we’ve emptied the water tanks in her house. Oops! Her fuming roommates, one of whom eagerly awaited his first shower after returning from five days of forestry work, will eventually forgive us for leaving the tap dry. Ali and I get *pupusas*, giggle, and contemplate the week behind us.

19 June 2005

Sunday: Resting!

A true day of rest, I spend most of it writing in my room. In the late afternoon, I venture out on the 30B bus to the Metrocentro. At first, this capitalism-gone-haywire shopping mall feels dizzying, but eventually I ease into enjoying people-watching. Generations of Salvadoran families stroll together, holding hands, and smiling. The children carry balloons and eat ice cream. This is a welcome respite from my persistent focus on

excavating the trauma of the civil war on human psyches. About half an hour before the light fades to dusk, I board 30B again for home.

At night, I attend a farewell party for Emily, the New Zealander who has been renting a room at Reina's house. A good-looking man sings and plays guitar. I listen for Emily's vocal solo then walk over to say goodbye. Emily's farewell message to me: "Don't forget to take time and sing. It's important too."

20 June 2005

Monday: Celebrating Julia's birthday

A productive day at Pro-Búsqueda is topped with a fun evening. Lucio telephones. "Okay, Liz. I'm coming to get you so that we can celebrate Julia's birthday. We have a cake here." 40 minutes later, Carol, Dora, and I are in Mister Donut buying Chilean empanadas and other treats to share for Julia's impromptu birthday dinner.

When we arrive, I am delighted to give Julia a birthday hug and to meet Tito, Julia's friend from the orphanage. Julia and Lucio also celebrate a 5th wedding anniversary today (they love each other and getting married was the easiest way to get Julia out of the orphanage when she turned of age). "Liz, come." Rosita summons me for my hair styling appointment with the doll-sized brush.

Dinner is pleasant. I speak to Tito, nicknamed Chino, across the table. He is a *joven encontrado*, now a father, and makes a living by selling hot chocolate. The cake is delicious and I enlist him to help me finish my piece. Luzecita has joined us, and she comments that she misses running after her son, who is home sleeping. “Don’t worry. You will see him soon enough,” Julia knowingly says. With that, the door flings open and in walks the little sleepyhead. Pablito beelines to his mother for a hug. With equally sleepy eyes is Agustin, Pablito’s father, who follows closely behind his son. Agustin works by night repairing planes for TACA and sleeps during the day.

After spending a good chunk of the evening playing with Pablito and Rosita, I decide to give talking to the adults another chance. From the playroom, I chat with Agustin, who sits at the spot at the table closest to where I am. I talk about medical school and he tells me what he likes about his work. He savors his annual trips to the United States; a perk of his job is free plane-tickets during the off-season; last year he went to Boston.

He asks for my thoughts about Cuba. It feels good to express my newfound clarity on my frustration about how Miamians act towards Cuba. Equally frustrating is how disenfranchised *izquierdistas* [leftists] throughout Latin America perceive Cuba. Each group has their own interests; each ignoring what is quintessentially most important with regards to the island—the well-being of the Cuban people, the health and happiness of each Cuban. Politics and ideology aside, stop perpetuating this suffering and stop idealizing it. I realize that Cuba is a mooshy spot in my heart. It’s like a cavity. I mean to say, the culture enriches me, fills me with warmth, life, and strength. But when people

talk about Cuba, it often pains me. Pains me. Pains me. Because the conversations that I have heard Outside of Cuba are filled with eyes of self interest. Eyes that reflect of North Americans: “I want to enjoy the music. I am exotic. I am righteous. I am in solidarity with the poor. *Que viva Che* [Long live Che].” Or in young Latino’s view: “My government is corrupt. People here suffer under capitalism. Fidel is the treasure. Cuba is paradise. *Hasta la victoria siempre*. [To victory always].” Neither view is correct; both views pain me. Why are they deficient? Because they fail to take into account the reality in which the Cuban people live. To appreciate the benefits of Cuba’s socialism while critically analyzing its failures. In short, their perspectives are inherently selfish. Not to mention the Cuban-Americans: “Fidel is evil. Therefore I am Republican.” Selfish. Because their votes damn the Cubans and the poor in the United States! And the women, fathers, daughters, and sons in Iraq as well... I am grateful for the opportunity to express this and find some degree of understanding in Agustin who offers sympathetic eyes but no words to my soliloquy.

After a grand evening, Luzecita, Julia, Lucio, Pablito, and Rosita pile into the car to take me home.

21 June 2005

Tuesday: Connections to U.S.A.

I arrive at Pro-Búsqueda early to meet Father Jon so that we can submit the proposal to Washington by the end of the day. He has read my translations and asks me to double-

check the document. I get to work reviewing the document and before I know it, am enveloped with passion for the words, words that describe the disappearances in details, that tell of the mothers who started the search for their children, and of how this movement grew into Pro-Búsqueda.

Father Jon and I review the changes I've made to the document in my attempt to convey these points more powerfully. We both pause when we reach the paragraph detailing the events surrounding the forced disappearances. "Father, as I was reviewing this, I got struck by passion and decided to make the language more powerful." (For example, I had changed what previously read "children were disappeared" to "children were abducted").

Father Jon confesses, "Me too. I changed it this morning." He directs me to his edit where he specifies that children were transported via helicopter, which signifies that military commanders knew about the disappearances. He looks to me with innocent eyes and shrugs. "What can we do? It's the truth."

"Yes, it's the truth," I agree. For the rest of the afternoon, desire for truth, justice, and reparation fuel me in my work. It is a privilege to work closely with Father Jon. Under time pressure to get the letter to Washington, he dictates in Spanish as I simultaneously translate, re-work, and type our ideas. I think we grow to appreciate each other this day.

In the psychology office, I see Sancho with a hand on his forehead. He is exhausted from preparing a brother for a *reencuentro* with his sister Matilde who lives in the United States. Sancho mentions that other members of the family abused the brother and that this will be a difficult reunion.

Finally, I prepare for a phone call to Violeta, a *joven encontrada* who lives in Kentucky. She may have a *reencuentro* at the end of July if she chooses to come to El Salvador.

CHAPTER 4—Carmen and Claudia

22 June 2005

Wednesday: Carmen's mother

We traverse a bumpy, bumpy road on our three-hour journey to Morazan. Passing through Ciudad Barrios, a town in celebrations, we haltingly navigate through the crowd of partygoers. The tires spew mud as they spin. After choosing the wrong fork on the muddy road through a farming town, we backtrack, and with due diligence, arrive to the home of Filomena Ramirez.

Cornhusks protect the outside of her adobe home and bamboo provides structural support. The bed where she now sits is a wood plank curtained off by burlap sacks, which I believe serve as mosquito nets. The bed is about one meter from the kitchen. A stove of mud rises out of the floor. The floor is earth itself, wet and fertile. The land is uneven and there is a large grade, even within the home. Not much light enters the home, so we leave the front door open so we can see. Very few possessions are contained in this house. I see a mirror. I sit on a wood board. There are two chairs in the home, which Ismael and Sancho occupy.

Filomena Ramirez is the mother who will be reuniting with her daughter Carmen this Saturday. The child that she lost was Maribel, a girl 2 ½ years old. The person that she will receive on Saturday is Carmen, a woman 27 years old who is herself mother to a 7-year-old boy. Filomena perches anxiously on the edge of the bed. Her ankles are

nervously crossed. She appears timid, meek, and tiny. “I have fevers,” she tells us. She wears a light blue dress and apron, typical attire of a Salvadoran *campesina*. The bandana on her head holds in place a large leaf. The leaf is used medicinally to relieve her pains, she explains.

Sancho will attend to Filomena privately to prepare her the *reencuentro*. Ismael and I respectfully step out and wander the village. The soccer field is gorgeous! It lies on a plateau overlooking a valley embraced by the mountains of Morazan.

As I stare into this jungly valley, Ismael tells me Carmen’s story. “This zone was heavily affected by the war. Carmen’s mother had gone into hiding in Ciudad Barrios. Carmen remained in the village. An explosion from a grenade left Carmen with an injury to her ear, so her uncle took her to an FMLN clinic. The clinic was hidden in the jungle.” As he tells me this I am still looking into the valley. Perhaps my eyes fall on the very treetops that shaded the clinic 23-years ago. He continues, “When Carmen was in the clinic her uncle lost track of her. A woman affiliated with the FMLN adopted Carmen and took Carmen into her home. That was when Carmen’s tie with her biological family broke. But Carmen was treated horribly and at age 7, she ran away. When she was running away a Salvadoran woman on a bus took pity on her and brought Carmen home. This is the woman that raised Carmen; but the woman has since passed away.”

There are going to be conflicts to face at this *reencuentro*, Sancho had forewarned on our ride to Morazan. Filomena Ramirez blames her brother for the disappearance of Carmen,

or shall I say Maribel? And Carmen is angry, Sancho explained. She asks, “Why do they look for me after all these years when I have suffered so much? Why now?”

When Ismael and I return to Filomena’s home, Sancho tells me that when we had first arrived Filomena had thought that I was Carmen and that it made her feel “so happy.” I bear no resemblance to her family. Imagine having no conception of what your own daughter looks like after so many years.

Ismael sits in the chair closest to Filomena. The first issue Ismael raises is whether Don Orlando, Filomena’s brother, the man who took Carmen to the clinic eventually leading to her disappearance, will be invited to the *reencuentro*. Filomena insists that Don Orlando cannot come because he is a drunk who once threatened to *machetear* [cut with a machete] somebody, arguing that his presence will ruin the event. Ismael firmly asserts that Orlando is key to this *reencuentro*. He is the person who brought Carmen’s case to Pro-Búsqueda. It was through Orlando that Ismael, the investigator for this case, was able to find Carmen. Ismael continues to push for Don Orlando’s inclusion in the *reencuentro*. “A drunk,” Filomena obstinately repeats.

Josefina, a 4-year-old niece who has entered the room shyly states one sentence. It’s barely audible but Ismael catches it and asks her to repeat it. “My uncle does not drink anymore.” Finally Ismael lets the subject drop.

Ismael and Sancho plan for the “party” with Filomena. How many people are coming to the *reencuentro*? We add up the number of people hypothesized to attend, about 20. “So you will cook chicken and rice because it becomes abundant when you cook it,” Ismael advises Filomena. “And it’s nice to decorate the home.”

“The important thing,” Sancho adds, “is that the family can sit together at the table.” He gives her \$50, support from Pro-Búsqueda for the event, and tells her to “administer it as you see fit.”

Shortly before we leave, Filomena’s 17-year-old son Samy enters the home. He has just returned from working in the coffee plantation. He charms me with his bright smile and honest, innocent eyes. Happy to meet him, I extend a hand. Why is such a seemingly kind, friendly young man refusing to reciprocate my gesture, I wonder briefly to myself. “Forgive me, but I am poisoned.” Yes, his clothes are wet, not sweaty but oily. I understand. There is some chemical on his body that he does not want me to touch.

We bid farewell to Filomena. I had tried to give her as much love as I could through my smile. I could see that she was shrinking as Ismael reprimanded her for not wanting to include her brother in the *reencuentro* so I did my best in silence to help her feel supported. As she is a timid, reserved woman, the strength expressed in her hug surprises me. I know that I am representing her daughter, or the hope of seeing her daughter, as she hugs me. “I met your daughter. She is beautiful,” I tell her. “Saturday will be a very special day. Rest, and I hope that you feel better.”

As Sancho, Ismael, and I make the short walk through bamboo to the jeep, I ask, “What was Samy poisoned with? Was he working with pesticides?”

“Yes,” Sancho confirms. I am sure that Samy does not wear protective clothing when he works with pesticides, I think to myself, recalling his shirt drenched in chemicals. His act of not shaking my hand indicates awareness of their toxicity. Yet the economic need is so great—Filomena cannot sustain the home on the meager amount she earns from selling bread to dip into coffee. Poisoned.

It’s a hot ride in the jeep as we roll back to San Salvador.

23 June 2005

Thursday: Pesticides, Sardines, and God

At 6 AM, Don Jaime, Margarita, and I gather at Pro-Búsqueda for a dawn departure for our DNA collection trip in Chalatenango. Once in Chalate, we stop at a town plaza to pick up Enrique, a local who has informed the relatives of the disappeared throughout the region about today’s DNA-collection gathering, which will be held in Teocinte.

We drive along a dirt road; it’s sweltering. Margarita and Enrique get out of the car to speak with relatives of the disappeared, while Don Jaime and I climb out to wait in the shade. Shortly, a white cloud of pesticide fumigation descends on us. The cloud covers

the front yard where Margarita speaks with a man, presumably about his missing child. Children are breathing it. It is literally a white amorphous mass that I can see growing. “Mosquito control,” I am told. I get into the jeep to avoid breathing it. To my dismay, white fumes now waft in through the rolled down windows. The air tastes like turpentine. I see the man holding the shiny, fumigation bullet, which hangs by a strap over his shoulder, cradled by his two arms. Get out of the car. *Guacala* [Yuck]! It’s landing on me! On my hair, on my apple that wasn’t organic but even if it had been organic it wouldn’t be any more. I walk a bit up the road. Don Jaime follows. Eventually Don Jaime and I are distracted by the gorgeous white flowers, fragrant like jasmine or gardenia, elaborate and delicate; he picks some for me and places five stars of white flowers in my hair, decorating my pony tail that has recently been bathed in pesticides.

We drive not too far down the road before pulling over again. Margarita and Enrique set off down a narrow path to speak with a family. They are now out of sight. I decide to venture after them. The slender, agave-lined walking path bends, leading me to a bamboo bridge over a creek. The bridge delivers me to a cornfield. I hear Margarita’s voice coming from the home adjacent to the cornfield. I follow the bed of dried plants that forms a path to the house, which I imagine protects from mud during the rain.

When I reach the patio of the house, I am entertained by a plump, toothless woman with a comical smile. This curly haired elderly woman is the sister-in-law of the woman that Margarita speaks with. As Margarita gathers the story from the mother of a missing

child, the funny-sweet lady swings around the pillar of the balcony to tell me stories about the war. She is so proud that she remembers the war days. Mostly, she tells me about having to cook huge amounts of food for the soldiers, and having to cook copiously for the *guerrilleros*. She admits that she and her family fed the soldiers and the *guerrilla* out of fear. These were women who did their best to remain neutral during the armed conflict, negotiating the precarious balance between providing obligated support to both of the opposing sides. I am most impressed by her pride in sharing her memories.

Driving into Teocinte, we see Eulalia; Reina had told me she was the one who lent her bed for Reina's childbearing. Eulalia is working with the men to repair the road by freshly lining it with rocks. Holding two rocks in her hand, she walks over to the jeep to tell us that her patio is ready for the DNA-collection gathering.

Teocinte. What a splendid place for a town! The creek that follows the road is gorgeous! The area feels open and free; surrounded by rich jungle but not cramped in it (that's how I feel in Morazan—squished by the jungle). Beautiful gardens of banana trees and Heliconia decorate the community. Homes of adobe, aluminum, and a few of cement rise from the fertile earth, red-brown and rich with colorful flowers.

At Eulalia's home, we unpack the supplies for the DNA collection gathering: clipboard, interview and consent forms, buccal swabs, pens, and ink pad for fingerprinting. Margarita conducts an interview while I speak with Enrique's family, relatives of a *joven encontrado*. Enrique's cousin was located in El Salvador and two years ago, the family

celebrated a *reencuentro* with him. Enrique's aunt, uncle, and two cousins have come to donate their DNA samples. Enrique's uncle is a dignified man of the Salvadoran countryside. He is humble yet proud, thin yet strong, and not so quick to give a DNA sample. "What is this for?" he forcefully questions. Don Jaime gives an explanation of the DNA collection and introduces me by saying that I am a collaborator from a DNA lab who has come from California to help Pro-Búsqueda with the establishment of a genetic bank. After this four-minute explanation, Enrique's uncle asserts, "I would like to hear from her."

In addition to illustrating the basic genetics behind kinship analyses, I also explain our motivation to create the bank from a legal angle. I speak briefly about the case of the Serrano Cruz sisters, reporting that the argument used by Salvadoran government was that these children never existed. So, for legal purposes it is critical to archive DNA samples of disappeared children and their relatives, "especially in your case where your nephew has been found."

As soon as I finish my explanation, the uncle rises from his chair. The noble articulations of his gestures impress me. "Well here, take a seat. You have to work," he says, sternly and tenderly while giving me his chair. I understand that his act of offering me the chair was an expression of gratitude for my team's solidarity to the cause of the disappeared children. I graciously accept the seat. Now out of his chair, he puts on his clunky glasses to review the informed consent document that he just signed. When we finish with the DNA collection, Don Jaime offers the family a ride up the steep road since we had made

one of the cousins late to school. Though the children accept, the uncle declines the ride. He had come to Teocinte by horse.

We drive for half an hour into a town with a swing-set, rusty and broken, and surrounded by trash. With giggles and trepidation, Margarita and I knock on the door of the house that emanates obnoxious, drunken singing. Two young girls answer the door. “Yes, the man that you ask for is our grandfather but he’s drunk.”

The girls approach him anyway to inform him of our arrival. “*Hija de puta* [Daughter of a whore]!” he barks, and then eventually stumbles to the door. We end up not collecting a sample from him because we determine that he is not in a state of mind to provide informed consent. Though yes, he is the father of a disappeared girl, he confirms with a slur and wagging finger. Margarita and I return to the vehicle. A little boy begs for money through the window of the jeep.

The drunk father comes to the car. “Don’t put me in jail. I didn’t do it. She sold my daughter!” he hollers with blameful conviction while pointing accusingly at a neighbor’s house.

Another drunk man has purchased a can of sardines from the nearby shop. He tries to no avail to pound the can open with a rock. He manages to pierce the lid but unable to remove it, he drinks the juice of the can of sardines and stumbles away. As he drunkenly saunters, he tosses the can over a tall gate and into the front yard of a well-to-do-home.

The engine of the jeep is rumbling and I notice the young mendicant who had just asked me for money now hopping the fence to retrieve the can. He is hungry! I hadn't realized that he was hungry; I had assumed that he wanted to buy candy or toys. As regretful thoughts roll in my head, we are driving away.

Explosion?! Something has gone wrong with the car and it sounds like firecrackers. Actually, the smaller explosions sound like a 28, and the louder ones sound like a 32 (revolver), Margarita tells me. Every other minute the car emits a ruckus of *bangs* from the rear. Jaime says that the brakes feel funny, which is worrisome, since we are winding downhill on a steep mountain road in the rain. It's painfully humorous that besides the danger of driving with malfunctioning brakes, it would be unsafe, they insist, to drive to San Salvador with the jeep emitting the explosive gun-shot like sounds. Because you never know who is going to shoot back.

A 1978 taxi station wagon passes us. A few minutes later, the driver reappears to ask us how we are doing. In the rain, he and Don Jaime spend 1 and ½ hours attempting to fix the vehicle. Interspersed are multiple attempts at driving while the taxi driver follows us closely behind to observe whether the car is fixed. It's just one little automotive part that is missing, Jaime and the taxi driver deduce. Finally, around 5:30 PM, Jaime and the cab driver venture off together in the taxi to purchase the needed part. Margarita and I wait in the jeep, which hugs the shoulder of this rain-slicked road. Don Jaime forgot to take the keys. Margarita does not want them "because anyone could pull over and steal the car."

She would rather be able to honestly say to a thief, “I don’t know where the keys are. The driver has them.”

Margarita takes the keys out of the ignition and hides them deep in the glove box. Yet besides this protective measure, she exhibits not an ounce of fear. “Liz, I very much believe in God.” With her stories, she confirms what I have been suspecting about the Salvadoran people—it is their belief in god that allows them to transcend the war, and the continual poverty.

Margarita tells me about how, during her childhood, her father was a fugitive. He used to drink and get into fights. One time, he and his brother fought with a man and almost killed him. As a result, Margarita’s uncle was jailed. Her father, however, was tried and found to be innocent. Nevertheless, as these were years leading up to the war, the authorities would frequently come to the family’s house looking for her father. Eventually, he stopped sleeping at home. Once, when Margarita was 11-years-old, the police were chasing her father, firing shots into the night. She ran after them. “Why are you shooting at my Dad?” she had indignantly asked the cops. They responded by threatening, “ We will come to the house with tortillas if we have to,” meaning that they would stay as long as necessary to capture him. From there, according to Margarita, the only logical next move in life was for her to join the *guerrilla*.

Being in Chalate, where Margarita spent most of her war years, fills her with memories. In Teocinte, we had walked past a man, a fellow *guerrillero*, whom she remembered

from the war. “You are far from your land,” she had told him upon greeting him for the first time in years.

In the parked jeep, in the rain, Margarita tells me about her relationship with God. “In the war, I would always make a small cross out of sticks wherever I slept. That simple act helped me to feel safer. It gave me the peace to sleep. But there were difficult moments when I doubted God, and blamed him. The father of my firstborn was also a *guerrillero*. It was 1986. I took our child to him and after seeing him, became pregnant with my second daughter. Then he was murdered. I was devastated. We had shared so much together. We had so much in common. Both of our families had been murdered. I doubted a God that would make such pain... Now I know that I will never understand the mind of God. He does things for reasons that we can not understand.”

At around 7 PM, the jeep is attached to the taxi, which tows us four miles to a nearby Texaco. We have to go slowly though, because the brakes barely work and we are traversing a wet slope. “The children of God are always taken care of,” the taxi driver tells us. At 9 PM, I am home.

24 June 2005

Friday: Claudia and Jacinta’s *reencuentro*

I wake up after a long day. There is no running water in the house! There is barely enough water in the barrel for a rinse, so my pesticide hair-do will have to stay.

Sancho barely has a chance to tell me that there is going to be a *reencuentro* today at Pro-Búsqueda. It was planned yesterday, while I was in Chalate. Father Jon walks over to Sancho and me. Time is limited because Claudia, the daughter, was expected to have already arrived. I assume that it is because of the time limitation that the Father speaks candidly in my presence. “Sancho,” he says, “tell the mother to say that she gave Claudia up for adoption because she did not have the resources to care for her and that she wanted the best for her. What we are saying is true. The girl has no need to know that she is the result of a rape.” Sancho asks me to be present at the *reencuentro* for support, specifically to help with translation. These exchanges happen from 8:30 to 8:33 AM. At 8:33, the family arrives.

Two Caucasian physicians from New Hampshire accompany Claudia, their adopted daughter, a radiant 14-year-old who awaits a *reencuentro* with her biological mother. Claudia, tearing in anticipation of the meeting, mentions her fear that her birth mother will not want to meet her. She saw a photograph of her birth mother last night for the first time and “cried lots.” Sancho, Claudia, and I wait in the stale room for Jacinta, Claudia’s biological mother.

Jacinta arrives and both women cry as they reach their arms draw each other in. Their embrace: so much kissing and crying into each other’s hair, shoulders; their feet far apart; their waists far apart; but they embrace chest to chest, cheek to cheek. Crying. “My girl.

My pretty girl,” Jacinta coos as they hug. They walk each other over to the plastic chairs in Pro-Búsqueda’s meeting room, still in half-embrace. Mother and daughter sit down.

Claudia’s hand is on her mother’s shoulder as they speak to each other with the assistance of translators (Sancho and myself). Tears flood out of Claudia. Her words, barely audible, come out as a squeaks above her sobs. I am awed by Claudia’s strength, clarity, self-confidence, and compassion. “I understand why you gave me up for adoption. I know that it was very difficult to do. And I love you for it because I am happy. I am happy where I am.” Wow, she is 14.

Jacinta turns to me to translate. “Every Christmas I would think of you. My little boy—you have a brother, he is 8 years old—he would ask me, ‘Mommy, why are you sad?’ and I would say, ‘I am thinking of someone I love’.”

Claudia responds by confessing, “Every night before I went to sleep, I would think of you. I always wondered what you looked like. Every night before going to sleep, I would try to imagine what you look like.”

“Every morning when I am alone cleaning the home,” Jacinta reveals, “I think of you. I ask God to please keep you safe, to make you a person with a good heart, and an educated person.”

Jacinta begins the inevitable apology. “I am sorry. I didn’t have the resources to take care of you. If I had the resources then that I have now, I never would have made that decision. Please forgive me. Please forgive me.”

“I understand. I forgive you.” Claudia’s words are whole-hearted and sincere. Jacinta still apologizes again. Claudia repeats her brave words—that she is grateful to her (biological) mother since it is because of her that she feels happy, happy in her life in New Hampshire.

Also in the room with us is Jacinta’s three-year-old daughter, Celina, who sits on Jacinta’s lap. “Celina, she is your sister,” Jacinta says, introducing the young child to Claudia. Celina’s big eyes stare up at Claudia and Claudia reaches her arm out to her youngest sister. Moments later, Jacinta’s husband, Claudia’s stepfather, enters the room. He supports the reunion of Claudia and Jacinta.

Now it is time for the families to meet. The two mothers hug. The gratitude they feel for each other is beyond words. (Both say to me at different points, “Tell her that I am so grateful I don’t have words to express how grateful I am.”) Claudia’s adoptive family returns to their hotel, allowing Claudia more private moments with Jacinta. Claudia will phone the hotel when she is ready to be picked up.

Now it’s time for her to get to know her biological mother. The mood is less intense now. The big emotional balloon has slowly let out air. But each moment is still

powerful. Claudia tells her mother about her life at home. “I wake up at 7 AM. School starts at 8 and I get home at 3 PM. I play basketball and field hockey.” Jacinta is elated to hear that Claudia is receiving an education.

Jacinta has to leave soon because otherwise, the 8-year-old, her husband reminds her, will be arriving at an empty house. So, we (Claudia, Sancho, the Pro-Búsqueda investigator Perla, Jacinta, Jacinta’s husband, their young daughter Celina, and I) all jump in Father Jon’s jeep to take Claudia to the fancy Hotel El Presidente and Jacinta’s family back to their home.

On the ride to the hotel, Jacinta tells Claudia about how she chose her name. “At least I was able to give her that,” Jacinta remarks.

“But that’s not my name,” Claudia, who I learn goes by Monica in the U.S., tells me. I can’t bring myself to translate this remark to Jacinta.

Claudia describes the beach house where she spends weekends during the summer. With a raise of her eyebrows, wide eyes, and a smile, Jacinta indicates to Claudia that she is impressed. From the corner of her mouth Jacinta quietly says to me, “I never would have been able to give her that.” She adds, “We live in a neighborhood where there are murders at night.”

Instead of translating directly as I had been doing all morning, I say, “Would you like me to tell her that?”

“No. Better not.”

Clash of families, class, and culture at the hotel—even I feel out of place in this U.S.-like display of affluence. The Salvadorans (Jacinta and her family plus three of us from Pro-Búsqueda) wait uncomfortably in the lobby while Claudia finds her adoptive parents. Claudia has two older siblings, Salvadorans by birth, who also hope to meet their birth mother someday. Claudia is the lucky one. Her adoptive parents registered the three siblings’ cases at the start of their family trip to El Salvador and within three days, Pro-Búsqueda located Claudia’s mother by tracing adoption records. The other sibling’s cases remain unresolved. Claudia’s adoptive brother and sister did not attend this morning’s *reencuentro* because they were “sleeping at the hotel.” Later, Amanda, Claudia’s adoptive mother, privately admits to me that the siblings did not attend because “they were jealous.”

Claudia is elated to present her biological mother to her older brother and sister. Her lean, coffee-colored sister fights against tight lips, forcing a passably polite smile as she extends her hand to meet Jacinta’s. “The siblings look like they are from Usulután,” Perla, the Pro-Búsqueda investigator, later comments.

We pose for photographs in the lobby of Hotel El Presidente. Do we want to stay for lunch? No, we must be leaving shortly because Jacinta must get home to her little boy, who will be arriving from school any minute.

Will Claudia and Jacinta see each other again? Claudia and her family will leave El Salvador early tomorrow morning. I get caught in the middle, negotiating between the two families to work out a meeting for this afternoon. I wade through a bog of logistics, tension, and personal and cultural barriers: Jacinta feels that she cannot make the decision to see Claudia again in front of her husband (she only says yes to a second visit when he steps away to run after Celina); Amanda is expecting company in the afternoon; and Jacinta would want to be home by 6 PM because her neighborhood is dangerous. The time already nears noon. Claudia wants to meet her brother. Amanda will pay for the taxi. Does Jacinta feel comfortable accepting? The parties agree to meet at 3 PM in the lobby. What a relief! Celina will stay home with her father and Jacinta will come to the hotel with the 8-year-old. Narrowly resolved; I had an audience of 12 intensely invested people standing by as I teased that deal out.

We drive Jacinta to her home. As we near her house, I ask, “Jacinta, have you thought about what you are going to tell your son?” He has no idea about Claudia. In fact, Jacinta’s husband only found out about Claudia’s existence two days ago, when Yessenia, the office manager at Pro-Búsqueda, contacted Jacinta. Jacinta initially denied being the mother. Lucio perceived her denial as a cover up of the truth so he went to visit her the next day (yesterday) in person. Jacinta confessed to Lucio to having given a child

up for adoption and reluctantly agreed to meet Claudia. Just as Claudia had expressed during the early moments of reunion, she too feared rejection.

Jacinta is not sure what she will tell her son. In fact, she is not sure *if* she is going to tell her son at all. “Little boys talk,” she explains. She lives nearby to her in-laws and they do not know about Claudia. Before two days ago, Jacinta’s sister was the only person in whom Jacinta had confided that she put a child up for adoption. Jacinta had been promised that Claudia would go to good hands. So she kept her pregnancy a secret and after fifteen years wouldn’t want her son to divulge that secret. “Maybe I can bring him (my son) to the hotel and tell him that Claudia is a cousin,” she skeptically proposes.

As Jacinta climbs out of the jeep, Sancho guides her with words that are few but firm, clear and honest. “You have to tell your son the truth. You can tell him the truth at your own pace. Little by little, with the years, he will come to understand it better. But if you bring him to the hotel today, he has to know the truth now.”

Oooph. We drive away.

Perla, Sancho, and I place our bets. Do you think she will bring the boy to the hotel? I want to say yes. I believe in Jacinta, she has been incredibly brave in these three days, but doubt fills me. All three of us cast our prediction that the brother will not be brought to the hotel.

We arrive at Pro-Búsqueda, give Father Jon back his jeep, and have lunch.

Upon returning from lunch I am sitting at my desk in the psychology office taking a breather. Eduardo comes into the office. “Sancho, the lady Sochil is here to see you.”

Sancho sighs. He is tired, too. Then he turns to me and says, “Now you will hear a Spanish that is difficult to understand.” He explains that this woman, mother of a *joven encontrado* speaks differently, perhaps because of her dentures coupled with a hearing deficit and other conditions.

Tiny, fragile Sochil enters the office. I have noticed her before at Pro-Búsqueda, and to be honest, I had thought that she was a beggar off the street. We shout so she that hears us. Sochil from Apopa wears a soiled, cotton flower dress and a flowered apron. Her hairstyle is shaved short on the top of her head and long and frail on the bottom. Her mental facilities do not seem completely intact.

“Liz, would you be willing to call Charles, Sochil’s son?” Sancho asks me. “He lives in Michigan. They send money to maintain his mother but the money has dried out.”

“Yes.” Sancho outlines that the phone call has three objectives: to find out about Sochil’s “quota,” to allow Sochil an opportunity to hear Charles’s (Carlos’s) voice, and to find out how Charles is doing since she has not heard from him lately.

From Eduardo's desk in the foyer, I place the phone call to Charles Eden in Michigan.

"Hi, is Charles there?" A 100% American woman answers. She is a little guarded. "Is this Nancy (Charles's adoptive mom)?"

"Y-e-e-s-s-s-s," she draws out in more of a question than a response.

"Hi, my name is Liz and I am calling from Asociación Pro-Búsqueda in San Salvador."

"Oh, hello," Nancy sings. "Yes, yes. I am so glad you called. How is Sohil? I was just thinking of her today. I hadn't sent her money in a while. How is she doing with that? I sent her \$200 at Christmas."

That was easy—Nancy will send a check for Sohil on Monday.

Nancy decides to elaborate on her family's relationship with Sohil. "Yes, we helped her with some other things—fixed her teeth, got her a bed." And then, "Charles will be so sorry that he missed her call. He would have loved to speak with her. Now, don't get Sohil's hopes up," Mrs. Eden continues, "but Charles is hoping to come to El Salvador next year. A delegation from our church goes every year."

"And how is Charles doing? Sohil wanted to know."

Nancy Eden gives me an update on Charles. He seems to have a full life with fatherhood, graduate school, sports, and teaching. “He has been very stressed out. This was a stressful year for him. He became very sick at winter. But don’t tell her that because it will make her worry. Just tell her that he’s fine.”

As the phone call is drawing to a close, Nancy expresses her gratitude for the call. She appreciates that she is able to communicate with me in English. Her closing words: “Tell Sochil that we love her. Give her a Big Hug. Tell her hello and that we think of her often. She is always in our prayers.”

I walk back into the psychology office. I tell Sancho, piece by piece, the update that Nancy Eden had given me and he relays it via shouts to a grateful Sochil.

At 5:15 PM, Lucio and I drive over to Claudia’s hotel to deliver photographs from this morning’s *reencuentro*. In the car, we talk about the process of writing one’s life story. Lucio asks me, “What was your favorite part of my story?”

I give my disclaimer, “I only read it once and that was in December. That was one, two...seven months ago. But I still remember some of your words. ‘This is the story of my father and how my father protected me’,” I recite. I then share a thought about his testimony, “I don’t remember if you said this in words or if I just gathered this impression from reading, but it seemed like when your father died you lost your will to live, your will to continue surviving during the war. It was as if you continued to

struggle to survive solely to obey your father because his last words to you were about this.”

“Yes,” Lucio calmly says. “He told me to get out. ‘Get out if you have a chance.’ And I didn’t right away. I wanted to stay and fight, and my brother said to me, ‘Dad asked you to leave. You told Dad that you would leave.’ So I did.”

“And what happened to your brother?” I ask what I instinctively know.

“He died in the war.”

We reach Hotel El Presidente. In the lobby, Lucio and I run into Claudia’s siblings. They direct us to their father who sits leisurely at a table beside the pool. He introduces me to the fat, rich, old Salvadoran adoption attorney. Lipstick marks the glass of juice that she sips from. I hand Dr. Jeffreys the CD with the digital photos and as we are saying goodbye, I happen to ask, “How was your afternoon?”

“It was nice. Jacinta came with her son and he swam in the pool.” I am delighted. Sancho, Perla, and I all lost the bet. “Claudia is saying goodbye to Jacinta now,” he mentions.

As Lucio and I walk towards the lobby, Amanda intercepts us. “Hello. Claudia knows you are here but she is in the room crying. She just wants to be alone.” Amanda and I

say our goodbyes, expressing mutual gratitude in speech and gestures. They have been so generous in loving the butterfly by setting it free—allowing Jacinta and Claudia to enjoy the *reencuentro*.

Lucio and I drive off. The workweek is over. “I have to buy a wedding present. I have to get one from me and one from Luzecita,” Lucio casually informs me. “The wedding starts at 6 PM.” The next thing I know, we are parked at some sort of supermarket-department store looking at picking out towels. He finds my suggestion of a picture frame to be funny. We poor people, he conveys, only give each other gifts that are useful. He settles on a set of glasses with a matching pitcher. “You are coming to the wedding,” he insists. “I already told Julia.” He has to tell me 10 times that I can attend the wedding because crashing a wedding is not generally appreciated in the U.S.

Rosita’s gigantic smile greets us. When I step out of the car, she puts confetti in my hand and sprinkles some in my hair. Julia dresses simply for the occasion. We stop in to pick up Luzecita who offers me clothes to change into. No thank you, I’ll just wear my own clothes even though Julia says they make me look pregnant. (Fortunately, I know the culture—it is my culture—and being called *gorda* [fat girl] or *flaca* [skinny girl] is not uncommon). The wedding celebration is excellent. 30 people are crammed into a one-room apartment sitting around a big table eating traditional turkey sandwiches. The bride still wears her make-up but is now in a T-shirt, which facilitates breastfeeding, I later notice. The sofas are covered in white polyester, and streamers and balloons adorn the vibrantly painted lime green wall. I am welcomed. Lucio and I step out to order me

pupusas because he knows I won't eat the turkey sandwich. While we wait in the *pupuseria* for the "best *pupusas* in El Salvador," I quietly listen while Lucio tells me about the physical and sexual abuse rampant in the orphanages that raised him.

The *pupusas* are ready. We return to the festive apartment, where I happily share my *pupusas* with Luzecita. That was why Lucio got one extra, Julia tells me, to account for the one he knew Luzecita would eat. The whole gang, Lucio, Julia, Luzecita, Pablito, and Rosita, drive me home. It's 10 PM.

25 June 2005

Saturday: Carmen's reencuentro

I am outside the gate of the *Residencial Santa Barbara*, waiting for Sancho who will take me to Morazan for Carmen's *reencuentro*.

I buckle my seatbelt and I, a little too garrulous for 5:15 AM, say, "Sancho, I know what the mantra is for today. Do you want to know what it is?"

"Yes."

"Little by little," I tell him. "That is what we have to keep in mind for today's *reencuentro*." It is going to be a tough day. Carmen is not thrilled about meeting her

biological family. She carries a lot of anger, hurt. Why do they look for me after all these years? What do they want from me?

“She will ask the hard questions,” Sancho tells me. “It will be opposite from the *reencuentro* that we attended yesterday.”

We pick up Carmen and her son in Soyapango. Carmen refuses to eat breakfast and her son doesn't eat either. “The car makes me nauseated,” she says. I would love for her to eat; I offer juice, bread, and crackers. We stop in San Miguel, to pick up Fidelia, Carmen's “*hermana de crianza* [sister from growing up].” We also drop off Carmen's son, who will be watched by Fidelia's family during the *reencuentro*.

Traversing those rocky, bumpy roads, we eventually reach the town where Filomena resides in Morazan. Little girls wearing dresses, young boys, and adults, all waiting on the dirt road, freeze in place as their eyes, full of curiosity, study us as we pull up. Carmen steps out of the jeep. I don't have time to put on my sandals because I don't want to miss this moment so I carry them in my hand. Just as I step around from the back of the jeep, I see Sancho with his hands on Filomena's shoulders. He guides her to where Carmen stands on the dirt road. “Carmen,” Sancho says, “I would like to introduce you to your mother, Filomena.” The two women, mother and daughter, look expectantly at one another; Carmen cries first. They stand still in a face off. Ismael puts one long arm around each and draws them into a three-person hug. Then he backs away and slowly brings the two women together into an embrace with each other. This is a dramatic

moment, pregnant with a cold and bitter hug. The hug appears natural and forced at the same time.

Carmen lets go of her mother and paces quickly towards the jeep to take refuge. “I want to go now. I want to go away from here,” she whimpers to Fidelia.

Fidelia responds firmly, “Just drink water, take a break. Everything will be okay.”

I cross through the thick patch of bamboo leading to Filomena’s house. I am glad to see that Samy was able to get the day off from work. One day less of exposure to pesticides and more importantly, he is here to welcome his sister.

It is an uncomfortable, tense atmosphere. The air is hot, the ground is wet, there are many flies, nowhere to sit, and I am surrounded by people who are hurting.

I meet Carmen’s aunt. “I am the oldest sister. I was with Carmen grinding corn when she had the accident to her ear by the grenade.” The aunt is proud yet shy. Yes, Carmen does have a scar, I noticed on the ride over. It looks like the bottom of her ear lobe was cut off and sewed back on. The scar extends superficially across her lower ear lobe and over her mandible.

Uncomfortable, Sancho quietly admits in my ear, “I don’t know what to do.”

“How about taking mother and daughter on a walk,” I suggest.

Sancho follows my suggestion. “Daughter, forgive me. Forgive me.” This is the topic refrain of the walk, Sancho later tells me.

I am happy to converse with 17-year-old Samy. He is watching and listening intently, but not talking much.

We are told that Carmen looks a lot like her older sister. Her sister is sick today and could not make the one-hour walk to the *reencuentro*. So Ismael set out in the jeep with Don Orlando, yes Don Orlando, the “drunk” uncle received an invitation and an apology from his sister. In Filomena’s eyes, he was directly implicated in the disappearance of Carmen. And now he is the hero who has brought Carmen home. This is a beautiful moment of reconciliation between brother and sister.

Minutes after Ismael and Don Orlando’s departure to pick up Carmen’s older sister, she strolls in wearing a lavender shirt, white skirt, a tight ponytail, and a bright smile. Of course she is Carmen’s sister. They look so much alike! She doesn’t appear ill to me. Oh well, Ismael and Don Orlando will return soon.

Remember the timid woman with the analgesic leaf on her head to guard from pains? The Filomena of Wednesday is not the Filomena of today. This woman is tough. She wears a bright orange t-shirt, a trendy flower skirt, her hair is gelled back in a tight

ponytail, and there is a showy gold chain around her neck. She has built of fortress around herself today. Her shield is a façade of strength. Or is this true strength? Gone is the gentle, shy *campesina* I met on Wednesday. Who is the real Filomena? I don't know, but I can see that meeting her daughter again restored a tremendous sense of life back into this woman. There are not words sufficient to express, but I will say that Filomena exhibits one of the most amazing transformations of human persona that I have ever witnessed.

Face to face at the side, along the margins of the house, Carmen meets her sister. Filomena stands beside me watching. The way her hands now spread over her belly insinuates that this tough woman is breaking with pain on the inside. I put a hand on her back and soothingly pat her. "Don't you want to hug your two daughters?" I gently ask Filomena. In tears, she nods. She reaches her arms around her girls. When was the last time that Filomena held her two daughters in her arms? Will it ever happen again? I encourage the aunt who stands idly by to join the group. She had told me that she pained a lot over the years.

I leave them and walk past the house. The entrance is decorated by corn stalks. Inside, a string of balloons and poinsettia-patterned decorative foil adorn the walls. A table with tablecloth has been placed in the corner, where Samy's bed had been on Wednesday. The home is dimly lit by the morning sunlight that creeps in through the open door. There is no electricity and there are no windows.

I speak with Don Orlando. Today is a happy day, also a sad one for him. Two of his daughters were also disappeared. Will he ever have a *reencuentro* with them?

It is still Tense.

A 30-step jaunt past the chickens and mango trees leads me to Ismael, whom I find in the home of Filomena's niece. Happy to hear laughter, I enter the home. Carmen and Filomena are inside, too. They are telling the story of Carmen's disappearance. Ismael is the emcee of the conversation and he keeps the family and friends laughing. He mentions something about the arrival of the prodigal son, which I think is a reference to Carmen's return.

I exit the home and I find Samy and Fidelia silently standing just outside the house, both keenly listening to the fateful story that Ismael helps the family reconstruct. I ask Samy why he isn't inside and encourage him to be with his family at this precious moment. Just as Samy walks in, I hear Ismael ask Filomena, "And you were pregnant with Samy when you lost Carmen?" Carmen wears a pained smile.

Meanwhile, still outside, Fidelia, chunky, smiley, fidgeting with a water bottle, leans in to me and to Carmen's aunt. "Carmen has told some of her story to Pro-Búsqueda," she convincingly says, "but that is just the beginning. She has so much more to tell. She has suffered so much."

Someone has called us to lunch. I linger outside with Sancho, letting the honored friends and family file into Filomena's home first. By the time I walk in, all have plates of rice and chicken, and two tortillas in hand, but no one is eating.

At a the table for Carmen's family sit Carmen's sister, her mother, Carmen, an empty chair, Samy, empty space but no chair, and Fidelia.

Ismael, taking note that no one is eating, communicates "uncomfortable" to Sancho with his eyes, wordlessly asking his colleague what to do to break the tension, to get people to start eating. Sancho responds with an "I don't know" shrug. Then I see Ismael's eyes change; he has an idea. Ismael addresses Filomena, "Filomena this is your home. Maybe you want to lead us in a prayer. You are the head of the house."

Filomena nods obsequiously.

"Maybe you want to us to stand or on our knees, however you like," Ismael prompts.

"On our knees," Filomena replies.

Filomena's incantation lasts 15 minutes. 40 knees kneel on the damp floor of her home. Her voice has a sing-like quality. The prayer is spontaneous. "I thank you, God, for bringing her back to me. I thank you for my family... And may your blessings enter my brother...I thank you Father. Your love is great. Your love is great." There is really no

way to capture Filomena's mystical expression of joy. Near the end of the prayer, she says, "Thank you, Jesus, for entering my body." She really does seem possessed, an instrument of divinity. This is my humble impression, as my knees kiss the mud floor: Filomena's transformation is complete.

We eat. The family at the table laps up a bountiful chicken soup. 20 additional guests, some seated in plastic chairs that are scattered throughout the room, out the doorway, and some standing, nibble at rice and tortilla served on disposable plates. We all eat in silence.

Despite Filomena's prayer, the home is still dark in atmosphere. Does Carmen have any photos of her son? She has one. Ismael lends a flashlight and the photo is passed around. SILENCE. I have such a hard time with the SILENCE because it is a heavy silence. No one talks. Sancho suggests that maybe the family could present the guests to Carmen. It was a brave comment but the SILENCE persists. This SILENCE carries years of misunderstanding and fear. 30 people sitting in a room for a party, everyone looking at each other, by now they're not eating anymore; just silence. 5 minutes of SILENCE, no one wanting to talk. I can't resist picking up on Sancho's suggestion. I realize that I may be overstepping my role as an observer, but I have grown to care too much about this case. And a little push could go a long way, I reason. I cut through the no talking to say, "Well, I would like to know the names of everyone in this room." I am simply repeating what Sancho had said in his own way, and it works. A number of guests introduce

themselves as “Sisters in Christ” of Filomena. Others are cousins, nieces, nephews of Carmen, and her aunt, uncle, brother, and sister shyly present themselves as well.

Now Ismael brings up the idea of singing. People timidly smile. Don Orlando claims he cannot remember the words to any songs. So, Ismael sings, and then requests that I join him for a Cuban song, which we sing briefly together. “Sing, my sister,” Carmen’s aunt sweetly says to Filomena. Filomena sings a religious hymn. There is strength and faith in her wiry, weaving, enchanting, and sometimes piercing voice. One call tell that this singer is self-taught. Her voice is rugged and natural like the hills of Morazan. Filomena announces that she will sing another song.

Carmen has been smiling sparingly. She motions to get out of the house and quietly asks Fidelia to join her. They confer outside of Filomena’s home. “I want to go,” she tells her friend. Out of here. “Now.” We had arrived at 10 AM and now it is 2 PM, exactly the time we had planned to leave. Carmen has satisfied her commitment and does not want to stay a moment extra. They tell Ismael that they want to leave.

“Okay,” Ismael replies, “but you have to say goodbye.”

Carmen shrinks and then begrudgingly agrees. “Okay, I will stay for a bit more then.”

Afternoon sun has come and there is light in the house now. I spend a few moments enjoying solitude in the sun’s warming rays. Then I walk slowly into the cave-like

house. Fidelia stands at Carmen's side. Carmen addresses her family, "If you want to contact me then you can do so through..." her voice slows and this is difficult for her to say. "You can reach me through Pro-Búsqueda."

"But do you have a telephone number that we can call?" Don Orlando asks, perplexed.

"Through Pro-Búsqueda," Carmen repeats, staring into the ground. Her aunt asks again for a phone number. Carmen gives the same answer.

The aunt, uncle, and mother, surprised, protest together. "Can't we have a phone number? Isn't there a number where we can reach you?" To me, this is the most heartbreaking moment of the day.

"Thank you for everything," Carmen says, poised by the door for her exit.

Don Orlando, the senior man in the family, stands to display gratitude and bid farewell. After his brief speech, Filomena Ramirez stands as well. Her speech, slightly warmer than polite, expresses gratitude, but I do not feel that it conveys the full depth of her motherly love.

The moment that Carmen has been yearning for, the pulling away of the jeep, finally arrives.

I fall asleep in the back of the jeep. I wake up when we pull into San Miguel. Carmen and Fidelia come around to the back door to say goodbye. Half asleep, I extend my hand.

Driving. We see a fatal car accident on our way home.

Ismael, Sancho, and I discuss our marvel at Filomena's transformation. Ismael shares that this is the third time he meets her and that the previous two times she was the timid, sweet *campesina*. We also talk about how Carmen refused to give her phone number. Ismael interprets, "I think it was her sister (Fidelia) influencing her. She's afraid to lose Carmen." He then says, "I am sure that when the corn is ripe in the cornfields they will invite Carmen to eat tamales, tortilla, and *atol*. I am sure that they will be calling Pro-Búsqueda to invite her."

Now Ismael reveals a final piece of Carmen's story. "It is because of the older sister that Carmen was lost. The sister was clinging to Filomena saying, 'Mommy, don't leave me. Mommy don't leave me' and Filomena could only carry one of them so she left Carmen."

"Do you think that the sister feels shame?" I ask.

"Yes" says Ismael, commenting that he observed a feeling of repentance in the sister.

When we reach Pro-Búsqueda, I run into Lucio who has just come in from collecting DNA in the countryside. He gives me a ride home. I'm exhausted and feel an insidious flu beginning in me.

At dinner, I raise with Reina the issue of Pro-Búsqueda using *reencuentros* to popularize its cause. Did I really have a right to witness Carmen's *reencuentro*? Why had Father Jon invited me to attend? Perhaps I had intervened too much but even if I had been a perfect observer, I would still question the ethics of my presence today. Why do foreigners need to see *reencuentros* to be stirred to care about the human consequences of war? Why videotape and show photos of these sacred events? Why are the Canadian journalists willing to pay for a *joven encontrada*'s plane ticket from Kentucky to El Salvador only if they can film the *reencuentro*? Did I really have the right to share this moment with Filomena, Carmen, Samy, and Don Orlando?

In our conversation, Reina and I also talk more generally about the *jovenes encontrados* and the different types of disappearances. "The forced disappearances are the most moving *reencuentros*," she tells me. I realize then that it's important to problematize the term *jovenes encontrados*. A minority of the *jovenes* were placed in orphanages but never lost touch with their families while others were separated from their families at gunpoint, not even knowing who lived or died. I wonder about the utility of this term in promoting healing. I see that it has been useful for helping people to feel united in a common identity. But does it also encourage a lifelong self-victimization that may actually be unproductive for the *jovenes encontrados*?

What does being a *joven encontrada* mean to Carmen? How might the *reencuentro* with her mother alter Carmen's life? Changes far less visible than the scar that zig-zags across Carmen's ear likely await her. What will they be?

CHAPTER 5—Mamá Ofelia

26 June 2005

Sunday: Suchitoto with Mamá Ofelia

Today I will accompany Margarita and Lucio on a DNA collection trip to Suchitoto. It's a special treat that Ofelia will join us; she had asked to come along on our visit to her native land.

At 6:45 AM, Lucio picks me up. We meet Margarita at Pro-Búsqueda, where we grab the DNA collection kit and switch to the Pro-Búsqueda jeep. We stop for gas, and while Lucio fills the tank, a poignant song, *Plegaria a Un Labrador* [Supplication to a Farmer], by Victor Jara, comes on the radio station of the UCA. "I love this song," I casually mention.

Margarita turns up the volume. "Oh, this song brings back memories. We were burying a *compañera*, we had just lifted her up by her arms, and somebody had a radio. This song was playing."

"Levantate y mírate las manos

Para crecer estréchala a tu hermano

Juntos iremos unidos en la sangre

Hoy es el tiempo que puede ser mañana"

[Arise and look at your hands

To grow extend them to your brother
Together we go united in blood
Today is the time that can be tomorrow]

Margarita's face has turned noticeably paler. When the song finishes I say, "Margarita, to cheer you up, look at the motorcycle cowboy over there." All dressed in leather, stout, with bullhorns adorning the handlebars of his motorcycle, the cowboy brings a smile and returns the color to Margarita's face.

We pull over at a bus stop in Apopa where Ofelia climbs into the jeep.

We turn off the main highway and cross over a steel bridge, signifying our arrival at the flat, heavily farmed terrain of Suchitoto. Ofelia, contented in the back seat, narrates local legends about this bridge.

We reach the first house on today's DNA collection schedule. A blind, 80-year-old woman is led by her 30-year-old grandson to the gate to receive us. She is the paternal grandmother of a disappeared child. Lucio and Margarita patiently interview her. "How tall was your grandson when he disappeared?" Margarita asks, filling out the forms necessary to corroborate DNA evidence. She does not remember, but his head reached just below her waist, she tells Margarita and Lucio. The *abuelita* stands placing a hand on her leg, as Margarita measures the distance from ground to hand, 96 cm. The *abuelita*

tells her story of the war: of running from bombs, of surviving massacres, of who she lost, and of who is still alive. Now she eats a *mamey* brought by her niece. Since she is blind she cannot see the flies landing on her fruit; Lucio and Margarita take turns swatting them away.

Lucio and Margarita set off to collect a DNA sample from the *abuelita's* daughter, who lives nearby. "Don't talk to her about the war. It makes her very sick," the *abuelita* warns.

Mama Ofelia and I stay to keep the *abuelita* company. We are in the community La Mora and Ofelia is from Palo Grande, but the *abuelita* and Ofelia know people in common. They talk about mutual acquaintances, naming lost friends, lost distant relatives. "Who survived (the war)?" the two women ask each other.

My ears perk up when I hear Mama Ofelia talk about existential concepts. "...The armed conflict was very, very difficult. And who are the ones that suffered? We are the ones that suffer the most. And the others are still in power. But what is most important is that we have a clean conscience. That is most important of all." Then Ofelia talks about her experiences during the war. About hiding with five children in the *tatus*. Someone had given her candy, one piece for each child, so she gave that to them. She fed the *zipotes* [young ones] sugar water so that they would survive. They would "walk all night, sleep on the path standing up, each with their back-packs on."

Then the inevitable—Ofelia remembers the children she lost during the war. Rogelio died as a *guerrillero* while protecting civilians during a *guinda*.

Finally, reserving the hardest for last, she mentions her missing boys. “Two children were disappeared. They are in Italy now. I have had contact with one of them, Inocencio. I do not know where the other is. I spoke with Inocencio on the telephone last year.” She explains the strain of the relationship for her and Dora.

The *abuelita*’s niece, who has joined us on the patio, does not understand the restrictions on the relationship. “Don’t you write him letters?” the niece asks.

“I cannot,” Mama Ofelia responds, resigned, sad. “It causes him problems with his family. He told an Italian friend to tell us that we cannot be sending him letters.”

The niece’s questions persist. “Can’t you mail the letters to a different address?”

Mama Ofelia is not interested in a clandestine relationship. She tightly explains, “We have to wait.” After a pause—“I hope to see him once before I die.”

Shortly after this exchange, Margarita and Lucio return from visiting the *abuelita*’s daughter. As we drive along the open fields of Suchitoto, I am observing to be true something that Ofelia had mentioned early that morning—there is no place to hide. In these dry plains, trees and shrubs are sparse. I mention my observation aloud. We are

driving past small patches of chest-high cornfields. Ofelia remembers, “Yes, there was no place to hide. Sometimes the people would hide in the cornfields. The soldiers would burn the fields to get the people out.” Looking into the open fields, the mountains surrounding us, and hearing this, Margarita also shares memories about being a *guerrilla* in this area. Although she spent the majority of her time in Chalate, she also fought in Suchitoto.

House 2. The owner of this home, spacious and slightly luxurious for this isolated location in the countryside, sits on the porch with a razor, a mirror, and a small bucket of water. He is a thin elderly man whose shirt is worn thin. Wrinkles on his face promise that he has many stories to tell. I enjoy listening to the old man. “I was a *guerrillero* and I am proud of it,” he declares. After we collect the DNA sample, the family kindly allows us to gather an armful of the green mangoes that copiously dangle from their trees.

We stop by the meager home of Ofelia’s 94-year-old uncle to drop off crackers and juice. This skinny skinny man lives just with his 23-year-old granddaughter; the mother of the young lady was murdered years ago. I find myself contemplating “Fate” and studying the anatomy of his shoulder because his bones are so prominent.

Parents of a *joven encontrado* inhabit the third house we visit. When she sees the Pro-Búsqueda jeep pull up, the mother jovially rises from the hammock on the porch to motion us in; the father smiles, waves, and trots to the car. Parents whose children have

been found by Pro-Búsqueda display a sense of indebtedness towards the organization; with other families trust is gained slowly.

Margarita and Lucio conduct the interview. I play with the two grandchildren. They teach me how to manually grind corn and we look at worms, chickens scrambling in a yard, and a kitten sleeping in a wheelbarrow. The little boy wants to be a lawyer. His sister aspires to be a secretary. “Follow your dreams,” I tell them as I am leaving. The girl throws her arms around my waist for a hug.

We go to a green-painted house where we meet a man with a *sombrero*, the uncle of a disappeared child. During the course of the interview, which Margarita conducts, he brings out a photo album to show us an image of his assassinated sister. In the meantime, Ofelia holds my hand, pulling me along as she leads me through his garden, pointing out medicinal plants and herbs we can eat. She tells me to take a bite of the chili that grows near the house. It burns! She shows me a fruit whose rind when dried is used as a spoon to serve beans. Ofelia has a habit of picking plants and then asking for permission. The deliciously, perfumed *paraiso* flowers that we have picked are abundant in our hands when we ask the man for permission to take them. He responds graciously that of course we can, and offers Ofelia one of the dried rinds for scooping beans.

While Ofelia and I play in the garden, I ask her about her son Rogelio, about his death and how that affected her. “Did you send him into the *guerrilla* or did he choose to go?”

“No, Liz. At that time we did not have a choice. They took him,” she solemnly replies.

“How often do you think about him?” I want to know, seeking to quantify something I cannot comprehend.

“About twice a day,” she says, shaking her head as if discouraging a fly from landing in her hair.

Ofelia tells me about the three romances in her life. The father of most of her children (Dora’s dad) died in the war. She reveals: “I wanted an illusion of safety so I found someone else during the war. But I was of the ERP (a faction of the FMLN) and he was not. So we could not talk to each other. Sometimes we would pass each other in the night and I knew he was there but we could not talk to each other. I was so disillusioned. Since then I have had no more.” Then, with a mother’s worried resignation, she talks about Dora, about how she had one boyfriend back in college, 10 years ago, and remains quite reserved with regards to her love life.

Our own way back to the capital, Lucio announces, “Liz, you are going to get to see downtown San Salvador.” The first historic site he and Margarita point out: the location of a massacre.

“Here is where the workers are on the hunger strike,” Lucio says as we drive past a row of cots and tents pitched at the entrance to San Salvador’s largest cathedral. Banners

read: *President Saca, our jobs and our lives are in your hands*. These strikers have been fasting for over a month.

We drop Margarita off at the bus station. As we navigate chaotic traffic, past the multitude of street vendors, child beggars, and litter, Lucio says, sounding ashamed, “There is a lot of disorder.” His eyes peer over to catch my impressions of downtown San Salvador. He seems to know some of the street kids; at the very least he knows the scene. He explains that they have a ringleader who sends the kids to beg. At the end of the day they reunite, divide the money, the leader takes a big cut, and they all buy drugs.

As we near the university, “Here was another massacre,” my tour guide relates. “In 1976. Many students were killed that day.”

He offers to show me Cuscatlan Park. “There is a memorial here, a wall with the names of people who died during the war.” Parking the car, Lucio says, “I suppose you don’t want to get out because it’s raining.”

My seatbelt is already half off. “I do.”

Wow. I am struck. Listed by year are the names of civilians who were assassinated during the war. Also by year are the names of the disappeared. Lucio relates that he assisted with the collection of the names for this wall. I walk the 60-foot length of the wall, and then plant my feet to start reading names. I am surprised to find the first

portion of the wall dedicated to the *jovenes encontrados*. Immediately my eyes jump to Lucio's name. We look at it. This is the first time he is seeing his name on the wall. I find Julia's name. And Agustin's. And Agustin's brother, Alfredo. I read Yanira's name—Maria del Carmen. We look together for Luzecita's name. He points out *el Chino's*. What about Eduardo's? What is his last name? Is that Pedro?

I am still reflecting on what it means to be standing next to one of the few names of a living person on this wall, which is mostly a memorial to the dead. I point that out to Lucio—there are so few names of survivors on this wall—he is one of them.

In the panel titled “1985” I look for the name of Lucio's father. Lucio discourages me. “It will take too long.” I can tell that he does not want to find the name today.

In the evening, comfortable at home, Reina talks to me about Pedro, the *joven encontrado* who lives at Pro-Búsqueda. I had already heard how his family had been forced by the FMLN to abandon him and about his involvement with drugs and gangs. He was treated as a slave by his foster family and ran away at age 7. “He told me,” Reina divulges, “that ‘I used to like to see blood run’ because of how he was beaten to the point of bleeding when he was a child. It [gang violence] was like a revenge.” She continues, “And he raped young women. He had to do it as part of the gang. Pedro has so much story to tell. I helped him write out his life story. It's a little book, but it only tells a part of it.”

Mark calls to interrupt our conversation. I am still feeling a little disturbed from hearing about Pedro when I lie in the bed and close my eyes to sleep.

27 June 2005

Monday: Rest

I take this Monday to slow down. I enjoy writing, hand-washing clothes, reading, and buying yummy tropical fruits from Felipa of Sonsonate.

28 June 2005

Tuesday: Mama Ofelia's wound, Phoning Violeta, & Drinking Atol

Today, the entire team at Pro-Búsqueda attends an all day workshop led by the organization's two human rights attorneys. The workshop aims to familiarize employees with the sentence of the Interamerican Court of Human Rights in favor of the *hermanas Serrano Cruz*. It is intended to empower them to teach community members about the rights of the disappeared.

During our lunch break, I find myself in the kitchen when Ofelia walks in. I ask her if she knows any herbs for curing nail fungus. Yes, there is a tree bark she recommends, and the tree grows at her house. She will bring some tomorrow. We sit. I thrive in her loving presence. I have identified her as a healer. "Ofelia, how did you gain so much wisdom about plants? Who taught you?"

“Life. When one is poor she cures herself with plants. And I observed how people treated the wounded during the war.”

Then she winds her way into another story. “And once—No, this I don't like to tell.” Her eyes close as if to hide from pain. She looks to the corner of the kitchen, above the drying dishes, and then continues despite her hesitation. “Once my son was shot in the leg. You remember the one that I told you about that *andaba con la masa* [took civilians to safety]?” I nod. “He came to me with his wound and said ‘Mommy, you have to cure me. Mommy, you have to help me.’ There was a big hole in his leg, a big hole. So I did. I cured him.”

Dora walks into the kitchen, stands beside her mother, and listens.

“Did you get the bullet out?” I ask.

“No. They had already gotten it. I did not get the bullet out. But they left a big hole and I healed him. And then. Sent him. To Die. Over there, up in those hills that I showed you.”

To those hills that hang above Suchitoto.

“Who are you talking about?” Dora asks, with forehead wrinkles that disapprove.

“Rogelio,” Ofelia answers.

“I don’t remember. I don't remember a lot. That worries me.”

“You were little,” Ofelia consoles.

“Not so little to not remember.” And then they tell me how thin Dora was. Bones. And that Dora will bring me a photograph of herself from during the war.

When Dora leaves the kitchen, Ofelia tells me that she herself has always looked for ways of healing, opportunities to talk about the war. She was attended to by the psychologists at Pro-Búsqueda. Dora is more reserved. “What is happening with Inocencio really makes her sad,” Ofelia confides. “She had written him a letter on his birthday, happy, telling him when his birthday is. Inocencio was upset with this and conveyed via Stefano to not send cards again because it caused Inocencio problems (with his adoptive parents). We have to understand that he has parents there too. I tell Dora, ‘it hurts me too, but we have to give this time’.”

Traveling down the hall I run into Sancho, who requests that I telephone Violeta. “You were so excellent with Charles Eden’s mother. So I waited for you to call.” Violeta is a *joven encontrada* who has the opportunity to come to El Salvador for a *reencuentro*. During the early years of the civil war, the military assassinated Violeta’s mother and

then the four children, Violeta and three siblings, disappeared. Violeta, who lives in Kentucky, will be reunited with her father and two brothers who reside in El Salvador if she chooses to come.

In preparation for the phone call, Sancho and I review the concerns that Violeta had expressed via email about coming to El Salvador and meeting her family. She worries about traveling by herself in El Salvador, cost of the trip, language barriers, and conveys that she feels rushed. Maybe she could see photographs or write letters with her family first, I think to myself. I want to be careful and address Violeta's apprehensions without making her feel like I have studied her case.

I phone Violeta at work. We had been waiting to receive permission to telephone but she had not responded to email, so I just went ahead and called. "Hi Violeta. My name is Liz. I am a volunteer at Asociación Pro-Búsqueda and I am calling you from San Salvador." She is hesitant, resists the conversation. Travel to El Salvador? "Yes, it's cheap here. I spend about \$15 a day." I add, "I am also a woman traveling by myself and I can talk to you about that. Maybe you can stay in the home where I am staying." Then I get to the heart of the phone call—how she feels about joining her family for a reunion this summer.

"A *reencuentro* in July?" Outrage. "That is short notice," she angrily says.

“Well, of course you can come whenever you want and I don’t want to pressure you but that is when your plane ticket would be paid for. I really don’t want you to feel pressure. I am just relaying the information that I have been told.” Journalists, hungry to observe a *reencuentro*, will pay Violeta’s expenses *IF* she travels this July. Sancho explicitly directed me to not tell Violeta about the journalists yet, as the thought of a public reunion would be too much information to bear all at once. Violeta has every right to feel outrage at being asked to come in three weeks. I resent being told to dance around the truth, but oblige. I agree to send Violeta an email with my contact information. She gives me her cell phone number and “has lots to think about” so I will call later. This is progress.

I review Violeta’s file, skimming a printed email that reports DNA confirmation with her biological father. I then clarify with Margarita what she has communicated to Violeta so I can assess Violeta’s understanding of her history. She knows that she could reunite with her father and that she has three siblings, one of whom lives in the United States and with whom she has already had a *reencuentro*. I realize, however, that Violeta probably does not know that her mom was assassinated. Or that hers is a case of forced disappearance, meaning that soldiers forcibly abducted her from her parents’ unwilling arms, likely at gunpoint. Gruesome and terrorizing details such as these are often deemphasized in the early exchanges with a *joven encontrado*. I think to myself, given the watered-down history that Violeta has received up to this point, she has probably concluded that the benevolent army rescued her from the hell that is war by putting her up for adoption.

I email Violeta. I will call you but it cannot be on Saturday because I will be attending a *reencuentro* in the countryside. A woman who lives in the United States will be reuniting with her family.

On my walk home from Pro-Búsqueda, I stop at the bustling corner to enjoy *atol* with banana, which I purchase from a street vendor for 25 cents. As I happily lap the soothing drink, I ask the woman sitting on one of the green plastic chairs set up on the sidewalk what the beverage contains. She answers me in the form of a recipe. First you take *maizena* [maize], then add milk, and stir in sugar, and banana or pineapple for flavor. She invites me to sit beside her.

“What do you think about our small country?” she amiably asks.

I learn that her husband, who is also sipping *atol*, is a police officer. Yes, he wears a bulletproof vest. Yes, sometimes he is afraid for his life “but one gets used to it,” they tell me, patiently answering my questions as I seek to understand living with violence. Yes, he has to work night shifts in dangerous areas. Yvette works as a saleslady in a department store. Their toddler goes to day-care where the little one has fun “making war” (a playful expression) with the other little children.

I ask Yvette and her husband their thoughts on immigration to the United States. “What do I think about immigration?” Yvette echoes aloud.

Her husband answers quickly, “It’s an economic necessity.”

This question strikes a personal note. Yvette’s mother left El Salvador for the U.S. 18 years ago, when Yvette was 6-years-old. Raised by an aunt, Yvette conveys bitterness and hurt that her mother has not yet returned. It is hard for Yvette to accept the idea that love motivated her mother’s action. Maybe it was love, she concedes, hope for the well-being of her children 18 years ago, “But not to be away forever.”

The husband’s mother left the country 20 years ago, when he was 7-years-old. His mother lives in San Francisco, California. She regularly corresponds with her son and sends him remittances. On the other hand, Yvette’s mother barely writes or phones. On the rare occasion that she speaks with her mother, Yvette will ask, “Why don’t you call me?” The mother consistently replies that she does not have time, as her work as a hotel cleaning lady keeps her too busy to call. To this, Yvette bitterly comments, “I bet she has time to go the bathroom.”

Yvette relates that when her mother requests photographs Yvette replies, “I don’t like taking pictures.”

To this, I playfully say, “One more stubborn than the other.”

Yvette tells me this story: Once her brother showed her a photo of a lady and Yvette had asked, “Who is that lady?” Surprised, her brother had responded, “You don’t know? That is your mother.”

Well, I happen to be carrying a stamped post card that my friend had given me. “Yvette, you need an *empujon*, a push,” I tell her, lighthearted and maybe meddling too much, but I’ve seen that distant look before—in my mother’s eyes when she thinks of Cuba. “Here is a post card with a stamp.” Yvette graciously accepts the gift and agrees to send the post card to her mother.

By the time we finish talking it is 7PM and the sun has set. Yvette and policeman husband offers to walk me home and I accept. Standing outside the gate for my neighborhood, I tell the policeman, “If you wait, I can give you your *push* too.”

“*Bueno*, we will wait here,” he responds with a vibrant smile.

I run into the house, and dash back out with a second stamped post-card and a handful of envelopes. “You can fit photographs in these,” I say to Yvette, handing her the stash.

“And lots of letters, many letters,” she says laughing. We say goodbye and I go home.

CHAPTER 6—Matilde and Gloria

29 June 2005

Wednesday: Preparing for Matilde's *Reencuentro*

Once in the office I sit around the couch area for a while laughing with Don Jaime, Margarita, and Lucio about my experiences in the field. Lucio gives me a *pupusa* of *ayote* so that I can taste it, he says.

I sit at the desk in the psychology office and Sancho reads aloud (to me) the email that he has just received from Matilde, a young woman from Massachusetts preparing to reunite with her family. "I am overwhelmed...I sit on the floor and cry," her enthusiasm for the *reencuentro* clouded by a knot of emotion.

Sancho invites me to join him and Margarita on an excursion to prepare for the *reencuentro* of Matilde with her family. We drive to La Libertad, at a fork in the dirt road we pick-up Ysidro, Matilde's oldest brother. He shows us the luxurious house he plans to borrow for the event. The ample patio, toilet (not latrine), cement walls, and a separate kitchen of the chosen spot out do Ysidro's humble home of adobe. Uncertain as to the history behind this *reencuentro*, I try to practice keeping my mouth shut, being an observer in the truest sense and watching the present unfold history.

Ysidro is a short, chubby, late 30-something guy. Has he taken the day off from work for our meeting or does he not work? He is putting a lot of effort forward for a happy reunion with his sister. Sancho gives him \$50 from Pro-Búsqueda for the *reencuentro*.

Sancho prepares Ysidro for the delicate psychological aspects of a *reencuentro*. I do not have the details of Matilde's case clear. I know that Matilde is coming to do volunteer work in El Salvador and as part of this trip she will have a reunion with her family. She has known while growing up that she was adopted. I understand that there is a big rift in Matilde's biological family. The three siblings living in El Salvador are pitted against the Aunt. Yes, I remember the day when Matilde's brother Ysidro came to Pro-Búsqueda. Sancho told me that day that Ysidro is convinced that the Aunt sold Matilde. All of the siblings hate the Aunt. Yet Matilde expects a reunion with her siblings and her aunt. I heard that the *guerrilla* assassinated Matilde's mother. Or was it the military? And Ysidro served in the armed forces. Another brother was in the *guerrilla*?

"Ysidro, whatever conflict you have with your Aunt can be discussed later," Sancho admonishes. But the last thing that we want here is a fight... This is a wonderful opportunity to reunite with Matilde. And possibly for reconciliation." Sancho's words are parsimonious yet to the point. Ysidro nods. Sancho then agrees to visit the Aunt to prepare her for the "conditions" of the reunion.

As we drive away Margarita comments, "I didn't like what he said about wanting to have two soldiers (standing guard) here at the *reencuentro*."

Sancho adds, “Yes, the last thing I want is to see rifles in the house.”

Margarita continues, “Yes. Those (military) people are crazy. They were just trained to kill.” So they talk about how “*re-loco*” one of Matilde’s brothers is, his head “full of drugs and training of murder.”

We set off to the outskirts of San Salvador to meet with Matilde’s Aunt.

Her house is a stunning blue. I comment on the gorgeous paint. Margarita says, “I don’t like this color. Liz, I can’t like this color. It is the color of *Arena*.” She could not remove the political symbolism in her mind even for a moment to enjoy the vibrant color. The Aunt is not home. One of the Aunt’s seven children takes the message: *reencuentro* on Saturday.

Driving away, Sancho remarks, “The *hermanos* of Matilde are all sure that the Aunt receives remittances from Matilde every month. It is not true. She has not been in contact with Matilde. She does not even know that Matilde is coming.”

On our way back to the office, we detour a few blocks for a short visit to Sancho’s home. We take advantage of the opportunity to see his abode, to maybe meet his mom, to use a clean bathroom. (Important things in life.) I enjoy drinking chilled water and meeting Sancho’s sister and niece. He shows us his bedroom and his precious photo album. After

looking at the pictures I say, “Sancho, thanks for sharing your treasures with us.” In that moment I realize what it is that we at Pro-Búsqueda work for, what it means to an individual to know his history. I share this aloud and Margarita concurs. She would love to have a photograph of her mother, her brothers.

A few hours later I am back at Pro-Búsqueda writing at my spot in the psychology office. In walks a mother whose daughter has been located in the United States but the daughter does not seem interested in a *reencuentro*. Another daughter and two grandchildren accompany this mother. Sancho sits with her and offers photographs that the localized *joven* has sent from USA for her biological family.

“Does she have a message to send?” the mother inquires. “I would like to know more about her—to see her,” the mother implores. “I am very grateful for the photos. We hope that she returns, that she comes to El Salvador. We wait for that moment.” Pause, and then she adds, “It has helped me to know that she is in good hands... In that way, I have felt proud of her.”

Still rifling through the small stack of photographs, now for the tenth time.

Sancho promises to contact the daughter and see how she is, meaning that he will see if he can forge the path to *reencuentro*. The feeling I observe from this family is timid, shy, sadness mixed with gratitude that daughter is well, with lots of sorrow, mother’s eyes that want to cry. I can glimpse the photos from the desk where I type as the mother sorts

through them. Three people at the beach buried in sand, smiling; a Christmas tree; baby pictures; the *joven* as a toddler; high-school graduation photo.

“Thank you for everything. *Salud.*”

Minutes later, Lucio asks me to translate an email written by Claudia, the 14-year-old who reunited with her biological mother at Pro-Búsqueda last Friday. Without hesitation I agree to translate it into Spanish. My eyes sting with a few tears as I read over the two paragraphs that comprise Claudia’s note. In her letter, Claudia repeats the words she had shared at the *reencuentro*, “Every night I wondered how you looked...Meeting you was incredible...When you said you were willing to meet me I cried because I knew that after tomorrow morning I would be complete...I understand why you put me up for adoption and I love you for it. Because of you I am happy...Saying goodbye to you was the hardest thing I have ever had to do...”

When I finish translating Claudia’s letter, I step out for a break and enjoy an amazing coincidence. I stroll a few blocks from Pro-Búsqueda to purchase a *chocobanano* [chocolate-covered banana] and encounter Jacinta, Claudia’s mother bundling Celina, Claudia’s little sister, in her arms. Celina wears the same pink outfit with the little pink shoes that she wore at the *reencuentro*. With them walks Claudia’s 7-year-old brother, who I have not yet met. I excitedly tell Jacinta that I have just translated a letter for her from Claudia. Jacinta’s huge smile cannot outshine the shadows of sadness in her eyes. Jacinta tells me she has been desperate to hear about Claudia; that she does not have any

pictures of Claudia; that she is feeling sad and she worries that Claudia may be feeling sad. So she is coming now to Pro-Búsqueda to send off a letter to Claudia and to see if we can give her any photos.

I return to Pro-Búsqueda, eat a mango, and then mosey into the psychology office to fulfill Jacinta's request to translate a letter to Claudia. "No, I will do it," Sancho says slowly, looking confused, maybe even annoyed too. While in the office attending to other tasks, I overhear Jacinta and Sancho's conversation about: how Jacinta has been hurting; her worry that her presence in Claudia's life will interfere with Claudia's studies; and how she misses her daughter.

Before exiting the room, I place a kiss on Jacinta's cheek to say Goodbye.

By evening, I feel exhausted and ready to leave Pro-Búsqueda for the day. Time is 10 to 5 PM. Yes, Sancho, I agree, let us translate Jacinta's letter. Sancho, reads me the ideas Jacinta dictated to him in Spanish as I type. One paragraph full of intimate maternal love, yearning, joy and gratitude, emerges from my fingertips to the computer screen, and then is pasted in an email to Claudia.

As soon as we send the letter out, Sancho apologizes to me because he felt that he had been rude earlier in initially rejecting my offer to translate Jacinta's letter. His apology, unnecessary but appreciated, consists mostly of an explanation. "I had the intuition that Jacinta needs psychological attention. I was taking advantage of the opportunity of the dictation of a letter to have private time in the office with her because I felt there was

something she had to tell me. Her case is very complicated. Besides everything having to do with Claudia and the adoption, she still has the injury of the rape. She has adapted excellently to a new life with her husband and two children. *Ojo.*” Sancho’s assessment continues, “She is living with her husband. That signifies that she has overcome any physical-sexual injury from the rape. But her psyche may still be injured. I suspect that it is. She is coming on July 8 for a first session.” Hours later I reflect that he could be wrong. Living with her husband and two children does not necessarily mean that she is physically and sexually healed. It’s definitely time for me to go home.

30 June 2005

Thursday: Eduardo & Pedro

I get up to fetch a cup of water and Eduardo invites me into a conversation. “Liz, I am just talking here with Pedro about how one is illusioned and then disillusioned before and after a *reencuentro*. We are talking about our experiences as *jovenes encontrados*. Have a seat.” Pedro tells me some facts about his life: his birthplace, number of siblings, which ones died, date of *reencuentro*, who he reunited with. Then Eduardo tells me his own story. Following is a paraphrase of Eduardo’s story:

I had my *reencuentro* in 2003 when I was 22-years-old. I reunited with my father, but now he does not want to have anything to do with me. He is an *impresario*, a businessman. He has money. He thinks I just look for him for his money. He has two families in El Salvador and one in the United States. I have

lots of brothers and sisters, 4 that I know of. He says he is too busy to have time for me. And why would Jorge (my brother) and I want him in our lives? He says that we are grown and that we do not need him anymore.

I grew up in an orphanage. I have very few memories of my mother. Only my mother and grandmother knew that I was in the orphanage. They took me there when I was 4. Many children in the orphanage were children of *guerrilleros*. It was a very delicate situation. Our location was confidential. That is why my mother and grandmother did not tell anyone—because if anything happened they could find us.

My life made a complete turn in 2003. I was 22 and living in the orphanage. I was going to be a father. I needed a place to live and a job. My brother and I had brought our case to Pro-Búsqueda in 1998. In 2003 was when we re-met our Dad. Our case is sad but there are others that are more ugly. There was a boy in Belgium whose adoptive family would not let him communicate with his Salvadoran family, so he killed himself. He was 26. Yes, he was our age.

My mother and grandmother, they had their ideals. They went to the *guerrilla* together. When they fought, they were always together. And they died together too, in the same massacre. A friend who works at *Equipo Maiz* saw my mother the day before she died. My mother stood out because she had white skin and light eyes. I just found out about this a few years ago. Before then I did not know

that my mother was in the *guerrilla*. Yes, Liz, it is sad. It is hard. But there are other cases that are harder.”

I admit, while I listen to Eduardo’s story I mostly pay attention. But sometimes my mind travels elsewhere. To the hot water I sip to soothe the uncomfortableness of my sore throat, to the rainstorm outside, to Pedro who sits on the couch with me. To Pedro. I think that I told his story of disappearance in the first set of field notes. Sometimes I smile at him admiring how much he has been able to evolve himself. Sometimes I smile inside, observing the community of support that he and Eduardo and the other *jovenes* provide each other. But I know that I am sitting on this couch with a murderer, with a rapist. That is strange for me. His hair is well combed; his shirt neatly tucked into his brown pants. Does he deserve to smile? Of course he deserves another chance? Right? I can’t get his words that Reina shared with me out of my head: “I used to love to watch the blood run.” Murderer. I have no right to know these words. Reina should not have told me. And here is my confession—as I listen to Eduardo’s story, and Pedro serves as a supportive observer to Eduardo, I imagine myself getting up from my seat, walking over to Pedro and yelling at him, slapping him. ‘How dare you hurt a woman. How dare you do that to a woman,’ I say. Luckily, that only happened in my internal world, and much of Eduardo’s story is captured above. I actually trust this murderer. Sure, I feel okay coming in on a Saturday to work, even if Pedro and Don Max, who has a walking impediment, are the only ones here. I trust this murderer. I hate him and I respect him. He is a *joven encontrado* with an incredible story to tell.

The rain has stopped. Eduardo will tell me if the lady who sells *atol* comes by.

In the evening, after a cool shower and a meal of *tamale de elote* [corn tamale], I receive a phone call from my mom. She is coming to El Salvador on Tuesday.

1 July 2005

Friday: Eduardo's story & pupusas at Lucio's

Morning time. I go to the kitchen at Pro-Búsqueda to wash a cup and I find Ofelia, who insists on feeding me homemade corn tortilla and beans, washed down with chamomile tea. The sky is thundering but the light pours brightly through the clouds.

Later, as I work with Father Jon on installing *DNAView* I am amused because he is distracted by a report written by the Interamerican Court of Human Rights as a follow-up to the case of the *hermanas* Serrano-Cruz. After reading the report the Father says, "They came down hard on the State." He then tells Yessenia that basically the report says that the government actors should "*dejan de joder* [stop screwing around]." He makes me chuckle.

As the workday closes I sit on the couch and talk with Lucio. I tell him that I miss Rosita. We telephone her from Pro-Búsqueda. “I miss you,” I say to Rosita, and when finished chatting with this adorable youngster, I hand the phone back to Lucio.

He speaks with his daughter and then says, “Rosita told me that you are coming over.” So that is how I receive my invitation to join his family for *pupusas* tonight.

I appreciate that spending time with Lucio’s family is becoming less an ethnographer’s focus and more of a friendship. Pablito is “tremendous” in the sense that he never sits still, climbs everything, constantly has to be chased after, screeches, and cleans his *pupusa*-greased hands on my pants. Julia takes care of him during the day and now over dinner, she tells Luzecita the hard truth as she sees it. “He does not act like this during the day,” Julia tells her closest friend. “It is only when you are around. He really wants your attention.”

Julia, Lucio, and I talk about this in the car as they drive me home. Pablito is starved of attention from his father, they report. Agustin is kind when he spends time with Pablito, but he works by night, sleeps by day, and is usually exhausted when his son is around.

“Luzecita and Agustin want to give Pablito the best,” Julia tells me, “And so they both work hard to give him the best by economic means. But one cannot buy love in the supermarket. There is a lack of love in that home.”

I wonder to what extent these patterns relate to their experiences as *jovenes encontrados* and also to poverty and speculate that these two aspects may feed each other.

Still riding in the car, now we talk about memories. In their home, Julia and Lucio had proudly shared their photo albums with me. There are various photos of Lucio giving his testimony to European audiences while presenting *Historias para tender presente*, the book where his narrative appears. I allude to the multiple photo albums, teasing Lucio that he is the president of his own fan club. I also share my observation that these two are completely opposite with regards to how they express their life story. Lucio is forthcoming with his *historia de vida* [life story] whereas Julia does not emit a peep.

“You don’t like to talk about it?” I ask Julia.

“It’s that I do not remember anything. I do not want to tell people about it because I would be making things up.”

“Do you want to remember?” I ask.

Without hesitation, she answers. “No.”

2 July 2005

Saturday: *Reencuentro* of Matilde and Gloria

Pro-Búsqueda is exceptionally busy for 9:30 AM on a Saturday. All the employees here are either preparing for the afternoon festival at Cuscatlan Park or for today's *reencuentro*. I duck into the kitchen to eat the oatmeal that I brought myself in a *Nevaria* ice cream container. Yumm. Then I eat a mango.

Sancho walks into the kitchen, with his hand on his heart. "I need two glasses of water for these two girls."

He is preparing the sisters, Matilde and Gloria, for their *reencuentro*. "How about these," I nonchalantly suggest, reaching to hand him two glasses.

"I need two decent glasses," he snorts.

He is acting overdramatic about the glasses but the root of his emotion is unease. He tells me, "Margarita, the investigator for this case, had not told them that their brother was in the army. Matilde is very upset," he hastily explains. "She is in El Salvador doing human rights work and this information is very upsetting to her."

We wash two glasses. Sancho leaves the kitchen. I savor the mango and also savor hiding in the kitchen from the chaos of the office.

I come out of hiding and am standing by Eduardo's desk when Sancho introduces me to Matilde. I say my introductions in English and extend my hand. Matilde shares that she has spent the last month in El Salvador volunteering at an orphanage, where she is helping with the construction of a greenhouse. She pushes a photograph in front of my face. The photo is of two sisters, one 7 and the other 2, wearing dresses, standing in front of a verdant bush with burgundy-colored flowers. "This is my sister and I." When I ask how she got the photo, Matilde says, "My aunt gave it to me when she dropped us off at the airport...I was 7 years old. "

Impressed by the visual imagery of the photograph and by Matilde's sharp tone, I remark, "Then you must remember a lot."

"Oh yeah, I remember everything," she says with confidence and authority, and then rushes off.

Time to head out for the *reencuentro*: Lucio, Margarita, a Salvadoran fellow, and I pile into Lucio's car. Sancho drives the Pro-Búsqueda jeep; his passengers are Gloria, Matilde, and two other women. Who are they?

When we stop at Shell for gas, I jump out of the car to buy water from the convenience store. Inside, I learn who the other two women are starting with Tami is a photographer from the *Boston Globe*. She has fair skin and green eyes and does not look much older

than me. “We have been with Matilde and Gloria since they arrived...I am nervous for them,” Tami confesses.

I sprint over to the jeep and introduce myself to Gloria. “I am Liz and I can translate for you if you like.” Gloria (who is Maria in her adoptive family) smiles with appreciation. Claire, the lean brunette, a journalist for the *Boston Globe*, says hello.

Okay, so now I finally figure out that there are two sisters who are being reunited! Sancho had only been mentioning Matilde, but now I understand that Gloria, Matilde’s younger sister, will meet her family too. I even decipher that the Salvadoran fellow that rides with us is a journalist who will report on the *reencuentro* in the national press. He gives his credentials as soon as the car gets rolling. “I covered the armed conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua...I have known Father Cortina, ooooooh, for years.”

“Before he was a Father?” Margarita jokingly asks.

“No, not that long,” he charismatically responds, earning a laugh from the other passengers and driver.

He takes notes in a steno pad as Margarita dictates the number of disappeared and other stats on *reencuentros*. I sit back, listen, and anticipate.

We reach La Libertad, arriving at the home of the *madrina* [godmother], which has been loaned for the day's event. The sisters step out of the car and line up outside a tall, metal gate.

I snap a digital photograph of the two sisters, Matilde and Gloria, as they stand hand in hand awaiting the moment that they will set eyes on their family. Tami stands close to them with her six cameras strapped around her waist. The sisters take a few steps in, crossing through the metal gate, now moving onto the patio towards their relatives. All is one big hug. Like flies landing on honey, the family swarms together in one huge hug of reunion. Matilde and Gloria hug their sister Pilar and their two brothers. The three sisters are crying. Many hugs are exchanged. Matilde and Gloria place lots of loud, smoochy kisses on the cheeks of their brothers and sister. Hugs and crying. Tami's knees are already brown with dirt; she is sweating, having taken so many photos of this priceless moment. I see Claire, a queen of composure, batting her eyes behind sunglasses. She tears as she rapidly sketches her notes. I peek over her shoulder to read the barely legible notes. "Still hugging and crying" is what her notes say. I am glad that Lucio has come from parking the car, because I can now give him the camera that I have been carrying for Pro-Búsqueda. I stand about 6 feet from the hugging mob but he walks right in among the family to take photographs of the sacred reunion. I stand not too far, not too near, in case Gloria wants me to translate. I am present in silent awe. What is amazing is that Gloria does not request that I translate. In fact, the family spends the first 15 minutes of meeting mostly in silence. No words are exchanged. The loudest sounds are the smoochy kisses being delivered by the disappeared sisters—or, I guess now, as of

these moments they are *jovenes encontradas* who have met their family. Silent awe. Potent emotion. I am glad there are photos of this because language feels like a poor tool to express the song of joy and sorrow, observing the skin to skin, eye to eye, tears on her brother's shoulder *reencuentro* of Matilde and Gloria with their family.

The sisters move to the side of the house to rest, squatting by the dirt, breathing. Sancho comes to their side for support and the two reporters close in like hungry mosquitoes. Their rest is brief because young relatives run over to meet the sisters. More kisses. Lucio tries to take a picture of me but I have not bothered to wipe the few tears off my cheek so I resist.

I speak briefly with Claire. "I have to stay back. I am not to interfere with this event in any way," she explains in a cool, serious tone. "But Maria (Gloria) said in the car that she wants you near her," I am told.

I approach Gloria and touch her warm arm. "Maria, whenever you are ready for English translation I am here." She responds gratefully. But the family is still filled by physical expressions of emotion. No words are needed.

We are no longer standing on the open driveway. The giant hug has moved to the shaded patio beside the house. Ysidro, the eldest brother, has been taken aside by the Salvadoran journalist, who audio-records impressions. So, the silence continues. With all the hugs and joy, the introductions begin. A *tía* [aunt] introduces herself to the girls. Sancho

translates; I assist with a few words. “I took care of you when you were *tiernita* [young].” Gloria melts with her words. The *tía*, a *señora* [lady] advanced in age, beams as she extends her arms to embrace her niece.

Chuy, the second brother, introduces himself to Matilde and Gloria. Now I am here to translate. He wears a vibrant red Burger King t-shirt and black jeans. Two crutches brace against his forearm to support his weight. He leans forward on them, even as he stands. His legs and feet curve limply backwards to meet the ground. Now I am translating an exchange between Chuy and Gloria. “Our parents were killed at 11:30 PM on the last day in July in the year one thousand, nine hundred, and eighty,” Chuy soberly relays. He tells Gloria, “You were one-year-old at the time. You were taken to a relative’s home,” after the escape.

“Matilde, did you hear that?” Gloria shouts in shock and excitement. “He says that our parents died at—” Matilde interrupts.

“Ask him how we came to be put up for adoption,” Matilde directs me rather forcefully. I ask Chuy, and with both sisters awaiting the response, he begins a discourse about how the family was taking care of the girls, but then the Aunt found them, he doesn’t know how, then the Aunt sold the children, she profited from doing it, she trafficked them, he says, and did not tell anyone in the family that she was selling them and...How am I going to translate this! Or better stated, how am I *not* going to translate this? The sisters are not ready to hear this part of the story, Sancho had told me days before we set out for

the *reencuentro*. And it seems like it might be an untruth, there is a family divide. The “evil Aunt” has not come to the *reencuentro*.

I have paused too long. “What did he say?” Matilde implores. In the meantime, I have managed to call Sancho over by shouting his name and with my eyes saying please come rescue. While we at Pro-Búsqueda are relieved that the Aunt did not accept the invitation to attend the *reencuentro*, this exchange brings forward fear that the feud—the hatred towards the Aunt—would spoil the event.

Sancho walks hurriedly over to where I stand. I tell him quickly in Spanish, “He’s talking about the Aunt and that she profited from selling the sisters. Do you understand?”

“Sí [Yes],” Sancho says. He addresses Matilde and Gloria with a skillfully vague answer, “He is just saying what he said before about your family.”

All this happened very quickly; the family did not notice much of a glitch. They might have observed that many words were reduced to a few, yet with so many emotions swarming this stall was minor. But Emilio the Salvadoran journalist begins to translate word for word Chuy’s speech. Among the first lines he translates: “He says that your aunt trafficked you to the United States. She made money from selling you.” I see the look of shock on Claire’s face and watch her hastily scribble on her notepad. Matilde, eyes and mouth open wide, lips twisted, head slightly tilted for a better angle, looks painfully confused but keeps on listening.

Sancho watches, and then after many translated lines, he interrupts vociferously in awkward English to say, “Hey, just know that that is not the whole truth.” In a rigid, fiery tone he adds, “There are two sides to every story.” Matilde looks to Sancho as he talks and then looks back to her brother.

I step to the side, just keeping quiet and translating when the service is requested of me.

I think I have made it 20 minutes staying uninvolved except for translating upon request. “Sancho, what do we do?” I ask with a hint of panic. “It’s painful to listen to what Chuy is telling his sisters upon the first moments of reunion.”

“I wish that Ysidro would be here,” Sancho responds with an intonation of frustration. “But he is too busy in the kitchen making sure that everything is just right.” I know that Sancho and Margarita think that Chuy is *re-loco* [crazy] and has a loose tongue, while Ysidro is more stable.

“Is it okay if I ask Ysidro to come spend time with his sisters?” I offer, concerned.

“Yes.”

“Ysidro,” I say, as I walk over to the kitchen, where he manages lunch preparation. The kitchen is its own separate little building off to the side of the courtyard; we are all

outside. “How are things going in the kitchen?” I ask. I tell him that it would be wonderful if he would be with his sisters now. He realizes what is going on and motions to me with his hand that Chuy is crazy. Within five minutes he joins Matilde and Gloria on the patio.

I ask Sancho’s permission again (still learning to be an observer). “May I tell the journalist that there is more to the story than what Chuy was saying?”

“She heard me but yes, you can make sure she heard.” Okay. My concern is that an untruth will be published that is harmful to the family, and even to the cause of the disappeared children.

I stand against the wall beside the tall, skinny, unruffled journalist lady with the long eyelashes, and peek again at what she is scribbling. “I saw you taking a lot of notes when Chuy was talking, like when he said that the children were trafficked to USA. I just wanted to say—”

She cuts me off and her articulate eyes face me. “I know there is more to the story. Believe me, I will look into it before I write anything.” Her words are forceful and I appreciate her dedication to search for truth. We both suggest that perhaps she could come to Pro-Búsqueda to meet with Sancho and learn more about the background of Matilde and Gloria’s story, and of others.

She then shares some meaningful words with me: “We have been with them every moment and I try not to grow attached. These girls have been through a lot. The deal is that I cannot affect anything they do, so I have to stay uninvolved. I am sure that you have this experience too—that I want to take these girls to live with me in my home in Boston.” Wow. I am struck by her compassion. What has she heard about their lives that she finds so compelling?

I ask, “Were they adopted into the same home?”

“No, they went to separate families. Matilde fared much better than Gloria. Matilde went to a home where the family cared for her.”

“And Gloria?”

“She was adopted by a family that did not really care about her. By age 12, she was bouncing around between foster homes. She basically raised herself since she was 12.”

“She did a good job,” I say. Claire unequivocally agrees.

“Did the two sisters always know about each other?” I wonder aloud.

“Yes. But they haven’t always had a good relationship,” Claire plainly states.

“What do you mean?” creeps out of my mouth.

“They went years at a time without talking.” Claire’s eyes look to me, flash to the note pad, then to the sisters, the corners of her lips curl for emphasis, then drop down again. I think of the photograph I snapped 30 minutes before, of the two sisters holding hands at the gate waiting to meet their family.

“Matilde remembers a lot?” I say.

“Yes, yes she does,” Claire responds, then sweeps the questions away.

This is the second time my eyes tear: I am standing on the patio near Matilde. She is still receiving and giving warmth to her newfound family. Ysidro approaches her and places a sleeping baby in her arms. The chubby, slumbering infant is Matilde’s nephew.

Without stirring, he naps with his head resting over her left shoulder, his small body supported by her chest. I watch five minutes of Matilde gently rocking her sleeping nephew and talking to other family members, still meeting cousins, nieces, nephews, for the first time. I cannot imagine meeting my own little nephew like this, being placed in my arms while he is sleeping. A few tears slide unnoticed down my cheek.

The family serves lunch early. It’s about 11 AM. Good; a way to take a break from the emotions.

I sit at the table with the second layer of family, *tía*, and first cousins. I introduce myself and they hungrily ask me questions about Matilde and Gloria. I am embarrassed. What is my role here if I cannot even answer simple questions such as ‘Where do they work?’ I don’t like not being able to come through for people. “I am sorry, I don’t know. I will find out and let you know,” I respond.

A cousin tells me about all the expatriate cousins living in the USA. In Houston, Los Angeles, “Okalahoma,” “New Yersey.” I shout over to the next table. “Matilde, did you know that you have a lot of first cousins that live in the United States?” She smiles. I tell her where they live and how they are related.

“I’ll have to take a road trip around the entire country,” she radiantly says.

I ask the relatives (how dare I ask), “Please forgive the question, but do you know where Matilde and Gloria’s parents are buried?” Yes, one kilometer from here, the relatives tell me. Now what will I do with this information?

I am eating corn tortilla. The rice does not inspire confidence in me. I feel hungry. I should eat tortilla or else I will be too hungry later. Hand on tortilla, tortilla in mouth. No more eating. It’s a struggle to eat. Why? Because now I hear Matilde asking all the hard questions at the next table. “Was I in the room when my parents were killed?” she wants to know. Sancho grows more nervous and exhausted with each question. She has just learned that there were two older sisters, 19 and 17 years old. They were killed on

the same day as their parents. That's it. I drop the tortilla down on the plate. Who can eat when Matilde has just learned that her mother was pregnant when slaughtered. I know that this means that her belly was probably slashed open.

I go back to where the flies on the wall watch. I decide I will tell the journalist Claire that the location of burial of the parents is known and is close by. She can tell Matilde and Gloria. "You should tell them," Claire says. "That is something that they would want to know. I can't tell them because I cannot affect what they do. That is the deal."

I tell Sancho about the graves. Then I ask him in private, "Do you believe that the Aunt really sold them for money?"

He responds, "She put them up for adoption and sometimes there is money involved. But we will never know if she received money. I believe that she was doing what she believed was the right thing. And time has proved her right—Matilde and Gloria are both well."

After lunch, Sancho drives Matilde, Gloria, Ysidro, and the two *Boston Globe* journalists in the jeep, two kilometers east along the dirt road, so the sisters can explore Ysidro's mud-walled home.

Meanwhile, I wander up the road to a neighborhood shop with Margarita and Emilio, the chubby Salvadoran journalist who did not eat lunch and is hungry. By now he and

Margarita have realized that they are *compañeros* [companions] who have a lot of stories from the years of the civil war to share. Emilio tells us: “Ysidro told me that he entered the military because he wanted to determine who killed his parents and seek revenge. Chuy was drafted by the military. He was in the Atlacatl battalion. He had no choice about when he went in but he stayed because it’s a question of poverty. He was earning a wage in the military. *A saber* [Who knows] what he did to get himself up to the battalion of Atlacatl.” Emilio eats a package of Chiky cookies and gulps a Cola.

Now Margarita, Lucio, Emilio, and I linger near Lucio’s car. Pilar and Chuy are a few steps away, resting also near Lucio’s car, hovering near the trunk, talking, and waiting for the sisters to return from their visit to Ysidro’s home.

“Lucio, tell me about the Battalion of Atlacatl,” I request, unceasingly wanting to learn. I know roughly that they were among the most violent of the Salvadoran armed forces, specially trained at the U.S.-sponsored School of the Americas.

“Not now,” Lucio says, because Chuy is too near. But Lucio had promised that he would tell me more. I suggest that we take a few steps farther away, to the other side of the car. Okay, Lucio reluctantly agrees.

We make our way to the front of the car. Leaning on the hood, he tells me: “The Battalion Atlacatl was one of the worst, most barbaric battalions of all.” I have trouble getting the syllables in the right order. Lucio grabs a stick and writes the name in the

sandy road, then scratches it out as soon as I have read it. “Atlacatl. The U.S. trained them. They were notoriously violent with civilians. They would often cut open the womb of pregnant women, cut people’s heads off. I spoke to a survivor once. They shot him but he did not die. He played dead. They cut at his hand to remove his rings. He was still playing dead.”

“Do you know how Chuy was injured? Did it happen during the war?” I ask.

“Yes, I know about it,” Lucio says, squinting, looking partially at me, partially down to the faint reflection of sun on the beige, rocks of the dusty road. “I worked on this case for a while. A couple of years ago Chuy told me. It was during an *operativo* [operation]. A grenade exploded on him.”

Contemplating Lucio’s words, I think to myself: when someone is in a fire it is hugely relieving to be with a fireman, one who has tools to ameliorate the situation. Likewise, I feel hugely relieved by Margarita and Lucio’s presence. Lucio has lived through this *reencuentro* business, the emotional heat wave. “What was your *reencuentro* like?” I ask.

“There were two,” Lucio matter-of-factly explains. The first one was in 1995 and the second in 2001. In 1995, I reunited with my two sisters. I knew the third one was alive. No one believed me but (eventually) we found her. In 2001, the rest of us reunited with her. I did not cry. But she fainted when she saw us.”

I am asking lots of questions again. The sun's rays feel hot and Lucio continues talking. "My mother was murdered on November 9, 1980." (I silently reflect that my boyfriend Mark was turning six-years-old, receiving Luke Skywalker action figures, safe in a home thousands of miles away, on the exact day that soldiers slashed open the abdomen of Lucio's mother).

"Do you know why they killed her? What did your mother do?" I ask.

"They said that she cooked for the guerrilla," Lucio says, even and calm.

"Is that true?"

"Probably." He remembers: "The soldiers came to the home and asked for my father. My mother told them that he was not in the house. They took her. She had said that she would be back, but she did not come back. My sister was with me. By night I was crying. My father found her [corpse] and we buried her. They say that I saw her body, but I do not remember. I must have blocked it out. Her breasts were cut out. She was pregnant, her belly was cut open."

This is the first time that I hear Lucio admit that there are aspects of the war that are too painful for him to remember. He prides himself on remembering every last bit, on giving detailed accounts. (Later I review his testimony in *Historias para tener presente*. Yes,

he glosses over the description of his mother's murder when he writes his story.) "We were eight boys. Only the youngest lives, me. The other seven died. My three sisters are alive. I remember when my first brother died. He died in an ambush. He was in the guerrilla and was trying to steal supplies from a vehicle on the road. He was left in a gutter, dead. My sister prayed that he would come back to the camp where we were all staying. I knew he was dead. He did not come back."

"My father had a dream before he [himself] died. He dreamt that he cut his leg while planting, and blood sprang onto the Earth. The shrapnel cut off his leg, just the way he had in his dream. Lots of blood spilled on the Earth. There was a hole in his head too, where his nose had been. The day it happened I had gone out from the camp to get fruit because I was hungry. *Mi papá* found me and hit me. He told me to stay at the camp. He left. I climbed a tree to watch where he went. I heard an explosion. I was filled with a horrible feeling. I knew it was he when they came back to the camp carrying someone in the hammock. I attended to him. There was so much blood. 'I want to go poo-poo,' he said. 'That is okay. Just do it right here' the lady told him. I cleaned him after he went to the bathroom. It was 2 PM, this time of day. And the sun was like it is now. My father told me to, 'Get out of here. Get out if you have a chance. And study.'

"Do you remember what his exact last words to you were?" I ask.

"No, I don't remember exactly. '*Te quiero* [I love you],' maybe. I was seven years old. I was in such a state [of shock]. The ladies there told me to go to sleep. I was seven. I

don't know where we buried him. And I did not know which way to tell them to put the cross, because here the cross goes at the head if it is an adult and at the feet if it is a child. I did not know where his head was. And I would never be able to find where he is buried.”

The jeep returns. Matilde smiles at me through the back seat window. “Are you okay?” she asks me. There I go turning pale again. It amazes me how perceptive humans are.

Matilde and Gloria climb out of the jeep. Now the decision is made to go to the cemetery; the five living siblings will go together to visit the graves of their dead parents. Margarita helps Chuy into the car. “You will be more comfortable in the front,” she warmly advises. When Chuy sits in the backseat anyway, Margarita helps to accommodate his crutches. This really moves me. Here's a former *guerrillera* concerning herself with the comfort of a crippled soldier from Atlacatl, a soldier who became injured in his attempts to kill FMLN fighters and peasants. Reconciliation...? Pilar, Ysidro, and Chuy settle into the backseat. The front seat of Lucio's car remains available. Margarita will stay with the journalist, Emilio. Sure, I'll get in. When I comment that I feel bad that Margarita has to stay behind, Lucio responds, “That is why Pro-Búsqueda needs another car. In a pick-up truck the whole battalion would fit.” Displeased yet amused, I smile. Lucio is *muy cabrón* [very crude] sometimes with his use of language. Chuy did not catch it. Lucio is smiling too. The car rolls forward, Lucio and I chat about holidays. Lucio doesn't like Christmas. Growing up in

orphanages I can imagine that it might be hard to like Christmas. His favorite holiday is Rosita's birthday.

We drive past the lady that sells grapefruit and past the other lady who sells fried yucca, then we arrive at the cemetery. We all walk in. Tami, the photographer, addresses me. "Stay back. Try to stay out of the pictures. Nothing personal." I do not want to get in the way of human rights journalism. I watch as Matilde and Gloria kneel to the ground 14 graves away. No sobbing. Just humbly, quietly kneeling.

Looking across the cemetery, Lucio says, "I knew there was a soldier here. I saw the boot prints when we walked in." His words about his mother's murder flood my mind. I imagine boot prints in the earth floor of the home that she was abducted from.

"Does it bother you to be here with a soldier from Atlacatl?" I ask.

"Why do you think I am staying back?" is his response.

"I am not even Salvadoreña and it's hard for me too," I say.

I am the last to walk out of the cemetery. It is so peaceful! I do not want to leave.

We make our way back to the home of the godmother for Matilde and Gloria to give the farewell. Shakira plays on the stereo and Gloria dances with some of her cousins. These

ones are little. Maybe they are her nieces and nephews. Margarita tells me the story, as she knows it, of Gloria and Matilde's disappearance. I ask who she believes killed the parents. Chuy swears that it was the guerrilla while Ysidro says that it was the army. "No, we confirmed that it was the army," Margarita says.

"Why were the parents killed?" I am curious to know.

"Because they were a Catholic family and went to church. Nothing more than that. The church was linked with the Left in the soldiers' eyes. So the mother, father, and the 19- and 17-year-old sisters were killed. Ysidro escaped out the window with the four younger children (Chuy, Pilar, Matilde, and Gloria). He later joined the army to avenge his parents' death. Chuy was recruited. And he ended up in Atlacatl. Matilde and Gloria, young and without parents, were taken to other family members. I don't know how the Aunt found them but she did. She gave them for adoption in the USA."

This is the clearest account that I have heard. I tell Margarita, "I am not Matilde, but the truth feels a lot less painful than all of this hiding that we, the Pro-Búsqueda team, are doing to protect Matilde and Gloria from knowing more details about their history."

To this Lucio interjects, "We don't know the truth, we just deduce it."

Out comes a black duffel bag full of clothes, toys, and other simple gifts. Every family member gets at least one. Lucio and Sancho play basketball versus Margarita and me

with two flat balls that can't be dribbled, shooting into the rebar hoop, avoiding the barbed wire clothesline as we shoot.

It's time for the cars to drive back to San Salvador. 5 PM. Lucio, Margarita, Emilio, and I circle our way around the San Salvador volcano, back towards town. Having observed the three journalists, I feel inspired and promise myself to write an article for the SF Chronicle when I return home to USA. My intention is to help connect people in the U.S. to the work that Pro-Búsqueda does. Lucio has the idea that I could write about an unresolved case in the U.S. I find it interesting that Margarita acts defensive when I mention the FMLN involvement in the disappearances of children. "You have to compare the number of cases," she says. "Many more children were disappeared by the military than by the *guerrilla*."

Emilio hops out of the car at the monument *Salvador del Mundo*, Margarita and I tell Lucio that "el pueblo" (us) wants to go to Cuscatlan Park where Pro-Búsqueda is having a festival to honor the *hermanas* Serrano Cruz. A large stage with musicians, vendors, maybe 100 people are sprinkled on the lawn. I see Eduardo and Ismael. They grab hands and dance in circles around me. Isabel and I exchange a big, friendly hug. My friend from California, Ali, has come to the park. She is the only *gringa* at the event (besides me, but I have just arrived and only 15 minutes remains before closing).

I greet Suyapa. She tenderly asks me when I will return to Guarjila. I have just introduced myself to Suyapa's brother, Fernando, when I notice that my big toe is

bleeding, a few drops. I have stepped on a small shard of glass. This is bizarre but Fernando enjoys it so much. “You are leaving your blood in El Salvador!” he exclaims.

I play along, “Yes, and right here at the Cuscatlan Park, in front of the war memorial.”

I successfully remove the glass from my foot and Fernando says, “I am going to go to California and find you. I’ll ask people, ‘Where is Elizabeth, the *media-Cubana* [half-Cuban].”

To this, his friend Alba teases, “How are you going to find her? You are blind.” (He really is). We Laugh.

Music. On the stage there is lots of thank you and farewell. The relatives of the disappeared who have come from the countryside will stay the night in a guesthouse. Ofelia is in a red pick-up truck on her way back to the office. “You abandoned me,” she proclaims when she sees me. “You were not here earlier to spend time with me.” She has an ear of corn in her hand that she is munching on and another one sticking out of her purse. I reach my arms into the back of the pick-up and hug Reina, a woman searching for her disappeared nephews, when the vehicle starts to pull away. I savor this joyful feeling of community.

Now it’s time to clean up from the festivities. Pro-Búsqueda had hung two banners in nearby trees. I help Pedro—the rapist with the gentle, artful hands that are good at

woodworking, painting, and other crafts—fold the banners. It is ironic that we are folding the long cotton cloth together because to me folding cloth, like a picnic blanket, is a symbol of friendship. I am thinking of Reina's words. I had asked Reina if she would feel safe leaving Pedro alone in a room with Jazmin. No, she had told me, sharply. Sometimes he would telephone Reina at her home asking for help and say, 'Tell me where you live, I will come over.' Reina would respond, 'I will meet you at Pro-Búsqueda.' She never wanted him to know her address. A few days after telling me this I express to Reina that it feels funny for me to know so much about Pedro, to know that he is a murderer. 'Ah, it's not his fault,' Reina had told me. 'He was on the street since he was seven, been given drugs. He was obligated to do what he did.' I had also said to Lucio earlier today, 'It's funny for me to know that I am spending time with people who have killed other people.' I had said this simple statement with Pedro in mind. 'Uh huh.' Lucio had responded. The banner is folded and Pedro and I exchange smiles.

Bye everyone. Ali and I will take the bus home from the park. Feeling brave. Not really. Feeling exhausted. We take three buses because we make a mistake about the route. Drizzling. Dusk. I've been hungry for seven hours. Emotionally exhausted. Okay, soon we are eating steaming *pupusas*, melting into relaxation, sipping hot chocolate. We talk. It's raining hard. Ali walks me home.

CHAPTER 7—Mothers

3 July 2005

Sunday: Ocean

Hooray! We are going to the beach today. It's a farewell for Carol, the attorney at Pro-Búsqueda who is leaving her job. At 6:30 AM, Lucio, Julia, and Rosita pick me up. At the gas station we meet Don Jaime and the others.

Our three-car caravan arrives at a neighborhood of humble homes with roofs of palm leaves. We pull into the driveway, past the coconut palms, to one of the homes. Lucio steps out to announce our visit to the owner. She is the mother of a disappeared child.

"Lucio, tell her quick that I'm not her daughter. I won't get out of the car until you tell her," I insist.

Surprise! We have come to cook lunch on your fire, Lucio asks and announces.

"My home is your home," she invites us to stay.

It is hot and flies buzz around, but this woman is precious. She is a grandmother to many but still misses her daughter who was abducted when the grandmother was in the hospital receiving treatment for tuberculosis. "I got excited when I saw you coming," she tells me. "I thought you were coming to tell me that you had found my daughter."

She tells me about her family. Her grandchildren come over as soon they wake up in the morning. “That is the richness of life—to be close to one’s family,” I proclaim.

“Yes,” she concurs. “Even though sometimes we do not have enough to eat, the important thing is that we are all together.”

10 AM. The women of our group skewer and barbecue the chicken, dice vegetables to throw in the pot and toast tortillas over the fire-pit, while the men drink the beer stashed in the trunk.

We drive five minutes further to a beach.

The ocean is angry, but I play with her anyway.

A day of relaxing, not thinking of field notes; it is wonderful to be part of this celebration.

Now sunset is nearing. I coax Margarita into one last swim. Jumping in the waves. It is a delight to see her so happy, and wonderful to meet her husband. He seems like a sweet man, “authentic,” I hear someone say. His 14-year-old daughter’s eyes reflect happiness. Roxy, the daughter, has a younger brother who is 9 years old. While I watch Margarita’s children cling to her arms and while Margarita and I laugh together in the waves I find

myself amazed by Resiliency. Here is a woman who suffered so much during the war, yet life has a way of bringing rejuvenation.

All in all, it's a superb day. My mom had told me that my grandmother used to take pots of food to the beach to feed the family, but my grandmother died before I was born and I had never done it. It felt so natural. It's amazing how being at the ocean, in her waters, taking in her breeze, brings me so much peace.

4 July 2005

Monday: FMLN propaganda

While I am working in the psychology office, Lucio walks in and we discuss cases of disappeared children living in the United States. He tells me of the shameless ways that Salvadoran mothers were tricked into giving their children up for adoption. “No, the North Americans are not at fault,” he clarifies. “In the U.S., it is just people who cannot have children and who want to help. The intermediaries are the guilty parties.” We talk about two cases of children found in the U.S. whose adoptive families prohibit them from meeting their biological families in El Salvador.

I raise my questions about the technicalities of blame with Virginia, a member of the Pro-Búsqueda team. She explains that a number of adoptions, though illegal in El Salvador, were “irregular” but legal according to U.S. law. She believes that since the U.S. financed the war, it has a moral obligation to assist with reparation in El Salvador. This

leads us into a discussion on the Right to Identity, which is prescribed in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. As an aspiring pediatrician and a citizen of one of the only two nations in the world that have not yet ratified this critical convention, I feel ashamed.

Prompted by our discussion, Lucio plants me in Pro-Búsqueda's meeting room to watch a documentary about the "reality of war." The film, *Victoria*, a 1.5-hour propaganda piece prepared by Radio Venceremos, the rebel radio station, tells a history of combat in a nation of warring brothers.

Just as I am thinking, 'war doesn't make sense. I don't believe in violence,' the door thrusts open. It's Eduardo.

"I like this song," he says, and sits down. "I wish I could have joined the *guerrilla*. I was too young, only 5-years-old," he laments.

I stare at the living Eduardo next to me and blurt, "And you don't care that you would have died?"

"No, because I would have died for an ideal."

Lucio comes in to check on me. I don't have words. He comes in a bit later. The screen depicts Soldiers packing a mine into the ground. "One of those [mines] killed my dad." He walks out of the room again.

Many battles later, Margarita, Lucio, and Eduardo stand in the doorway, peering into the room where I watch the film. "That is good what you are watching," Margarita comments. She knows the names of all the *comandantes* [commanders]. Now FMLN soldiers break the windows of a house with the butts of their guns. "I had the pleasure of breaking glass," Margarita pronounces. A headshot of an FMLN leader fills the screen. "Oh no, it makes me feel ashamed to see him. He is cheaper than a whore." These are surprising words from Margarita.

Tangled in the momentum of the social movement, an FMLN fighter boldly announces his call to fight—to protect El Salvador from "selling out."

Lucio quips, "It used to be that *we will* sell out. Now it is that *we did* sell out."

Fatima walks in, naming massacres by date and location. I am impressed to see everyone around me taking ownership of their history, and am struck by the peculiar nostalgia in the room.

Watching in silence, just me, again. Between duties of answering the telephone, Eduardo pops his head in. “There are lots of movies like this of the armed conflict. I wish I could see my mom in one of them. I wish I could see my mom.”

As bodies, buildings, flags, and cars are desecrated on the screen, in flames, Eduardo points, “That’s over there, at the fountain, two blocks away.” Two blocks away and 17 years in time.

End of film.

“What did you think of the film?” Lucio wants to know.

“I think that it’s good for me to see the level of violence that existed in this country. I think that I don’t believe in violence.” I add, “And just as I was thinking this, Eduardo said to me, ‘I wish I could have joined the *guerrilla*’.”

“He doesn’t know war,” Lucio says with a cool shrug. How can he dismiss Eduardo’s comment so easily? As I think this, I am looking at Lucio’s face, realizing that he lived five years under fire, age 2 to 7. It is civilians who suffer most from war.

Settling into these feelings, I return to my desk and compose an email to the *Boston Globe* journalist who attended Saturday’s *reencuentro*. My purpose is to encourage her to include a line at the bottom of her article: “If you think that you might have been

separated from your biological family as a consequence of the armed conflict then contact...”

5 July 2005

Tuesday: Mom’s arrival

I invite some folks from Pro-Búsqueda to join me in greeting my mother at the airport but they say they cannot escape work and politely decline. Lucio’s words: “Thanks for inviting me. I would love to go, it would fascinate me, but I can’t.” To me, his words reveal what I have suspected. For some of the *jovenes encontrados*, my mom’s visit is a little bit of mother arriving for them also.

I head off to the airport with Don Jaime, the driver.

It is a pleasure to greet my mom, who sports a Miami tan and too-dark hair dye at the airport. “Get me out of this oven,” she whispers to me, giggling, as mother and daughter embrace. All smiles, she draws me away with her arms to give me the usual look up and down to check if I have lost or gained weight, and then hugs me again.

We climb into the pick-up truck, dragging behind her a mountain of suitcases, laden with gifts and donations. Don Jaime surprises me by repeating what we had rehearsed.

Concentrating on not cracking a smile, Jaime says, “*Bienvenida Señora Susana. Usted nos ha jodido el almuerzo.* [Welcome, Susana. You have screwed up our lunch break.]”

It is now 12:45 PM. My mom chuckles and then asks about the mango tree outside of my window. Don Jaime interjects, “How could it still have mangoes if Liz is near it?” We laugh for a good part of the way back to San Salvador.

It’s 2:30 PM when my mom and I arrive at Pro-Búsqueda. All present emerge from their corners to greet my mom. She gifts chocolate, and her smiles and hugs are returned with joy and curiosity. Liz looks like her mom, they say. Liz eats lots of mangoes, they report.

Lucio introduces himself and my mom gives him a special hug because she knows that he has been taking good care of me. She also knows a little of Lucio’s history from *Historias para tener presente* and, like me, is almost moved to tears by first meeting him. Lucio enjoys talking to my mom, hearing her words of praise and admiration for the work that Pro-Búsqueda does and for what as a *joven encontrado* he has overcome. Someone comments that my mom is *bocona* [big-mouthed] like me. Lucio says that he shares his testimony so that young people whose parents are still alive can learn to better appreciate their parents. (At this point, I am already frustrated by all the demands and needs of my mom, and his words soften me).

Eduardo is quieter than ever. I miss his “*Eh Liz, que honda?* What’s up? ‘Ow are you?’” playful, enthusiastic attitude.

“Eduardo, what is wrong? Is something bothering you?” I ask, concerned.

“I am just pensive,” he says slowly. I think that he is missing his mother. In my whole time here this is the first moment that I am seeing Eduardo’s eyes clouded by sadness.

My mom spends the afternoon at Pro-Búsqueda while I work with Margarita and Lucio to document the transfer of custody of DNA samples from Pro-Búsqueda to me. I will be delivering the samples to the DNA lab in Richmond upon my return to California.

Meanwhile, Dora, the hard-working accountant, does not leave my mom’s side. Each time I walk by the central foyer, I am amazed to see Dora still on the couch, conversing with my mother. I suggest that maybe Dora would like to talk privately with my mom, a licensed clinical social worker.

My mom and I venture off to the bus station to purchase tickets for Guatemala. An hour later, we return to Pro-Búsqueda and soon after I find my mom in Dora’s office. Good! The two of them are talking. I overhear Dora sniffing and with watery eyes, mentioning the names of her disappeared brothers. 5:30 PM. After giving Dora some more time with my mom, I interrupt them because Julia has prepared enchiladas for us. I had invited Lucio’s family out for dinner but they switched it to inviting us over. We pile into his car and make our way to dinner.

In the car, Lucio declares to my mom that he is my bodyguard. As we drive through his *barrio* [neighborhood], he prepares my mom for the aluminum shacks, dump, abandoned

cars, and other signs of poverty that surround his colorful home. “This is not the same as where Liz is staying. This is the place of *los pobres* [the poor people].”

My mom has a similar response to mine when given the same speech: “I see an environment of families.”

We receive a royal greeting. A little boy neighbor rides by on his bicycle perfectly in time to open the chain link gate to the driveway so Lucio can pull his car in. Luzecita sits on the step in front of the home, while Pablito and Rosita coyly run over to side of the car. Julia lingers in the doorway. Then we all step onto the patio for hugs and happy salutations.

Dinner is delicious. My mom showers rose petals of respect and admiration on these *jovenes encontrados*. At one point, I quietly comment to Agustin, “Wow, you are narrowly avoiding this conversation. My mom may not even realize that you too are a *joven encontrado*.” He smiles. He is like what his last name, *Guardado*, implies in Spanish, locked away, reserved. In a quiet, side conversation with Agustin, I learn that he is the younger of the two brothers whose testimonies jointly appear in *Historias para tener presente*. Actually, Agustin is the middle child but the youngest one was killed with their mother during the massacre at Sumpul. The two surviving brothers were raised on an air force base and are now both airplane mechanics. Agustin has a strained relationship with his older brother, who currently lives at the air force base near Soyopango.

At the end of the night, reclining in my room at Reina's house, my mother and I reflect on our evening. My mom notes the beautiful bond between Luzecita and Julia.

Apparently, Lucio had owned a house in the country but sold it because Julia did not want to live there. "I wanted to live close to Luzecita to help her," Julia had told us over dinner. I speculate that she needed to be close to Luzecita to fulfill her own needs as well.

I tuck the edges of the mosquito net under the mattress where my mom lies, take my spot on the skinny mat on the floor, and swiftly fall into sleep.

6 July 2005

Wednesday: Departing for Antigua, Guatemala

We wake up at 5:30 AM, in time to catch the luxury bus to Guatemala. I convince my mom to ride the local bus with me to the station. With my backpack on my back and her suitcase and 40 cents in my hand, I climb aboard the 30B for a pleasant journey to the upscale Zona Rosa. Wandering before the bus to Guatemala departs we stroll up to the luxurious Hotel El Presidente. The hotel's five stars match the adornments on the soldier's sleeve. U.S. soldiers in uniform and Salvadorans in suits chew their breakfasts on the elegant terrace overlooking the pool and artificial waterfall. This is eerily similar to scenes of bourgeois gatherings depicted in Hollywood's renditions of the Salvadoran civil war, namely *Salvador* and *Romero*.

7 July 2005

Thursday: Lago de Atitlan, Guatemala

Two Irish travelers on their way to El Salvador press me to tell them about my work at Pro-Búsqueda. Though I have been expressing a lot in written words, the spoken ones barely come out. While living this experience with Pro-Búsqueda, it seems that I have neglected to notice how powerful (and painful) this work is. Speaking them, the words sting. And how can I express to strangers that beyond the pain, I have found a reservoir of spiritual strength amongst my co-workers, the relatives of the disappeared, and in the *pueblo* as a whole?

10 July 2005

Sunday: Return to San Salvador

We have a 30-cent breakfast from an outdoor eatery while admiring the colors of dawn over Lake Atitlan. Today, our fifth day absorbing Guatemala and partaking in my what my mom loves to call “mother-daughter bonding,” we head southwest back to San Salvador.

At the bus station in Guatemala City, my mom uses a fistful of our remaining *quetzales* [Guatemalan money] to call Dad from the public phone. After hearing my dad’s warm voice, I phone Lucio’s house. It costs 3 *quetzales* a minute to call El Salvador and I only have 5 left so this will have to be a one-minute phone call.

Ring. Julia answers. “Hola, Liz!” She sounds happy to hear my voice.

“Julia, we are in the bus station in Guate and are arriving in San Salvador today at 6:30 PM.”

“Oh, so then you can’t come over for *pupusas*?”

“Well, we can. I can call you when we arrive. Is everything okay over there?”

“*Si*, Liz. My *abuela* died and we had to bury her yesterday.”

“*Ay*, Julia. I am so sorry, so sorry.” She assures me that they are okay and is very understanding about this being a short call. Bye.

Riding the bus into the “thumb of Central America” (Salvadorans’ loving reference to their homeland), my mom shares some old Cuban humor with me: “*Ahora vamos de Guate-mala a Guate-peor* [Now we are going from Guate-bad to Guate-worse].”

Once back at Reina’s house, I phone Julia. “I want you to come over,” she insists. “It is good for me to be with people now.” She describes the ceremony they attended on Saturday in Arcatao, Chalate to honor her grandmother. “She was like a mother to me.”

“Okay, Julia. We’d be glad to come over.”

I inform my mom that Lucio is coming to get us and that *pupusas* are already paid for. Her voice breaks as if she is crying inside. “They are so generous and they have so little.”

Beep. Honk.

Lucio and Rosita have arrived. Rosita looks adorable, dressed in the pink pants, red blouse, and barrettes that my mom had given her.

In the car, my mom says to Lucio, “Thank you for taking such good care of Lizzie.”

“Since we don’t have much family to love,” Lucio warmly responds, “we love our friends.”

A few moments later, my mother asks, “How is Julia doing? This must be a big loss for her.”

“Yes, her *abuela* was like a mother to her. And to me she was like my own grandmother.”

“So this is a difficult loss for you too, Lucio.”

“Yes.”

“And Julia is reliving all the losses that she suffered during the war,” my mom, the social worker, adds.

“But I am used to change. I went from this orphanage to that one. I told myself that the death of someone would never hurt me again. But this one does. It really hurts.” And then upon a little reflection, and in an attempt to hide his emotion, Lucio says, “Life is just to be born and die and procreate.”

Susana Maya, LCSW is in action. I feel relieved because I do not know how to handle these emotions, how best to support Julia and Lucio through this loss. I just listen as my mom pours out therapeutic wisdom and motherly love.

While Luzecita and Julia retrieve the *pupusas*, Lucio entertains my mom and I with home videos. The video of Rosita’s first birthday party features Luzecita’s arrival with baby Pablito, followed by Luzecita’s mother. I animatedly say, “That is Luzecita’s mother, It’s Pablito’s *abuelita!*” excited to have recognized her from photos at Pro-Búsqueda.

“No,” Rosita indignantly responds. “She is MY *abuelita.*”

Luzecita telephones when the *pupusas* arrive and we walk the 40 steps from Lucio’s home to her front door. At dinner, they inquire about our trip to Guatemala, genuinely

wanting to know if we enjoyed it. We struggle to talk about swimming leisurely in Lake Atitlan when Julia has just suffered yet another painful loss in her life. So, my mom and I steer the conversation away from ourselves. The *abuelita* died unexpectedly of a heart attack on Saturday.

My mom asks Julia, “Were you able to say goodbye to her at the burial?”

Julia tilts her head to the side, a downward gaze to hide her tears, and responds no. The hardest part for Julia is that her grandfather is now waiting to die. Julia and Lucio had invited him to live with them in San Salvador but he insisted that he wants to die on his own *tierra* [land] and join his wife soon.

“He is just looking for what to kill himself with,” Julia mutters.

I am listening to Julia’s words as I soap and rinse the plates. Addressing my mom, Julia delves into her story. “At first, my father would see me. That was because Pro-Búsqueda gave him money to come see me every month. Then when the money stopped coming, he did too. He drinks a lot. He started drinking more when my sister Marta died.” Marta and Julia grew up together in the orphanage and two years after the sisters’ *reencuentro* with their father, Marta died of leukemia.

Lucio interjects, “He just uses that [Marta’s death] as an excuse to drink more.”

“I hate him,” Julia declares, resolute and firm.

“That worries me,” says the social worker, “because when you hate someone else, *mi amor* [my love], there is always a little venom that stays in you and hurts yourself.”

“My father told me that I was not his daughter. Well, actually, my sister told me that he had said that. That hurts me. My mother was never unfaithful.” More tears. My mom dabs the folded napkin on Julia’s cheek.

Now Pablito is shrieking, demanding attention from the adults. Though the ethnographer in me wants to catch the details of Julia’s conversation with my mom, I realize that unless I get up from the table to play with the children, their mothers will have to attend to the kids and this conversation will end. Julia so rarely speaks about her pain. She hides behind the excuse, ‘I don’t remember.’ Now she is talking.

Pablito and Rosita playfully trap me in a room. We laugh a lot as toys dance with imagination.

While playing with the kids, I overhear Lucio repeat the line: “Luzecita’s family is the only family that is happy after the *reencuentro*.”

I hear my mother ask, “Luzecita, why do you think that is?”

Luzecita's response is simple and clear. "Because both sides make an effort."

When it's time to go home, my mom gives a farewell blessing to the *jovenes*, telling them that it was truly a "grand honor" to meet them. Julia, Lucio, and Rosita deliver us home. "May you dream with the little angels," adorable Rosita says out the car window as the vehicle pulls away.

11 July 2005

Monday: Exploring San Salvador with Mom

My mom and I walk together to Pro-Búsqueda. She follows up with Dora, and I communicate with Sancho about Violeta, the *joven* in Kentucky, who has not yet e-mailed me back.

We hire a taxi to explore downtown. The driver heeds my mom's request to take her to the street vendors who sell pirated DVDs at \$2 apiece. My mom peruses the merchandise, while I take note of the many beauty salons and barbershops. I hear a man shouting "*chocobanano!*" from across the street. He carries a blue cooler suspended by a strap hanging diagonally over his shoulder. "Mom, I am going to get a *chocobanano*. I will be right back."

Just as I step onto the sidewalk to lay claim to a *chocobanano*, I see a face that I recognize. It's Pilar, the older sister of Matilde and Gloria. Amazing! Out of the chaos

and disorientation of downtown I find a familiar face. Her brothers, Chuy and Ysidro, live in La Libertad. Pilar lives in San Salvador, where she sells coffee and sweet bread from a little cart.

Pilar grins brightly as I greet her. “I have been wanting to go to Pro-Búsqueda to get the photographs [from the *reencuentro*],” she tells me immediately, “but I do not have the phone number.”

I show her my tattered version of Pro-Búsqueda’s card that I carry in my coin purse and she copies down the phone number. I recognize some of her children milling about on the street and in the beauty salon.

“How many children do you have?”

“Let’s see, how many are they?” Pilar asks her friend who sweeps the floor of the beauty salon. I realize later that this is a joke, a joke that covers up the unbearableness of Pilar’s poverty. Aware that my mom is looking for me, I quickly grab a *chocobanano*, and bring Pilar across the street to introduce her to my mom.

My mom and I invite Pilar to come with us to Custcatlan Park where we will visit the memorial to the civilians who were disappeared or perished during the war.

“Did you know that there is another wall, a memorial of the military?” the taxi driver says to me, trying to stuff my mind with political opinion the way one stuffs a turkey.

“No, I did not know that. Thank you for telling me.” In any case, he is very kind about Pilar joining us to come to the wall. She stores her cart, and with two of her girls, climbs into the back seat of the taxi.

After a short drive, we learn that the park is closed on Mondays. “Sorry Pilar, but now you know where it is and you can return.” She comes to the park sometimes but did not know about the wall.

As we drive Pilar back to her coffee cart, she tells me that she has been hurting since the *reencuentro*. She misses Matilde and Gloria and feels distant from her brothers. “I grew up on my own,” she tells me. (It strikes me that those are precisely the words the journalist had used regarding Gloria.) She adds, “and now my brothers expect me to visit them.”

“Do you have anyone that you can talk to about what you are going through?” I ask.

“No, no one I know has had experiences like mine.” I tell her about the support services available through Pro-Búsqueda such as workshops for relatives of the disappeared.

Pilar tells me that Matilde is still in San Salvador and they plan to see each other in 12 days. “Matilde said that she will take me to the United States but I told her that I cannot go because of the children. I cannot leave them. Matilde said that we could bring all of the children. My husband started to cry when I told him this.”

“How would Matilde bring them? With a coyote?” I ask.

“We’ll see. Who knows?”

We reach the street of beauty salons, barbershops, and \$2 DVDs. “Bye Pilar. See you tomorrow at Pro-Búsqueda.”

I feel sad after being with Pilar. It’s not just the trauma from the war, being an orphan, the disappearances of her sisters, or the *reencuentro*. It’s that the struggle continues. Each day is hard for her. She is supporting seven children. One coffee from her cart costs 12 cents. How many cups does she sell in a day?

I turn to my mother for support. “Mom, Pilar’s family has so many issues.”

“Ay, Lizzie. All of the families in El Salvador are like that,” she says with a mother’s concern. There is truth in her words. Each person that I have met here is struggling, enduring poverty before the war, then the war, and now poverty after the war. Deep

emotional scars persist. How can a whole country operate when families are in so much pain?

While I ruminate on the psychosocial impacts of poverty and war-related trauma, my mom seeks refuge in the \$24 seafood lunch buffet at *Hotel El Presidente*. It is her way of wiping off the mental dust that she picked up downtown. For years after leaving Cuba she lived in poverty (though she still insists that she never felt poor). Abundance is healing for her. I, on the other hand, struggle to justify my bean soup as I recall the statistics on child malnutrition in Central America.

We ride the 30B, arriving at Pro-Búsqueda at 5 PM. My mom greets Eduardo with a hug, mindful that he was gloomy and probably missing his mother the day my mom arrived. She speaks with Dora, and Dora seems glad to obtain my mom's e-mail address. I convince a reluctant Fatima to help me compile a batch of *reencuentro* photos for Matilde's sister Pilar.

At 7 PM, at our request, Lucio drives my mom and me to Metrocentro. Though it is awkward, my mom insists upon buying gifts for Lucio's and Luzecita's families. She wants to express her gratitude for their generosity towards me and again, seeks to heal through abundance.

Lucio, gracious about accepting a gift while gently refusing a number of times, subtly hints that he would like to enter the *Siemens* department store. My mom and I follow his

lead towards the kitchen appliances. "...Julia has been asking me for a blender. It is something that I have to buy." My mom snatches it from him and moves on to her next objective, a gift for Luzecita. Lucio picks out a hair-care set for Luzecita replete with curling iron and hair dryer. On our way to the cash register he pauses to examine a plastic pitcher and glasses. My mom seizes them and heads to pay. \$72.26. She gives it a "*tarjetazo*" [my mom's made-up word for a swipe of the credit card], and Lucio walks out of the department store with his arms full.

I reflect aloud in the car, "It's funny with material gifts. They are useful but they are really just a symbol."

"Of admiration and caring," my mom finishes on my pause.

Lucio tells my mom that he is going to miss us. I'll have been in El Salvador for two months, which he says is enough time to grow to care about someone.

Early tomorrow morning my mom will fly north. I'll miss her. There is still no water in Reina's home. (Running water has been out for three days. We sparingly use the water stored in buckets to flush, wash hands, brush teeth, and drop by drop, pretend to shower.)

Thanks for visiting, Mom. I kiss her goodnight, tuck in her the mosquito net, and stretch out on the lime green floor mat.

12 July 2005

Tuesday: Day at work after Mom's departure

At 5 AM, I awaken to the sound of my mother's sandals scuffling across the bedroom floor. From my spot on the floor mat I can smell the odor of my mom's pee wafting in from the bathroom; there is no water to flush the toilet, let alone to shower.

Mateo the taxi man comes at 6 AM to deliver my mom to the airport. Daughter and mother say goodbye.

It's a pleasure to be at Pro-Búsqueda. In the afternoon, I phone Violeta, the *joven* who will reunite with her biological father if she chooses to. It is lunch hour in Kentucky. I leave a message on her cell phone. "Hi Violeta, it's Liz calling from Pro-Búsqueda. I am not sure if I said this clearly before, but I just wanted to say regarding your coming to El Salvador that we want you to do whatever is best for you. I hope to talk to you later. Have a wonderful day." I hang up. Is she avoiding my call?

"Sancho, I left a message for Violeta." He fans out a big sigh.

Sancho, what would you like me to do? I swallow my pride and despite feeling like a stalker, I agree to phone Violeta again, this time at work. The Canadian journalists are coming in two weeks and Violeta still does not know the proposed arrangement. The

journalists are willing to pay for her trip if they can attend her *reeuncuentro*. The journalists want an answer and I want Violeta to not feel pressured.

“Hi Violeta. I am calling to see how you are doing...Do you have any thoughts about whether you would like to come to El Salvador?”

“I think I would like to save up money and come next year,” she replies. “This July feels too rushed.”

“I admire you for saying what is best for you.” I feel Violeta’s calmness grow. She has a sweet, Southern accent. I imagine her with blonde hair. Will she really look like her Salvadoran siblings?

I give Violeta my home phone number in Berkeley. “Please feel free to call me anytime. Right now, I am calling you because Sancho has asked me to. Once in California, out of respect for your privacy I will not have your number, but I would gladly speak with you anytime you call.”

We talk about a transfer of digital photographs and letters between her and her biological family, the intermediary steps. “It might help you to feel more prepared next summer. You say that you want to come next summer? I plan to come back next summer too.”

And she thanks me!

Fittingly, Eduardo gives me his trademark line “*Al suave es la honda* [Smooth is the way]” as I walk by his desk.

On the ride home with Lucio, I tell him, “I was wrong. I thought that I was leaving for Santa Ana on Friday but I am leaving on Thursday.”

Disappointed, he says, “Then you have 8 days left (with us). We are going to miss you, but you are going to go back to your life in USA and forget us.”

“No. I will miss you all too.”

He tells me about the blender drink he made yesterday and wishes me a good evening.

I heat my dinner, a corn tamale, in Reina’s kitchen. I then retreat into my room to contemplate my experience of San Salvador, observing the nostalgia that has begun to creep in.

13 July 2005

Wednesday: Today, I feel good

Dora stops into the psychology office to invite me for lunch. She is willing to go to the restaurant Casa Grande, where the food does not hurt my stomach.

Ofelia, Dora, and I lunch together. Mother and daughter are an adorable pair. Mama Ofelia tries to feed me ham. Without asking, she cuts half of her *torta* [quiche] and puts it on my plate. “Thank you Ofelia but I don’t eat ham.”

“This is more spinach than ham,” she responds, unbothered by my plea. The half piece travels to Dora’s plate. I love being in the presence of this pair. They talk of their dreams for the future, of adding a second room, of their *terreno* [plot of land], of the hens and plants.

We leave Ofelia at the stop for the 22 Bus and Dora and I walk on. Realizing that I’m going home soon, I try to learn more about the civil war by asking Dora, “What are the different factions of the FMLN?”

“I don’t know” is her first response. “RN, FLP, and FAN,” she then tells me.

“Which one did you go around with?”

“I don’t know. We were part of the *masa* [civilians], sometimes we were with one group or the other, I do not know.” Her answer reveals to me how little Dora and Ofelia have talked about the war years. Mama Ofelia had told me quite clearly which group she and her children were affiliated with and that her second lover was with another group, making it impossible for them to be together.

I try to talk Dora into dating someone. “Nah, Liz.”

We are back at the office for the after-lunch tradition of reading our horoscopes. Mine says “You will have a romantic encounter at a party.”

Dora teases, “Liz, you did not tell me that you were going to a party.”

“*Iba* [She was going to go],” Yanira says, cruising through the foyer and overhearing.

Yanira still wasn’t buying my excuse for not going dancing with her. I had told her that my mom forbade it. In fact, many Salvadorans had also warned me that it would be dangerous for me to go to a dance club at night.

Lucio offers me a ride. In the car, I mention that I am not sure what exactly will come of my fieldnotes. I convey that as I proceed with my thesis, I trust him to let me know if something I’m doing does not seem good for the *jovenes encontrados*.

He replies with an example of a colleague who he feels manipulated the *jovenes*. “She used me to help interview them and was very nice while she needed them. What she was really doing was completing her thesis, and when she did not need them anymore, she dropped them. She took advantage of the generosity of the *jovenes*.”

“What can I learn from this experience? How can I ensure I don’t do the same?”

“Be sincere. On the first day you came with a proposal. You told us what you wanted to do, so I am open with you about every aspect of my life.”

Passing my neighborhood, he chuckles, “I turned without even asking. You want to come to my house, right?”

“Yes,” I reply with a big smile. Surely within moments of seeing Rosita, my headache will disappear.

Now we’re talking about social class. “Do you feel like I live in another world?”

“You have possibilities that we’ll never have but you are humble. You value friendship above material things.” It is so easy to value friendship when I am with them. They fill me with joy.

At Lucio's home, Luzecita thanks me for my mom's "expensive" gift and gives me a "humble souvenir" to deliver to my mother. Julia prepares a toasted-lettuce-American cheese-cucumber-sandwich for my dinner, and Rosita styles my hair into pigtails while little Pablito insists I eat the extra tomato he has brought me from his home.

Feeling at ease, we talk about religion. Lucio believes in God but does not like religion. "Religion is just to organize people," he states, alluding to the difference between religion and spirituality.

"Do you believe in reincarnation?" I ask, ever curious.

"Yes, because the soul has to go somewhere," Lucio confidently replies.

"When someone dies I wonder where the soul goes," chimes Julia while scrunching her nose.

Lucio philosophizes, "I believe that everyone has in life what they deserve."

I test his idea. "How about this country suffering the war?" Did Salvadorans deserve the misery of the war?

Lucio meets the challenge. "We fought the war because we did not like the injustice. Some of us paid the price more than others. But we all have what we deserve—what we

make out of life.” Pausing to make sure I am listening, he adds, “I believe in God because a lot of good things have happened in my life.”

Now we talk about dancing. “Luzecita, do you like to dance?” I wish I had not asked. The shrapnel that cut her hips comes to mind. I am amazed by how gracefully Luzecita lives with her physical debility. She sits in the chair and smiles when others dance. Walking is a challenge.

“No.” Three-year-old Rosita is by far the best dancer in the room.

Julia braids her daughter’s hair while she, Lucio, and I have a stimulating chat about how Latinos are perceived in the U.S. We then talk about the family’s fears: HIV-infected needles are deliberately placed on seats in movie theatres; HIV-positive people ride the bus and if you get a cut they could infect you; Hepatitis B is on the telephones. “I am very protective,” Lucio proudly declares.

I ask Julia if she feels like she is in a cage. “No, I don’t want to go out.”

Bang bang sounds. “Is that gunfire?” Julia asks.

“No, toys (fireworks),” Lucio says.

After settling in at Reina's, I knock on Mary's door. Mary, a church-abiding housewife from the Midwest, rents the room adjacent to mine. She came to El Salvador for two weeks of Spanish lessons and cultural exchange at the CIS, the school where Reina works. Mary chats with Darcy, a Canadian political science graduate student who has docked at Reina's home for a few days.

Mary and Darcy are googly-eyed, in awe of the charismatic character that just graced their dinner table. Rodolfo Estevez was a commander in the FMLN. He told of his ideology, of being "covered by leaves and hearing soldiers walk over his head," of his belief that leadership means empowering the community because that way once the leader is dead the community persists in the fight. Now an expatriate, he is a friend of Reina's who drops in after ten years. He doesn't want to write about the FMLN because that would be strategically unfavorable, since he believes that there will be another uprising in the next generation.

"Throughout Latin America, violence will surge," Darcy predicts, still basking in the encounter. The ladies are drunk with their shared experience.

Mary copies Darcy's notes from the conversation with Estevez into her notebook.

Though I missed this godly guest Mary kindly acknowledges, "You probably hear lots of stories that touch you."

“Yes, I do stumble into a lot of stories,” I manage to reply. “They do not come from commanders, though. But human emotion is universal.”

Darcy interrupts. “Did you hear what Angela found out?” she excitedly asks Mary.

Mary: “Yes, yes. You explain [to Liz].”

“Today Angela learned,” Darcy crisply informs me, “that her adoption was illegal.” Knowing that I’ll take keen interest, she elaborates, “She was taken away from her family. Her mother was forced to sign papers. The adoption agency that carried out the adoption is out of business. Her [adoptive] parents have no idea and she does not want to tell them. It would break their heart. Today she learned that she was born in a private hospital. That’s a big deal.” The private hospital suggests that lawyers arranged Angela’s adoption before her birth.

I recall the facts of this case, which is already familiar to me. Angela, a Salvadoran-born adoptee who resides in the United States, traveled to El Salvador this summer to explore her roots—perhaps more deeply than she imagined. While studying Spanish and Salvadoran culture at the CIS, she learned about Pro-Búsqueda. Two days ago, she wandered into Pro-Búsqueda’s office. Would it be possible to locate her biological mother?

Mary shares that she has a Salvadoran friend in Kansas City whose children were “taken away by lawyers.” Confused, the earnest woman wearing the wooden cross turns to me for an explanation. “As a mother, this is hard for me to understand. How is it that these children were taken away?”

Squeakyrusty. Tight-jaws (me) does not want to talk. “It happened in a number of ways.” It is surprisingly painful for me to answer her question. Although I have been writing vigorously and sending my notes to my professors these experiences were communicated in silence. I am not ready to voice what I have lived and what I have observed being lived. Perhaps it is out of respect for the words that are not yet written, wanting to keep my mind stream pure and focused. Or maybe it’s because if I talk about it, it will feel too painful to continue writing, to continue coping in San Salvador. Once it is on paper, printed, and no more changes to the word document allowed, then maybe I can talk about the horror and joy. For now, I am in a pool of silence. I give a terse yet informative response. I appreciate this opportunity to observe how a rock feels when falling onto the pond of an inner silence.

CHAPTER 8—Angela and Pedro

14 July 2005

Thursday: Meeting Angela & Pedro

It's 5:15 AM when I hear Jazmin shout "Mom, there is water coming out of the tap!" Hallelujah. Wonderful! I pounce out of bed with a joyful beat. I am going to have a shower today, a real one! Cold, who cares? Clean hair, clean body, happy me. Then I'll wash clothes. Wow. It has become a blessing, a luxury, to have the water available to wash clothes by hand. Clean. Soap bubbles. Rinse. Clean! I eat breakfast, walk with Mary and Darcy to the CIS, and then continue on my own.

"*Barbaric one*, you showered," Lucio greets me when I arrive to work. Sebastian has me running around figuring out details about bank accounts and international deposits. Father Jon wants another lesson on *DNAView*. I teach him for three hours.

At 11:30, we are interrupted by a phone call that Father Jon receives on his cellular. Father Jon's side of the conversation: "The adoptions were not necessary illegal but rather illicit one could say... Could you please repeat that? I have not adequately understood... Why are you asking these questions?"

Ismael and Eduardo are singing in the hallway so I get up and listen to the duet, leaving Father Jon to his phone call. It turns out that the phone call is about Angela, the Salvadoran-born young woman from the United States whom Darcy and Mary told me

about yesterday. After the call I learn that Father Jon had been speaking to Angela's adoptive father, a man who adores his daughter and who fires questions nervously, protectively. "Angela will be here between 12 and 12:30," Father Jon informs me. "You can collect the DNA and do the interview with her."

I notify Margarita, the investigator in charge of Angela's case, that Angela will be arriving at Pro-Búsqueda shortly. "I am leaving at 1 PM today," Margarita responds, rushing her words and tensing her arms tightly at her side while she speaks. "I have to make some purchases because my husband is leaving for Sweden." Okay. Hopefully Angela will arrive on time so that Margarita and I can attend to her together.

I have 10 minutes to eat the cheese sandwich that Julia prepared for me yesterday, that I now stuff with two hard-boiled eggs. I can barely keep myself in my seat as I am eating because I realize the meaning behind what Margarita has just told me. "How long is your husband going to Sweden for?" I anticipate asking. I scarf the sandwich and run over to her office to ask. "For at least one year," is her response.

We joke because Margarita has dressed sexy today, in a tight green blouse and short black skirt. "So he knows what he'll be missing," I tease, continuing, "We women always have a plan behind what we're doing." We laugh. Then I ask, "Margarita, what can I do for you tomorrow? I know that you might be sad. What can I bring you?" She picks chocolate from my list of offerings. Deal.

I am washing the smell of boiled egg yolk off my hand, and now someone is calling me.

Angela has arrived. She is talking on her cell phone to her worried father in the U.S.

“Talk with her,” Father Jon gently commands me.

I sit on the opposite side of the desk, on the side where someone who works here sits.

“Hi, my name is Liz. I’m a volunteer. They asked me to interview you because I speak English.” Angela is shaky. She is crying even as I introduce myself. A folded napkin in hand, she dabs it on her cheek. I tell her about the genetic bank. Yes, she knows about it, she tells me with her Salvadoran eyes and American accent. So today we are going to collect a DNA sample, is that okay? Oh good, you did that in your anthropology class. Great. Still tearing, very delicate. I weave in and out of getting through the protocol and just making her feel okay. Your investigator, Margarita, has to see her husband off. Is it all right if we collect the DNA sample first?

Okay, now the interview. The interview is really designed for relatives looking for a disappeared child—no, let’s not say disappeared, that has too much political connotation. For families looking for a child, I tell Angela. Some of the questions may be painful. In fact, they are even hard for me to ask. But let’s do it. We’ll go as slow as you need. When were you last seen by your biological family? Answer: day of birth. Who was responsible for your adoption? Did you have a birthmark? Were you baptized? What color is your skin? Eyes? Hair? We fill out the family tree. Angela knows her original surname and has heard that before her adoption she may have been called Helena.

By now the exchange between us has warmed a great deal. Angela is from Berkeley, the town where I've lived eight years! She works in an after-school program for at-risk youth to keep them out of gangs. It turns out that our sisters are neighbors; our nephews may even attend the same small family-run day care across the street from King Park. It's funny to mention Ashby and Walgreens, but it serves an important purpose during the course of this conversation: Trust. "Angela, I want you to think of me as someone who you can ask your questions to. I know that you are smiling right now and that is really wonderful to see, and I also know that there are times when you won't be smiling. You might be crying. You can call me when you are crying. Or come to my house in Berkeley." She appears grateful. I add, "I have been so blessed, fortunate that many Salvadorans here have been generous in sharing their stories with me. The least I can do is use the awareness that I have gained to help you, to listen to you. You can talk to me and I might understand a little more than other people at home."

Angela nods appreciatively through tears, and smiling, replies, "Father Jon Cortina said to me yesterday on the telephone 'Wow, you're not freaking out. I would be freaking out' and I said 'Don't worry, that will come later'."

This is Angela's first visit to El Salvador. She has always known that she was adopted and her Berkeley parents kept her well informed about Salvadoran politics, history, and culture. She flushed her green card down the toilet when she was three years old imitating something she saw on a cartoon. It has been an ordeal to prove her existence since then and as a result, she has only recently been issued her first passport, one bearing

the American eagle. “But I didn’t have to pay the \$10 tourist visa [to enter El Salvador] because I’m Salvadoran.”

“As you connect more with your culture, there will be many other benefits. This is just the beginning.”

“I never know what to ask,” Angela says, alluding to her state of shock. She expects that most of her questions will come later, although there is one issue that perturbs her. When she arrived at the CIS, the language school in San Salvador, and learned that she could search for her biological mother, she was told that of the possibility that she was kidnapped. She adores and trusts her parents in Berkeley. Could she have been stolen?

Careful to state that I don’t know the details of her case, I speak generally about the circumstances that led to adoption in other Pro-Búsqueda cases that I’m familiar with. In vague terms, I tell of deceitful lawyers and corrupt judges. Now Angela looks even more confused, so without mentioning names, I relate Ofelia’s story. “Women were told that their children would be taken to a safer place and then returned. Mothers, desperate to save the lives of their children, obliged. So, the adoptions were legal in the paper-work sense but the mothers had been lied to. In some cases, lawyers even received money for the children, though the mothers had handed over their children with the best of intentions.” I pause to gauge Angela’s reaction. “I am not implying that this is what happened to you. I just wanted to demystify some of the language you have been hearing.”

She appears appreciative, and less shaky now. “Yes, I read in some papers when I was younger that my mother gave me up to save my life.”

The interview is finished. Latin romance radio sings in the background as Angela and I casually chat. Angela is handling all of this amazingly well and I share that impression with her. She smiles gratefully and says that her adoptive family is “freaking out.” This fall, she begins university classes in Davis and will commute daily from Berkeley. There are many changes happening in this young woman’s life.

I give her *Historias para tener presente*, the book containing the testimonies of Lucio, Luzecita, Agustin, and Tito, while reminding her that we don’t know for certain that her adoption was a consequence of the war. Angela thanks me and begins a goodbye.

“Where are you going now and how are you getting there?” I ask.

“I was just going to take a taxi on the street but—” reading the disapproval on my face she contemplates aloud, “I suppose that’s not a good idea.” I give her the phone number of a trustworthy taxi service and then, learning that it’s a short distance, offer to walk with her to her guesthouse.

It’s one of those moments where a walk is more than just a walk, it means support, that someone is caring for you when you are emotionally exhausted: soul food.

As we walk, Angela comments, “It’s interesting to be learning about El Salvador’s history through the cultural programs at the CIS because it’s like this is my history, too.” She plans to return to El Salvador in December, she tells me, to spend time with the family of a friend who lives in the USA. She asks me about my thesis, and I use this as an opportunity to obtain informed consent to write fieldnotes about our conversations. Angela studies sociology and is interested in the factors that lead youth to enter gangs. “I know there’s more,” she tells me, beyond the reasons commonly mentioned in the literature. She describes a term paper that she has written on the notorious Salvadoran gang *Salvatrucha*.

It’s about a 20-minute walk to her guesthouse. Hot, sweaty, and I didn’t bring money for taking the bus (20 cents) back nor any for a *chocobanano*. Angela tells me that she wants to see me again soon. How about lunch? Okay, let’s be in touch via email. And in our goodbye I am given gifts: “Thank you so much. You really helped me.” And a hug.

I walk back to Pro-Búsqueda, crossing the street a little too daringly. I feel beautiful and I wish I didn’t. Why did I wear that black skirt from Guatemala? “*Ay, mamita* [Wow, little mama]” catcalls roll out from under the predators’ breath so only I can hear as I walk by. *Guacala* [Yuck]!

Back at Pro-Búsqueda, I’m sweaty and thirsty from the walk when Fatima invites me to Las Pulgas market to buy a *chocobanano*. As we cross Los Heroes Boulevard Fatima

relates, “A *pandillero* [gang member] sat right next to me on the bus on my way to work. The *cobrador* [agent on the bus responsible for collecting the fares] had to give him \$1 so he would not assault anyone.” I ask whether the *pandillero* had solicited the payment and she says no. Since it was clear that she felt afraid, I ask why she didn’t get off the bus earlier. “We were in an ugly neighborhood.”

Back again at Pro-Búsqueda. Sancho is out. I have the psychology office to myself. I want to check something on the computer but it’s too slow to type with one hand; the other is occupied with feeding me the *chocobanano*. So I’ll wait. It has been an exhausting morning and this will be my break. I rest my feet up on the desk. Pedro nonchalantly enters the office and pulls up a white plastic chair. He sits in it. Oh, I am seated in the psychologist’s seat. It’s funny because I am not a psychologist but I sit behind the desk. (At some moments here, I have felt perfectly adequate in addressing people’s emotions. For example, my conversation with Angela had gone exceedingly well. However, on other occasions, I think, ‘I can’t deal with this.’ For example, I was glad to pass off to my mom the responsibility of supporting Julia as she mourned her *abuelita*.)

To my surprise, Pedro starts talking. Hmm. I eat my *chocobanano* and partially listen. Now he’s talking about quitting smoking, how that was the first vice he left behind. “I used to be so filled with vices,” he is saying. This is the first time that we are talking eye to eye, face to face. I already know too much about him and I’m eating my *chocobanano*, but he’s still talking. His speech is calm and slow; his voice gentle and

steady. Okay, maybe I'm listening a little bit more now. He finishes what he wants to say about the cigarettes.

"Pedro, you weren't here on Monday or Tuesday," I say. "Where did you go?"

"I went to see an aunt to ask for her forgiveness. From the world where I come from, it's really difficult to ask for forgiveness, but I went to Usulután to see her. That's where I was." The world where he comes from... reflecting into this world has visibly shaken him.

Now he looks at the ground and pauses. He wants to start from the beginning. When is the beginning? His re-birth day—the day of his *reencuentro*. "I was working at a carnival," he tells me. "Arsenio from Pro-Búsqueda found me. I was working at the game where you shoot a gun and according to what you shoot, you get a prize. So they came and said 'How much does it cost to play' and I say '5 colones [former Salvadoran currency]'."

That is all that I hear about his *reencuentro* because now the stream of conversation drifts to childhood. "I was with my adoptive family until I was 7, and then I just wanted to be free. To be free. Then I worked in the carnival." He is telling me this because he wants to talk about the vices again. "I was so full of drugs."

"What kinds of drugs?"

He responds, “Marijuana, coke, crack, and the pill.”

“What is the pill?”

“Diazepam [Valium].” He continues, “I spent years of my life as if in a dream because I smoked marijuana always more and more.” A continuous high and it sounds like he was continuously tranquilizing himself too. “Alex is what they called me then...I got so sick”

“From what?”

“Intoxication. My face was very swollen,” Pedro explains. “My skin was pale. I was so sick. So my *patron*, the boss at the carnivals, took me to the hospital but they wouldn’t treat me because they were afraid I would die. I was important to my *patron* because I was in charge of other people. So he took me to another doctor and the doctor said, ‘I will not treat him because he is going to die and then you will blame me.’ My patron pulled out his gun, and said, ‘Either you treat him, or I shoot you.’ So the doctor said that he would treat me but if I died it was not his fault. My blood was yellow. It was not blood anymore because of all of the drugs. So they put lots of punctures in my mouth and they treated me. I have lots of scars in my mouth.”

“Where?” I ask, requesting to see the scars.

“In my mouth,” he repeats.

“So after I got out of the hospital, I went back to the streets again. This is when I did the initiation into the gang. They told me to choose [my name]. So I chose Duande.”

“What does Duande mean?”

“Something diabolical. It was such a violent world. I come from a world so full of violence. I lived in a world without laws. I lost all respect for the laws. I evaded the police by giving them so many different names and I never carried my documents so they could never bring me in.”

“What did you have to do for the initiation?” I’ve heard too much about Pedro from others and I want to be relieved of this by Pedro telling me himself about his past.

“So full of violence,” he repeats the refrain.

“Did you kill anyone?”

“No, these things you cannot talk about.” His face is turning red-colored.

I change the question to “How many?”

“No, you don’t talk about this.” He is shy. Blushing his way out of the conversation. To me, the understanding is that the answer to my first question is “Yes” and to the second is “I will not tell you how many.” Because instead of telling me that he never killed anybody, he again talks about “lots of violence.” “I used to spend nights to myself crying,” he says. Today, Pedro is 21. The boy whose life he describes was 8, 10, 15, spilling blood with fists, knives, and guns. While I am sitting in this room, alone with him, I don’t want to know more about spilling blood.

Now Pedro is deep into telling gang stories.

“This is when my hatred for *Dieciocho* [*Eighteen*, the nemesis of Pedro’s gang, *Salvatrucha*] was born in my heart. Many people have a pain or regret in their heart,” he says, with his hand gestures leading all attention to behind his sternum and a little to the left. “But I had hatred. 26 people from *Dieciocho* grabbed me. They put a knife to my throat. Do you know what that’s like? It’s not nice to have someone saying ‘See that mud over there? That is where your head is going to be because it is going to come off.’ They beat me up. But no, that is not where my hatred for them arose. This is when my hatred was born: I received a fine of 2500 *colones* for trespassing on the territory of *Dieciocho*. Eight guys from *Dieciocho* came to my house to tell me about the fine. They came at 6:30 AM. They said that I had until 11 AM to pay the fine, or else I would be finished. What am I going to do? So I called my *patron*. And he said, ‘They don’t even realize how much trouble they are getting in. There is going to be such a big problem. They don’t even realize there is going to be such a big problem’. Only a little time

remained. Just minutes. What remained to me were just minutes. It was 10:30 and my *patron* still had not come. But look how God is. My friend comes. He was a clown. I used to be a circus artist too—we were friends. I saw him and I told him to come into my house. I told my friend, ‘Look, I need 2500 *colones* by 11 AM.’ He said that the *patron* had come yesterday to collect all the money and so there was no money in the box. He asked, ‘Will anything happen if you are with me?’ and I said no. ‘Come then. Let’s go,’ he said. I asked him if I could borrow 20 *colones* even though the bus only cost 8 *colones*. So we walk out of the house and the guys from *Dieciocho* surround us. I say, ‘We are just going to have breakfast.’ They say ‘Okay. It is good that you have breakfast before you go.’” Pedro laughs three beats as he tells me this. A nervous smile cracks across his face. He tells this story slowly, leaving the listener in suspense, feeling the passage of the precious moments, each one gone brings a slimmer chance that he will escape. “I did not go to breakfast. We got on the bus. I got out of there. That was when I grew to hate *Dieciocho*.”

Now he’s telling me about the world of violence again. Here come those chilling words. My ears are hearing them from him for the first time. “I used to love to see blood run. It was as if I felt like I was dead if I did not see blood run.”

He tells me about an injury to his nose. “This bone was split in two.” His lion face shows me the ramp to his curly nostrils. Bump-bump. If he were a patient, I would touch it because I am curious and I want to feel a bone split in two. But I will not touch Pedro. No. So I feel my own nose instead, bone intact. “There was a big blow to the

back of my head. You know, like when you pick up a ball that is flat and it just caves in? That is how the back of my head was.” He points to where the cranium would be protecting the cerebellum, or maybe a little more superior, the occipital lobe of the cerebrum. He does not seem to have balance, coordination problems. And his occipital lobe, his visual system seems intact. He did talk about a lot of demonic visions. Who is this person? Why am I still talking to him? I am listening so intently. Why do I trust him?

“It is God’s miracle that the hole in my head healed. I don’t understand. God did it. God can heal but also man has to take a part. Man has to want the healing. There are only two types of law in this world, the material law and the law of God. God gives me visions. He talks to me. Just last night he revealed to me that I am going to be taking a trip to the United States.”

“Do you know when you will be going?”

“God has not yet given me a date.”

“Has he revealed to you where you will go?”

Pedro’s face brightens. He answers slowly, “To Los Angeles. He has told me that I will go to Los Angeles. There is a tall building there. It’s white. I think maybe it’s the tallest building in Los Angeles. It’s next to a freeway. Near there is some land. I will build a

house there, a house of God, a church. He has revealed this to me. Near downtown Los Angeles. My purpose for going is to help clean the air. I get my information from God in my dreams. I can talk about God endlessly. I am always thinking how appreciative I am of God. He sent me to see my aunt to ask for forgiveness. He sent me to see a girl once who was sick with cerebral disease. He told me to put my hand on her for healing.”

Pedro tells me that there are three friends who have survived the gangs, but he is the best off of all of them (the dead and the survivors) because his two friends are in jail.

Pedro’s speech is filled with biblical quotes. He depicts himself as the holiest man in centuries to have walked the earth. Is he crazy?

Lucio storms into the room. He has just driven back from San Vicente where he was collecting DNA samples. “*Ya vine* [I already arrived],” he announces from the doorway.

“What?” I say. Who walks into a room announcing ‘*ya vine*’?

Since I had said ‘what?’ Lucio announces his arrival again. “*Ya vine, ya vine.*” It was as if Lucio had heard me talking to him in my head. As if he knew that I was relying on him to help give me a sense of safety after listening to Pedro talk about loving to see the blood run. I live to protect human bodies, and Pedro lived for destruction.

I cannot muster another word to address Lucio because I am mesmerized by Pedro's story. I am naïve. I am curious. And I am a little embarrassed to admit my fascination. This world of violence sounds like a foreign land to me. Seeing that Pedro and I are talking, Lucio steps back from the beneath the doorway and begins to shut the door. 'NO!' I shout inside my head. 'Do not leave me in this room with the door closed NO.' Lucio closes the door, and then, as if reading my thoughts again, with his hand still on the doorknob, he re-opens it to halfway, and walks off.

Pedro continues to talk to me about his aspirations. He has been quoting the bible extensively, but he is illiterate. "He has told me that I will read his word." Pedro tells me of other dreams: to have a carpentry shop; to travel to Los Angeles, the first of many lands that God has promised he will visit; and to have a wife. "But many go to church because they want a blessing. One has to go to church for love of God."

Pedro lives at Pro-Búsqueda because he has nowhere else to go. He is virtually penniless. I don't know how money sweeps his way. Talking to him, I can see that he doesn't care. He says that he has a Master's degree in carpentry. "But I can't sell my art for a few cents," he tells me.

I ask him if his life is in danger. Are the police out to get him? Or *Dieciocho*? He says no, they don't recognize him because "God confuses faces." Pedro relates, "I went to talk to some guys from *Dieciocho* to tell them about God, but they did not recognize me. I went with a long-sleeved shirt. I was carrying the bible and my hairstyle was different.

I went to talk to my friends from *M.S. [Mara Salvatrucha]*. I told them that I was Duande. They said to get out of here because Duande is dead. ‘I saw that Duande was shot,’ they told me. So I went away. And it’s true. God raised me from the Dead. He raised me from the Dead more than once.”

“Are you saying that you were shot [to death]?”

“No, I died from intoxication. And God raised me from the Dead.”

Pedro decides to tell me a story about money to illustrate his relationship with God. “I eat when God gives me food. Yesterday, I went to the church. I only had \$3 with me. That was all I had. So I went to church and my plan was to give 40 cents. Then, when I was about to give the money, I heard God say that he wanted \$1. So I gave God \$1. Today, I was walking back from the bus. I was coming back from visiting my aunt in Usulután. I was near San Luis and I heard ‘Here comes your dollar back’ and I look on the ground and I find a dollar.”

I know it’s a silly question but I have been listening for a long time. So despite feeling foolish, I ask anyway. “Do you know why you sat down and started talking to me?”

Pedro’s smile is wide. “If you listen to God you know why. Ask God.”

Okay, if all this magicky spiritual stuff is true then Lucio will hear me calling him to get me out of this conversation. I am interested in hearing Pedro's story but now it is turning into a sermon. Before moving on, I should mention that Pedro's eye contact during this conversation has been exceptional. Eye to eye, except for a few moments when his eyes wander to the side to think. While listening to Pedro quote verse after verse, I hear Lucio in the doorway asking, "Are you staying or are you coming with me?" Is he joking? It can't be time to go home—I think, but my eyes steal a glance at the clock on the bottom right of the computer screen—5:24 PM! Pedro and I have been talking for two hours.

"I'm coming."

"I have not finished talking about God today." Pedro lets out a girlish sigh. Lucio asks Pedro how his daughter is doing. Then Lucio talks to him about the sewing machines in the back room and about something that Pedro has to sew. My conversation with Pedro is over.

"Lucio, can I talk to you outside?"

I sit on the low, white ledge on the sidewalk in front of Pro-Búsqueda and find myself looking up at the tree that I had been envisioning for comfort while talking to Pedro. I tell Lucio three things: Pedro just told me about his life. It is *impactante* [heavy]." Lucio receives the statement. Few words are necessary. "Also, earlier today I was with Angela, the *joven* from Chalate who is searching for her mother. She is just finding out

that she might be a ‘case’. And I have to make a phone call to consult with the scientist about DNAView.”

“So you’re not coming over for *pupusas*?”

I explain that I can come over in a bit. “Okay, we’ll pick you up at your house,” Lucio arranges. Forget setting a time. I’m too tired. It will all work out.

Good, I need air. Sometimes I speak my thoughts aloud, but I am not expecting to think this, let alone hear it. But as I walk out of Pro-Búsqueda, I hear myself say “*Ay, ay, ay*. I am drowning in emotions.” I cross the street heeding Fatima’s warning that I have been crossing too recklessly.

I gulp soothing *atol* [corn drink] on my walk home.

An hour and a half later, after I have been home and rested, Lucio picks me up. We eat at Luzecita’s home: beans, cheese, tortilla, boiled plantain, apple, and juice. Over dinner, I ask Julia and Lucio about their impressions of Pedro. Julia says that Pedro is a “little crazy.” At the meetings of the *jovenes encontrados* he says things that don’t make sense and make people laugh. Lucio is convinced that Pedro has never killed anyone. “Pedro spent some time in jail,” Lucio divulges, “because someone blamed him for rape but she actually consented.”

“At least that is Pedro’s version,” I, a female observer sharply blurt out. Oops, that came out too fast. I ask about whether people are after him. Yes. Would they still want to kill him? Yes. His nose was broken not that long ago. How recently? One month ago. Pedro had told me about that injury but he had in no way hinted that it had occurred recently. “Why did it happen?”

“Because he was on the territory of *Dieciocho*.”

“Why was he there?”

“To attend church.” Sometimes Lucio drives him places and asks him to get out of the car only in safer areas (ones that are not the territory of *Dieciocho*) but Pedro disregards the concern. “But you can trust him,” Lucio assures. “Nothing will ever disappear. Sometimes I ask him to buy materials for the backpacks [that I make]. I send him with money to downtown and nothing is ever missing when he returns.”

“Would you leave him alone in a room with Julia?”

No hesitation. “No.” Okay, I had given the maybe-murderer and the probably-rapist my phone number in Berkeley because he was talking about his dream to visit L.A. and he has suffered too much and I want to help. Hadn’t I learned from working at homeless clinics not to give my phone number, address, or full name? Well, I didn’t give him my

last name but he has the number. But he can't read and how would he ever make it to L.A. anyway?... unless God takes him.

After dinner, Julia and I bust out *Zumba*, a Latin dancersize DVD. We do aerobics while learning to dance tango, merengue, salsa, afro-reggae, samba, and more. From potent conversations about violence to fluorescent sporty outfits, lively music, and dancing! Febrile Rosita falls asleep in her daddy's arms. Lucio drives me home.

I am home now. Let me just lie on my bed for a minute before I brush my teeth and change... Too late... I am sleeping...

15 July 2006

Friday: Departure of Margarita's Husband

When I arrive at Pro-Búsqueda, Ismael wants to have a word with me. "I was impressed yesterday," he comments. "I saw that you were talking to the *joven* that was here, Angela. When she came, she was very nervous and when she left, after talking to you, she was much more serene."

I thank Ismael and plant myself in the psychology office. Pedro comes in and pulls up that plastic chair again. Oh, I don't know if I have the energy or time for this right now. "Pedro, do you have any artwork here that you can show me?" He retrieves two

paintings and a woodworking that he crafted for Pro-Búsqueda. He sells his paintings. Dora bought one for \$6.

I'm hoping that he is ready to leave the psychology office. "I like this photo," Pedro says as he hands me a photograph that had been casually resting on the desk across the room. Yes, I have noticed this picture before. He points to the smiling young woman with long black hair riding the bus in the photo. "That is my adoptive sister. We were adopted as twins," he proudly informs me. "Wait." Pedro walks out and moments later, returns with a stack of photos. In some unknown order he shows me each one. "Here is the day of my *reencuentro*. An aunt, two Pro-Búsqueda employees, an *abuelita*, and a cousin stand with Pedro in a line, smiling into the camera. Yes, this is the aunt whom he went to reconcile with. I see various photos of him in meetings with other *jovenes encontrados*.

Father Jon comes in and says he wants to practice DNAView when I finish speaking with Pedro. The Father's face brightens into a smile when he sees that Pedro is sharing his most cherished photographs. "This is in a hotel in Antigua, Guatemala," says Pedro. "These are two of my closest buddies." Gang-bangers. I am chilled by Pedro's appearance in the photo—the White Sox hat is on backwards, the faint moustache, and a demonic gaze. I marvel at his transformation yet I note Pedro's nose bones were not split in two in this photograph. Maybe what Lucio says—that it was a recent injury—is true.

Dora and I go to Casa Grande for lunch. I ask her in diplomatic, circuitous manner about Lucio's intentions behind the kindness he exhibits towards me. Dora tenderly explains

that I seemed lost when I first arrived to El Salvador, so people wanted to help me. Realizing how much they at Pro-Búsqueda have been keeping an eye on me is humbling. I come to this country to “help” and yet I need assistance even just crossing the street (literally—many people still protectively grab my arm when we cross together). I will miss my friends here. Though I can’t help wondering, am I just another *gringa* to them?

Walking past Eduardo’s desk, I ask, “Eduardo, has a letter for me arrived from the United States?” This is the first time I think of the letter in the one and a half months since I left California. Before leaving, I had conspicuously left a stamped envelope, addressed to me at Pro-Búsqueda, so that Mark would write me.

“No, Liz. *Al suave es la honda*. [Smooth is the way].”

I see Margarita for the first time today. She does not come in until about 4 PM. Unusual for her but understandable. I did bring the promised chocolates. Four candy bars from the USA, one for each of her children. She accepts the chocolate, displaying a gratitude that I did not expect. She seems appreciative for each ounce of cheering up that she can offer her children. “I thought I had cried all my tears,” she confides, “because my dad used to drink and he would mistreat my mother. And then the war came. But I had more tears to cry.”

No, she hasn’t cried today, but her two youngest did. They turned down going to the airport to see their father off to Sweden because they were so sad.

“Did you want your husband to go?” I ask.

“No, I supported him [in his decision] but I did not ask him to go. My cousin was going and his brother was there so he has a chance. Two people going together is very different from one on his own.”

“It must have been expensive,” I think aloud. “How much was the plane ticket?”

“\$1,200.”

“You had to take out loans maybe?” I say without judgment.

“Yes, I took out loans in my name, \$2,300 for airfare, visa, and other expenses. He has to make back what he spent. He will miss the little kids a lot and his mother is *ya muy señora* [already very old].”

I give Margarita my support, acknowledging that this must be a difficult day for her. We talk about distance, how distance can be good for relationships. It forces one to evaluate the relationship. “Yes, Mark and I feel closer now,” I remark, “than we did before I left home.”

The words are barely out of my mouth when Don Jorge the guard, walks into the office carrying mail. “Elizabeth,” he calls. I go to retrieve the envelope I had self-addressed containing a letter from Mark. There it is! Amazing—arriving on the day I asked Eduardo about it. I will save it to read with Luzecita and Julia.

I feel joyful, yet pensive in the shadow of Margarita’s husband’s departure. On Monday, I will visit Margarita’s home. She insists that I come. “We have space for you perfectly right now.” An extra place on the mattress and a spare pair of slippers, now that her husband has left. Generosity, resiliency, and more generosity—the people of El Salvador do not cease to amaze me.

Luzecita phones at Pro-Búsqueda to invite me for *pupusas*. I can’t resist an invitation from Luzecita. Riding in the car, Lucio and I receive three calls from her. In the car, I manage to ask in the form of a compliment a question I’ve been wondering about lately. “Do you know why you were so good to me since I arrived?”

“Because I like to make friends,” answers Lucio, “because you came to do good things and it would be bad if something unfortunate happened to you, and because I enjoy your company.” Fair enough.

We pull over to pick up the *pupusas* that Luzecita ordered. Lucio tells me about his dream—to open up a workshop run by the *jovenes encontrados* where the *jovenes* can produce backpacks, a trade Lucio inherited from his father. This enterprise would help

Pro-Búsqueda raise money and would give *jovenes* employment. Lucio is currently teaching Pedro to make backpacks. “If I help one person that is enough,” Lucio dreams aloud. Three sewing machines in the back room at Pro-Búsqueda (where Pedro sleeps) seem like a good start.

We drive past the ferris wheel to Building 37. Lucio does not own his home. Purchasing a home like his would cost \$8,000. He can’t afford it. This is roughly twice what I received for my fellowship from the Human Rights Center to spend just for me this summer. I swallow this silent thought. I live in the illusion that I came to help and yet I needed so much help when I arrived. We humans are so interdependent.

Julia is laughing when we arrive because she accidentally dyed the clothes aqua when doing the laundry. It’s funny except it “hurts Lucio in the soul” that his beige pants are now greenish, the “color of soldiers.”

Zumba! I play the DVD and dance. I am dancing samba when it is time to sit to eat *pupusas*. I’m feeling a lot more like a friend than a strange guest. With Luzecita we are beginning to share the story of our lives, the what-is-it-like-to-be-you-everyday. Spending so much time at Lucio and Julia’s home, I understand a bit about their lives too. Rosita has been sick but she keeps wanting to see me, so I get invited over. Lucio notices me massaging my belly and before I can walk to the store next door and pay for it, Luzecita has bought me chamomile tea.

I am touched to observe Lucio collect Luzecita's DNA. I salsa-dance to where they stand. He tells her the directions, "...Then you remove the cap from the collector..." He smiles. "I will do it for you." With only one arm, Luzecita is graceful in asking for help. I have not once heard her verbalize a request for help. All cues are taken naturally, wordlessly.

Luzecita scoops up Pablito to go home, holding the three-year-old against her chest, his sneakers dangling from her fingers. Julia grabs the miniature Adidas from Luzecita's hand and shoves Pablito's feet in. Like that they get by.

"We have to take you home now because I am sleepy," adorable Little Rosita tells me.

As we drive to Reina's home, Julia grimly reports, "My grandfather is not well. He has had a chest pain for one week. He has not eaten since my *abuela* [grandmother] died; he only passes time drinking beer." Julia worries about another loss. She continues to be concerned that "He is just looking for how to kill himself."

"Goodnight and thank you. I'll see you tomorrow when we go to Chalate."

I fall asleep sitting up in my bed, computer on my lap, hands on the keys.

16 July 2005

Saturday: To Guarjila

Waking up. I slept in until 6:30 AM! Morning routine. Then I pack my belongings into the closet so Reina can rent out the room. Mentally, I am on my way out of Reina's home.

I take a break from writing at Pro-Búsqueda to read and respond to the following email message from Angela, the *joven* from Berkeley I met on Thursday:

Hey,

I wanted to say thanks again for the talk yesterday. About doing the food thing, my sister is coming on Monday and I don't know our plans yet so I will get back to you soon about that. I hope everything goes well with you and I hope to see you soon here or at home.

Angi

I immediately respond:

Angi,

I am so happy that you wrote me! That will be special for you to have your sister here. If you are interested (and have the time!) to get together this coming week, let me know. Especially if you think it might be good for your sister to talk with me since I have been volunteering at Pro-Búsqueda. If I don't hear from you, I'll expect to see you in

Berkeley. You are a precious person and I am amazed at the elegant grace with, which you are confronting the changes in your life.

Salud,

Liz

After spending the morning catching up on fieldnotes, I wander over to Ali's. I remark to Ali and her housemate Ian that it is important for me to write because I carry emotions until I write them. It's like cremating bodies on the ghats of the Ganges River in Benares. Once I write, I burn the feelings and am free of them.

Ali accompanies me to the Superselectos supermarket where I buy graham crackers and apples for my upcoming journey to Guarjila, Chalatenango. She then keeps me company while I hurriedly pull clothes from the closet and toss them into my formerly-white backpack. What about taking a shower? I'm sweaty. Beep. Beep. Too late.

Lucio drives the green jeep; Julia & Rosita, Luzecita & Pablito, are in the back seat. Luzecita passes my backpack into the trunk compartment with her one arm. We head off. What a gorgeous drive to Chalate! Rosita feels better but Pablito is slightly feverish. We take a detour to avoid the unbearable traffic near Apopa. I feel oddly relieved that Luzecita is also scared as we navigate the surface streets of Apopa. Lucio tells us that there are roads in Apopa that cannot be traversed at certain times of day because the gangs "control" them. Once in Chalate, a second detour involves a dirt road with huge potholes, but I trust that we will arrive safely.

We have an intriguing conversation about the Salvadoran government's attitude towards Pro-Búsqueda. I mention the recent ruling in Argentina on a disappearance, noteworthy because a law of amnesty was declared by the courts to be unjust. Lucio says that the outcome is good for Argentina but bad for El Salvador. He surmises that his government will use this case as a reason not to talk, to seal their mouths. He then shares his certainty that his phone is tapped and implies that the phone at Pro-Búsqueda is tapped as well. Ismael had received a death threat when he was pursuing a case that involved high military figures. The result: Pro-Búsqueda dropped the case. We discuss the two failed assassination attempts on Father Jon's life. "They [the government] cannot assassinate Father Jon now," Lucio believes, "because he is a Jesuit and a survivor of the Massacre of the Jesuits." I ask Lucio to clarify the role of the Red Cross in the disappearances of Salvadoran children. He shares his perspective that the Salvadoran Red Cross (but not the International Red Cross) had a corrupt hand in the disappearances of children during the war. Who knows what the Salvadoran Red Cross did with their archives, but opening them, it seems, would resolve a lot of cases.

Luzecita and Julia's fear in the countryside surprises me. Is it because their last memories of living here were ones of terror? Luzecita is petrified of the windy, dirt roads. Julia will not get out of the car, despite having to pee, because she fears the snakes. She would rather hold it than walk to the latrine at night, she claims.

I notice the moderately populated, rugged, open-air cowboy bar to our left as we pull into

Guarjila. It's 8 PM. We drive one minute along the town's main road. There's Larisa, Luzecita's youngest! She waits in the street as we pull into the dirt driveway of *Abuela* [Grandmother] Eloisa, Luzecita's mother. A beautiful, chubby woman with black hair, Luzecita's mother wears a flower-patterned cotton dress and white apron. Luzecita got her huge smile from her mother, along with all the streams of vivacious laughter. I meet Luzecita's dad, a tall, dignified man of the countryside. He is clad in jeans, button-down cotton shirt, and a straw hat. It amazes me that Luzecita's speech pattern and laugh are so much like her mom's since Luzecita spent the majority of her childhood in an orphanage.

It is an honor to be in *Abuela* Eloisa's home. Luzecita hands her mother a box of Pollo Campero [fast-food fried chicken] and the mother receives it graciously. *Abuela* Eloisa feeds us *pupusas* greased with pig fat. Lucio is happy to tell me this after I have eaten one. Her tortillas are serious business, thick and pure, and she gives me *cuajada* [fresh white cheese] that she made today.

After chowing, it's time for bed. Where will I sleep, at the home of *Abuela* Eloisa or with Lucio and Julia at Lucy's house? Who is Lucy? I had brought my backpack into *Abuela* Eloisa's home thinking I would stay there, but just as Julia is leaving, she says, "Come with us. Otherwise you won't meet my sister."

We walk a block, slowly, along the country road past the bars of Guarjila and the food dispensaries. Around a corner and then it's only 30 steps to Lucy's home. Lucy, a

woman with three children, is Julia's sister, full sister. While Julia lived in the orphanage in San Salvador, Lucy remained in Chalatenango, each unaware that the other sister had survived the war.

How well do these sisters know each other? I sense playful competition between them. "I can see that your remittances have not arrived," Julia taunts Lucy. "There is no toilet paper, no mattress, and no soap." While I dig for toilet paper in my backpack, they chuckle and tell me that they are joking. But it is true though that Lucy's husband has gone to "oosa" [USA] and that he sends money home. Let's go to sleep. Lucy, her baby Yackie, and her 5-year-old daughter, Ingrid, pile into one bed. Lucio, Rosita, and Julia sprawl out on a mattress on the floor. I rest in a bed beside them, barely with space to step between my bed and their mattress. Laura, the 17-year-old cousin from next door takes the third bed in the room, sharing it with young Clarita. I suppose it is common to sleep lots of people to a room.

When I close my eyes I see the starry night sky of rural El Salvador.

CHAPTER 9—In the countryside

17 July 2005

Sunday: *Novenario* in Arcatao

I hear a baby crying in the night, but mostly I sleep well, awakening at 5 AM for the *novenario* [the ninth day of remembrance after a loved one's death]. When I first recognize dawn from my bed, I, veiled by the mosquito net, pretend to be asleep so I can have moments of silence before wishing 'good morning' to my Salvadoran friends crammed into this bedroom with me. Then, I bathe myself in dirty, stagnant water but it feels cool and it feels good.

The jeep is jammed full of passengers as we drive to Arcatao for the *novenario* to honor Julia's *abuelita* [grandmother]. I am in the front seat. In the back, ride Julia and her sister, cousin, daughter, and nieces. Details of Julia's family history fill in as I learn the names and relations of the passengers in the backseat. In 1982, after the assassination of Julia's mother, two of her sisters, Lucy and Loly, were taken in and raised by their Aunt Rufina. Julia and sister Marta fared a different fate. They both were disappeared during the infamous Guinda de Mayo, when they were scooped up by the military and handed over to the Salvadoran Red Cross. The Red Cross placed the girls in an orphanage in San Salvador, where they resided for fifteen years, unaware that they had living family other than each other. Sadly, leukemia claimed Marta's life two years after the reencuentro of Marta and Julia with Lucy, Loly, and their biological father.

Today, Julia cautiously forges a friendship with her sister Lucy, who now rides with us in the jeep, sitting in the backseat with her two young daughters on her lap. And who is that other adorable child? Oh, she is Clarita, daughter of Julia's sister Loly. Putting pieces together, I gather that Loly is in "ooosa" (USA) and that Clarita is currently in Lucy's care. In exchange, Loly sends Lucy remittances and lends Lucy her house. So it was actually Loly's house where I slept last night. And precious Clarita, I realize, is growing up thousands of miles away from her mother.

We take an hour detour down a steep, windy, dirt road to a town called El Rincon to collect a DNA sample. On our way, Lucio tells us about relatives of the disappeared he has worked with who live in the homes that we pass. "There was a case in that house," he says, as we drive out of El Rincon. "The case is now resolved. The joven is deceased. It turns out that she died in her father's arms (during the war) but the father felt ashamed and never told anybody. Well, he finally told. The child was very hungry so the father gave her *maizillo* [a large grain of corn normally used as animal feed]. Then the girl started to choke and wanted water, but there was no water. So that is how she died, with her father like that."

Winding our way along the dirt roads with their wide potholes, we arrive in Arcatao at 9 AM. I take in the scene of the novenario. Already women are making chicken tamales for the event. Huge pots are stirred; women kneel, cooking on fires beside a tree. Giant banana leaves dry on the tin roof of the house across the street. Once dry, they will be cut to wrap the tamales.

Julia's grandfather walks out to the street to greet Julia and Lucio. A pink and white vertical striped shirt with only two buttons buttoned, straw-hat, black pants fastened but the fly is down, alcohol breath, cataracts. His dizzy eyes smile when he sees Lucio and Julia. Lucio greets him like he would his own grandfather.

We have taken five steps on to the busy, earthen patio. "That man there is my father," Julia quietly tells me, pointing to the tallest cowboy hat on the patio.

Lucio had introduced me to that fellow, moments before. "Don Velasco?" I ask.

Julia nods. Hushed, tight-lipped, leaning in to my ear as she speaks, she says, "Your mom told me he is 'a piece of shit'." Her tense lips break into a smile. "But it does not hurt me that she says that." My expression of astonishment mixed with embarrassment at my mom's unique approach to therapy evokes a few soft laughs from Julia. (Knowing my mother, I understand that her deliberately chosen words were meant to help Julia by giving her permission to feel disappointment, even towards a parent. This message seems to have been healing for Julia to hear.) I notice that Lucy and Julia do not talk to their dad, or even exchange eye contact with him, as far as I can see, for the whole five hours that we are here at the small, crowded home of the *abuelo* [grandfather]. Nor does the father approach them. This is sad—Julia and her father never reunited after the *reencuentro*.

Just after Julia points out Don Velasco to me, the prayerful songs of an approaching choir arrest my chattering mind. Neighbors come parading to the house, singing church songs, and carrying a white statue of the crying Virgin. The procession walks the statue across the patio and into the main room of the *abuelo's* cottage.

I see that Lucio and Julia are talking to the abuelo. Rather than intruding, I learn how to make tamales. It's hard to fold the banana leaf just right.

I step outside of the patio and onto the dusty road to take a break from the mourning and from the many-person bustle of tamale making. Absorbing. I silently observe a group of a dozen people, temporarily splintered off from the gathering, summoning their Lord through reverent incantation as they traverse the pages of pocket-sized leather bibles.

I wander back into the novenario.

Wow! The interior of the abuelo's tiny home looks gorgeous. The Virgin statue is now on a beautifully decorated altar. There are hundreds of tropical flowers; my favorite is the huge hibiscus. Streamers—chains of streamers. The men cover coffee tins with purple streamers to serve as vases for more flowers. The children glue fancy twists of blue, white, and purple streamers together, covering the entire ceiling with these colorful paper adornments. The Purity of this celebration astounds me. The culmination will be tonight at 2 AM when the cross is lifted, when *Abuelita's* memory is honored and her spirit sent to heaven. Crying, praying, eating tamales, and praying more, the entire

community will come to the house to pay their respects.

While soaking in the beauty of the altar, I meet Aunt Rufina, the motherly woman who raised Julia's two sisters. I am impressed by the strength of the women in Julia's family. Cousins are sisters for survival's sake. I converse with 8-year-old Clarita. I love that she smiles whenever she speaks. Clarita, raised under the care of her aunt Lucy, is quite affectionate. I am willing to put my arm around her, pat her back, have her sit on my lap, the way her mother would if she were here. Clarita tells me that she has never met her mom. (I take it that her mother left for the USA when Clarita was an infant. On July 28, also my date of departure, a coyote will deliver Clarita, safely I pray, to her mother's arms.)

Back outside now, to check out tamale preparation. Approximately 500 tamales will be made and eaten here today. I am watching the giant vat of thick corn concoction for the tamales simmer when one of the chickens running through the yard recklessly jumps in! Soaked in maize and instantly de-feathered, the poor chicken flings its body wildly about the cauldron. Seconds later, the pathetic creature runs aimlessly over the earth. Lucio eventually "flies the head off" of the bald chicken because "it is suffering." The headless body is still writhing. Yuck.

"Just goes to show that when it is time to go, it's time to go," a lady who is cooking says.

Then comes the igniting of a fire in the kitchen, a room adjacent to the one that houses the Virgin. Smoke smoke smoke out of the adobe-walled kitchen. Finally, there is the woman cowboy in the red shirt and black jeans who trots by on her horse. She passes again, this time steering eight bulls. One of the bulls enters the *Abuelo's* patio. The women carrying children run into the room with the Virgin! *Abuelo* and the dog chase the bull out. It's an adventure to attend this novenario!

“Clarita, did you say goodbye to *Abuelo*,” Julia asks her niece; she might not see him again as Clarita will depart soon for the USA. We pile into the car to head back to Lucy's home in Guarjila. I am in the front seat; Clarita sits on my lap. She coughs for most of the journey home, a hoarse cough, which she has had for one year, asthma, I believe. Will she safely survive the journey hidden in the storage compartment of trucks? I believe so but I am sorry to see her suffer, and in a few years, wherever I go traveling I will bring my stethoscope. I wish I had it here to listen to her lungs.

We reach Guarjila, and unload passengers at Lucy's home. I am filthy so I bathe myself at this stop. I notice that the two sisters, Julia and Lucy, don't have much to say to each other, yet I observe a profound comfort between them. I am mindful of words Julia has shared with me: that for her, Luzecita feels more like a sister than does Lucy.

I say goodbye to Lucy and her children, and give a blessing to Clarita for her journey. Clarita looks to me with smiling eyes, and holding her outstretched hands, I say, “It's going to be okay.” ‘Really?’ her eyes, clouded by innocent fear, ask for confirmation.

“You will be safe,” I promise. Her glad eyes smile brightly, again. “Everything will be okay.” Outwardly, I beam smiles at this darling eight-year old while inwardly praying that my words are not falsehood but prophecy.

Lucio, Julia, and Rosita drive past the rodeo on our way to pick up Luzecita from her parents’ home. The *cuajada* [fresh white cheese] is even yummier today and Luzecita’s mom sends us off with big fat tortillas.

Driving back to San Salvador we are quiet, enjoying music and the sunset. I take advantage of this moment to ask Lucio about demobilization. I tell him that I had heard the prediction of a former FMLN commander (Reina’s dinner guest Estevez) that there will be armed rebellion again in El Salvador in the next generation. “In five years,” Lucio predicts, “there will be war again.” He continues, “You heard that they were burning buses. That is the beginning of the new student movement. I wish you could have gone to a demonstration to see 10,000 people marching. The state is so violent with them. The rich will win and it [war] won’t last long. 2 to 3 years.” Then, what does demobilization mean and has it occurred?

Due to road construction on the main highway, we again take the detour through Apopa, this time at night! I get my first glimpse of tattoo-covered *mareros* [gang-bangers]; two ride in the back of the police pick-up truck.

At 8 PM Lucio drops me off at Ali’s house. I am late for her farewell barbecue but not

too late to pop my head in. Still tense from the detour through Apopa, I cautiously observe some *gringos*, a laptop with U2 playing, an abundant barbecue spread, and a collared healthy-looking dog. Most of the guests are serving in the Peace Corps. Though I am glad to see Ali, I leave fashionably early to do the basics at home: talk to my mom on the telephone; check in with Mary, Darcy, Reina; and sleep.

At home, I organize my belongings. Reina comments on how few possessions I have. “This is like an operativo [military operation],” she tells me. “For 10 years, I had 2 pairs of underwear, 2 pants, 2 socks, and 2 shirts because one could not carry more than that.”

18 July 2005

Monday: To Margarita’s Community

I had a nightmare last night. Startled by the sound of my screams, “Help! Help! Help!” I sat up abruptly in bed. I went back to sleep and I am remembering my dream now at 5:40 AM.

The plot of the dream, I interpret, is a reaction to the intense feelings I glimpsed in Julia’s family on our trip to Chalate. Clarita, Julia’s eight-year-old niece, is the one who saved me in my dream. She sweetly consoled, “Don’t worry, my sisters and I are strong. We will save you.” In this time of grieving for the *abuelita’s* passing, I am extremely moved by the strength—the current of life and survival—that runs in the women of Julia’s family. The burning of the chicken that jumped in the boiling pot and its subsequent

machetazo [beheading by machete] may also have disturbed me. There was a lot of death in yesterday.

I'm grateful for a busy, distracting morning. I shower (hooray!), scrub my clothes, and throw a few items in my purse because tonight I'm sleeping at Margarita's home. Ali and I meet in front of the fast-food restaurant Biggest, and then walk together to our respective works. It's fun to be at Pro-Búsqueda today. I eat breakfast in the kitchen, comforted by routine and friends. Ofelia throws her arms around me. "Why are you leaving? Don't abandon us," she pleads.

To this, Pedro responds, "Don't worry, I'll follow behind her so she doesn't go." This is funny, it's sweet, and I know he means well, my friend the rapist-probably assassin. I predict that I will never fully trust him and I feel justified in this attitude.

I see Lucio. "Hey, let's go to Apopa for pupusas tonight," I joke.

Lucio chuckles at my mock bravado, and then seriousness washes over his face. "No, it really is dangerous there."

Still in the kitchen, someone asks Margarita how she is doing. "Physically," she says with a long sigh, "I am well." In other words, she is hurting emotionally because she misses her husband and worries how she will manage with the debt and the four little mouths to feed.

I work in the morning on DNAView with Father Jon. I observe his progress in navigating the software, in drawing pedigrees, and in constructing the primary and alternate hypothesis for determining kinship through DNA analyses. It's a joy to watch him learn.

Before lunch, with a quick check of email, I learn that my medical school classmate's younger brother is dying of leukemia. Ouch. Ofelia walks into the room where I am alone staring into the computer screen. "Why are you alone?" she asks. Seeing the back of my head and maybe a bit of my profile, she steps closer and lovingly says, "*Mi niña* [My girl], why are you sad?"

I explain that my friend's brother is dying of cancer and I tell her about Clarita. I am now reading medical websites, which support my suspicion that Clarita's persistent dry, throaty, wheezes are the cough of an asthmatic child, an asthmatic child who will make the harsh journey north in 10 days. And I express sadness about the low probability that Clarita will be taken to a doctor once she is in the USA. She suffers needlessly—an inhaler would likely ameliorate her symptoms and may even save her life in an acute episode of shortness of breath. But it will likely be hard for Clarita's mother to find the time, money, and courage to take her to a doctor when struggling to get by and living in constant fear of deportation.

I have lunch in the office with co-workers. What is gratifying about my lunch is that although I am feeling sad, I can still appreciate that everything on the plate before me has been lovingly given to me. Ali sent me to work with avocado and veggies from her barbecue, Margarita gave me a tortilla, and when Ofelia saw I was sad, she took beans out of the fridge and insisted on toasting a home-made tortilla of pure corn.

4 PM. Margarita and I walk past the *Pollo Campero* eatery to board the 22 bus. I have all I need in my purse: one small water bottle, a toothbrush, a change of underwear, and a clean shirt. Traveling with more is not worth the risk of carrying a bag that looks enticing to steal. Yikes. We're in a downtown traffic jam. Lucio had told me about how he and Julia were on a bus in Santa Tecla when a *marero* with a bloody face, carrying two stones, climbed through the window because he wanted to kill someone on the bus. Somehow, the *cobrador* [fare collector] was able to get him off.

“Margarita, do *mareros* ever come on the bus?”

Yes, it happens. “They come on [the bus] to ask for money.” I'm a little nervous but I can't help admiring the bus's character—Jesus portraits and slogans, dangly yarn decorations, and rows of Salvadoran commuters. We change buses at the cathedral. Now we are in a tiny, stuffed mini bus. My arm is skin pressed sking-against-skin to Margarita. We're crammed so tight that if I move the slightest to tie my hair back or to adjust my purse the man next to me thinks I am hitting on him. I can see in my peripheral vision that he looks at me each time I make the mistake of moving.

We arrive at the plaza of Santiago, a hilltop town 45 minutes west of San Salvador. Beautiful! Freshened by a crisp breeze, I enjoy the alluring panorama, an amazing view of Ilopango Lake and the hills surrounding San Salvador. Families stroll together through the stone-paved plaza, enjoying *pupusas* and other street food, all with the backdrop of this magnificent view. Wow! I hear church bells ringing. The bells sound old as they clang to announce mass.

Margarita and I begin the walk to her community. We walk 40 minutes downhill, buying bread and broccoli on the way. Now there are no more shops. This is jungle! The stone path is slick. And Gorgeous. I love it! The teenage boys who walk up the steep path are winded. Uh oh, if they live here and they feel tired then how will it be for me tomorrow? Walking through jungle on a narrow footpath with a steep descent!

Margarita points out her cornfield as we walk into her community. Her son is responsible for tending the crop, which produces enough corn to feed the family for a year. Roughly the size of three basketball courts, the cornfield slants with the slope of the hill. I admit, my legs are a little shaky when we arrive. “There is the mango tree from which I brought you mangoes,” Margarita points out. Once we reach the flat terrain where the homes are, Margarita greets all people that she sees.

We pass the tiny school, where I encounter her daughter Roxy whom I had met on the day at the beach. I meet Tamara, Margarita’s 14-year-old daughter, as well. Now we

walk into Margarita's home. Her oldest daughter Regina is there; she is in charge of the house, it seems. The house—it's a blend—half countryside, half city. There is a refrigerator and gas stove in the kitchen, but also a mud stove for cooking outside. I notice impressive piles of firewood and the metal contraption for manually grinding the corn.

The patio floor is part cement, part earth. Now my feet are up on the hammock and I am savoring cool water.

Where am I?

Margarita's community, La Esperanza de Santa Marta, was founded by a priest in the 1980s. It is a repopulation community, meaning that displaced families established residence here upon their return from exile. Currently 60 families live here and it is a community in the truest sense of the word. Its residents share a modest plantation, which right now is "giving lots of bananas." There is a community store and the profit from the store goes back to the community itself to pay for electricity in the church and other shared expenses. The community used to hire teachers to come to the little school but since the price of coffee has dropped, doing so has been unaffordable. This is one of the most enchanting, sacred places I have been. People here share a common ideal and are connected to the land, in this beautiful, hard-to-access, self-contained area. And they share a history, a history of violence that they work together to build past.

It is a bit of a hike to get to the latrine but it's a stunning view from there. A jungle of palm trees and birds of paradise covers the hillside. Immediately, Bono of U2 comes into my head: "I feel a long way from the hills of San Salvador."

I ask about the sleeping arrangements because I want to make sure that I am not taking someone's bed. Margarita tells me that ever since her husband left, her son has been sleeping beside her to "take care of her." Take care of her from what? This community feels safe.

"From what? From drunks?" I ask.

It takes a while for Margarita to answer then she explains, "I have nightmares." Her sleep is frequently terrorized. "I dream that they [the soldiers are shooting at me, or cutting at my neck with my knife. And I don't want to go to sleep when I have these nightmares because then they come back. So I sit up in bed and drink water, or walk to the latrine. I just sit up because I am afraid to go back to sleep because then I will go back to the dream."

"Did you have nightmares of when you were in the guerrilla?"

"Of course." She then tells me the secret of her psychological survival during the war.

"Whenever they [the soldiers] would come to get me, I always dreamed that I could fly. I just flew away from any danger."

Nearby is the rose bush that her husband Alonso planted before he left; it has not yet blossomed. Roxy tells me they will be red roses. I notice a tiny wooden cross growing out of the dirt, its arms tied together by rope. I recall Margarita telling me that when in the guerrilla, she would make crosses to guard her wherever she slept.

Margarita gets me out of the hammock because the sky has reached twilight and she wants to show me around before the night gets us. We walk down a steep path, up a steep path. She shows me the church, the heart of this community. I meet Margarita's mother-in-law. The mother-in-law's dialect and elderly-lady speech pattern are barely intelligible but I can still understand the blessings that she offers me. Her hands are joined as if praying, and through her smile, she says, "m-a-y y-o-o-o-u be-e we-ell."

Then I meet Margarita's aunt and three cousins. "This is my whole family," Margarita proclaims, a little bit proud and a little bit bitter. In between words exchanged I am thinking, 'Wow, everyone else was annihilated. This is all that is left.' They smile at me and tease Margarita that Alonso, her husband who is now in Sweden, will find another woman and not return.

As we walk back to the home, night catches us but the moon is generous. I can't see where I am stepping but putting one foot in front of the other and following Roxy's silhouette, I know that I will arrive.

We have a delicious dinner of tasty, fresh squash, broccoli, rice, and tortillas, cooked by Regina, Margarita's oldest daughter, because it is her shift. Margarita has each of the children doing their share of chores. I am impressed by the cooperative, mature way the children rotate through their assignments. I still feel hungry and I am ashamed to ask for more food because I know that it is hard to feed all the mouths in this home and all the pots are empty. Luckily, nature has given this community many bananas. "There are good harvests and there are bad harvests." Margarita had shared some of her life philosophy with me on the walk in.

After dinner, I am told to sit in the rocking chair of honor on the patio, which looks in on the TV in the living room. Margarita tours me through five photo albums, one of which includes photos of her brother who has lived in Alberta, Canada since the early 1980s. He was an urban fighter and received help from Canadian *gringos* to get out of El Salvador because he was heavily pursued.

Then Margarita shares with me *Nacido en Sangre* [Born in Blood], an ethnography of the members of the Community La Esperanza. A Spanish anthropologist visited La Esperanza and interviewed and compiled testimonies of community members into a book. Margarita's story appears midway through the book. As I read the four single-spaced pages of Margarita's testimony, I am surprised by what I know and what I do not know. Margarita has told me a lot of her story from her own lips (or at least as much of the story as she shares in *Nacido en Sangre*) and I am grateful for that. She has not, however, told me about one of her most critical assignments as a *radioista* [messenger]

for the FMLN. A rumor had begun to circulate that there would be an attack on the *masa* [civilian population], who at that point were concentrated into one area. So Margarita, along with another *radioista*, was told to run to tell the *masa* to move, to warn them of the impending attack. Running for hours without rest. Running because they know that mother, brother, sister, friends, cousins are there and will die if not informed. They have not yet arrived—still running—when they hear the shouts—the screams—the attack at the Sumpul River. This is when Margarita’s mother disappears; this is when she loses contact with her four brothers. Margarita had told me about running... running...how it hurt her feet when she lost her shoes...running...about the disappearances of her four brothers...assassination of her mother...but she never told me that she was carrying a message that she could not deliver...failed to deliver...a message that was impossible to relay.

As I trace the lines of her story with my fingertip, Margarita tells me about how her brother, an FMLN fighter, was killed by the FMLN. This is the most painful loss to her. He had reported to his superior the presence of military spies. Unfortunately, the superior was himself a military agent who had infiltrated the FMLN. The superior threatened Margarita’s brother, “if you talk we will kill you.” So the brother did not talk. Other guerrilleros who suspected that there were infiltrators assumed her brother was part of the spy network and intentionally shot him in the back during a battle. Years after her brother’s death, a fighter who was with her brother at the time of his death told Margarita this story.

Names. All of Margarita's children are named for fallen siblings, I realize as I read *Nacido en Sangre*. Now she continues the fight alone, in a way, because her husband is not with her. Barely feeding the four young mouths—thank goodness they are obedient, cooperative, loving mouths. I can see that she is in love with her husband. One can even sense that they have a good sex life. They will spend one year apart, at least, the first portion of the year just to pay off the expenses of his journey. One phone call a month; it will be brief. No email because Alonso cannot write.

I take a final hike to the latrine. Margarita tries to give me one of her three nightgowns to take home. I am touched, but decline. I settle into the bed beside her (tonight the son will slumber in his own bed) and I Sleep.

19 July 2005

Tuesday: DNA collection in Cabañas

“I am sorry Liz but it's time to wake up.” I can see that behind the curtain, the sky still holds darkness. I remember that we have to *mañanear* [wake up with the dawn] today to make it to Pro-Búsqueda by 7 AM. I had been joking when I said yesterday that I needed hot water to shower but Margarita had taken me seriously, and by the time I step out of bed, she has already boiled water for a shower. Slightly warmer than tepid, I clean myself—the warmed water is a treat. Stuff that toothbrush back in the purse. I am about as awake as the morning: peach sky to the northeast, pink to the west. UP. Walking. It feels so good! Movement and meditation awaken my joints and mind. Who cares what

we talk about or whether we talk at all. It feels so good to climb up this hill, moving swiftly, at daybreak. I am surprised that we reach the top so soon (out of the jungle), and the top-top (bus-stop in Santiago) within half an hour. Excellent. We walk even higher, back to the peak, to the church, to get a good seat on the mini bus. “No one else from Pro-Búsqueda has done that walk,” Margarita tells me. “They come once a year to celebrate the corn harvest and enter from the other side, via the only road accessible to cars.”

I ride the mini bus, remembering not to move too much so the kid next to me doesn't get any ideas. I peer out through the blue-tinted windows. The driver wears a paper mask to protect himself from smog. Gangsta rap is playing.

We step off the mini bus at downtown San Salvador's largest cathedral to catch the 22. Margarita runs from the sidewalk towards a car. It is Don Jaime! He's on his way to work, too. We jump in.

After gathering the appropriate materials at Pro-Búsqueda, Jaime, Margarita, and I set off to Cabañas for a DNA-collection trip.

An hour and a half later, we arrive at the central plaza of a charming though dilapidated town in Cabañas. I wait in the car while Margarita and Jaime, mentioning names to a lady in the plaza, learn where to find the joven that we seek. One block up from the plaza, we park at the corner house. We are invited in by the adoptive family of Solomon,

a *joven encontrado*. Solomon is *pelado* [unpeeled; naked] so we have to wait until he dresses.

Margarita explains that we have come to collect a DNA sample. Only one other country has a genetic bank (of the disappeared). That is Argentina, the bank of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Do you have any questions? Are you willing? Yes, Solomon will donate a sample.

Solomon, roughly 25 years old, appears healthy and well adjusted. Extremely timid, he remembers aloud the name of his mother who was assassinated during the war. I notice his face flush but he keeps his lips tight, careful not to reveal this flooding of emotion in words. Shy Solomon will leave for the U.S. soon because “young people have no other option for finding employment,” the Salvadorans in the room concur.

Don Jaime asks whether the war passed close by here. “Ooooo” the adoptive mother responds, “It’s a shame that we fixed up the house because you would have seen that it was full of bullet holes.”

Realizing that I’ll soon be leaving El Salvador, I brought a tiny digital camera today. With Solomon’s informed consent, I videotape the process of DNA collection. I’m just a little disappointed that the centerpiece of the foreground is a big fat television; I want to show people life in the *campo* [countryside] too.

Solomon gives us rough directions to the homes of his two uncles. “There has to be more family alive than just two uncles,” Margarita and Don Jaime insist. Bye, Solomon.

Home #2 is *Niña* Raimunda. Her rustic abode is dusty, dank, and crowded with chickens, pigs, and a dog scurrying about the living room and patio. Raimunda is the adoptive mother of a beautiful joven encontrada (I see an attractive photo of her on the coffee table). The joven is “already in the USA.” Raimunda first denied to Pro-Búsqueda that the child was adopted because she “loved her so much and did not want her taken away.” Eventually, Raimunda revealed the truth and has, with time, grown to trust Pro-Búsqueda. A reencuentro between the girl and her biological father ensued. The father of the joven is an alcoholic and reportedly does not love his daughter. This seems to be a pattern; it’s the same story as with Julia’s dad.

I ask Margarita and Jaime about the motivation for wartime adoptions by lower class Salvadorans. They explain that the informal adoptions that occurred in the lower class did not take place because families wanted to raise more kids. On the contrary, people who had too many kids were taking in orphans off the deadly streets.

House #3 is yuck; I mean it’s sad to be there. In the home reside two middle-aged sisters and their elderly mother, all relatives of a disappeared child. It takes the mother a long while to understand what a DNA sample is and why we would want one from her.

“I have only the clothes that I own,” she tells us despairingly. For 25 minutes, Margarita and Jaime patiently explain the process of DNA collection, obtain her consent, and collect the sample. As we are leaving, the mother of the missing child surprises us by asking, “So, you are testing me for a disease?” In the car, we breathe out relief at having left the dismal home. Yes, we all felt the sadness. There is bitterness, regret, and an overwhelming lack of joy for living.

House #4. Well, we don’t make it into the house, just to the side of the road where the home is being constructed. There is a skeleton of wood sticks around which the adobe will be laid. A little girl runs barefoot up the street to find him. Who? Don Ricardo, the uncle of Solomon.

It is noon and he comes down from where he works to eat lunch. Don Ricardo gladly sits with us, generously providing information about Solomon’s family. I hear him ask if Solomon is involved in gangs. No, he looks like a substantially good kid, Jaime and Margarita assure the uncle. I tell him that I have a photograph of Solomon on my digital camera. Would he like to see it? By now, a second uncle, also a brother of Solomon’s murdered father, has arrived. The uncles briefly study the photo, smile, and then pass it on to the children who have gathered around us. I marvel at the contrasting imagery: delicate, shiny, silver object in their calloused, dirt-under-fingernails hands.

Don Jose, the second uncle to arrive, comments, “I have not seen Solomon since he was up to here.” His hands are level below his hip, slightly above mid-thigh. Ooops! I had

assumed that there had been a reencuentro but this is their first glimpse of their nephew they see since before his disappearance.

Margarita interviews Don Ricardo. It turns out that Solomon has a brother that lives nearby. (This proves that Margarita and Jaime had been correct in insisting that Solomon likely has more family beyond the two uncles.) The uncles have a gentle, genuine demeanor. The setting is gorgeous: wild horses, green pasture, hills and palms, adobe houses, smiling kids, a cowboy riding proudly by on his horse.

The photos that I snap flatter them, and Don Ricardo especially loves to smile for the camera, which makes it hard to take candid shots of him. Once I clarify my role in the project, they realize there is no political danger in my sharing the photos. They consent to the use of the photos to educate people in the USA about Pro-Búsqueda's work and about the disappearances of children during the civil war. The contrast—of the TV-living room setting at Solomon's house to the countryside; of Solomon's clean bright turquoise top and jeans to the uncles with their rubber boots, well-worn shirts, and machetes strapped to their waists—is strikingly symbolic. This is the contrast that many juvenes find themselves navigating when comparing themselves to their biological family. And this contrast is even more pronounced for juvenes who have been adopted by families in developed countries.

We stop for lunch. I savor a meal as simple as refried beans, corn tortilla, and an orange. Don Jaime and Margarita are upset at the expensive price (\$3.60) of their steak lunch.

Margarita vows she will not eat [lunch] tomorrow to make up for it. She has those four mouths to feed.

Driving. We have one more house to visit, this time in the department of Cuscatlan. The joven who answers the door is beautiful; she could be a magazine model. She is relaxed, with a huge smile, make-up, perfect teeth, shorts, sandals, and comfortable blouse. Her *abuelita* is well kept too, in her blue dress, lounging in a rocking chair. Claudia, the joven, is 360 days my senior. A 5-year-old and an infant clamor for Claudia's attention. These are her two daughters; their father is in the USA. We are given guavas that the little girl picks from the tree, coconut water (Don Jaime gets the coconuts down with a ladder and chops them open with a machete), and Coca Cola (I secretly give Margarita my glass to drink when she has finished hers.)

In the car, I am compelled to ask whether this family is wealthy because I felt abundance in the home and wonder if it is material wealth or richness of spirit. Don Jaime responds, "Let's say, this family has their possibilities. They are not begging for crumbs or struggling to pay for tortillas, but what you felt was spiritual wealth." Thinking of Claudia's family, Don Jaime chuckles. "I wish you could meet Claudia's aunt. She's the one who put forth Claudia's case at Pro-Búsqueda. She is so light. She'll have you laughing with her jokes," Don Jaime says, laughing. Claudia's mother was assassinated during the war, her father too, maybe. Her sister was disappeared.

Back at Pro-Búsqueda Pedro shows me his pet, a scorpion that lives in a white tupperware. I ride with Lucio to Reina's house. I douse myself with cold water, and celebrate feeling clean. I wash the clothes that I wore today and grab clean ones to stuff in my purse; a new guest has moved into my old room. I walk with Ali and we go to her surfer-American-friend Kara's house. There we eat pizza on the futon and watch *Meet the Fockers*. This serves as my first break; my first mental departure in weeks from what is El Salvador. Wow. The break serves me well. But looking at the American amenities and attitudes that are mocked in this film, I realize that I will miss El Salvador tremendously.

20 July 2005

Wednesday: Almost-last day at Pro-Búsqueda

I wake up at ten to six. I have slept in the guest room at Ali's house. Soon I am done with the 2-minute shower (it was hot!) and walk with Ali to Metrocentro where she takes a taxi to the bus station. This is our goodbye. I hope to see you at home. It's been wonderful to see you here. Bye!

At Pro-Búsqued I go through the day typing on the computer. I learn that Sochil's letter arrived a week ago, I mean, the money that I requested on her behalf from Nancy Eden. It is gratifying to see Dora hand Sancho the envelope, which I knew contained a check for \$200. At the very least, I accomplished that this summer...Pedro tells me that his pet,

the lady scorpion, is eating cockroaches now. Ofelia wants to know why I am abandoning her and hugs me again. “The good ones always go,” she says.

CHAPTER 10—Blessings

21 July 2005

Thursday: Whirlwind

Today will be my last full day at Pro-Búsqueda in this two-month sequence of learning and growing. I feel sad, yet occupied. I spend much of the morning preparing my fieldnotes for send-off to my thesis mentors and assisting with preparing the DNA samples for their journey to Richmond. At 5 PM Brenda, my medical school professor, will whisk me off to Santa Ana where I will volunteer for one week on a health education project in rural El Salvador.

Two Canadian journalist ladies from the CBC prowl around Pro-Búsqueda. Yes, they toured the DNA lab in Richmond and met with Sebastian and his fellow DNA analysts. They would like to talk to me. When will I be ready to go into the field with them? I feel grateful that the news media is covering the genetic bank project and regretful that I can't join them in the field since I'm leaving today. I arrange their attendance on a DNA collection trip to Cabañas for the following day. I am finding it hard to leave my friends at Pro-Búsqueda and hard to leave the work, a growing passion.

I click *Send*—fieldnotes gone...the words of my heart are orbiting in cyberspace.

Speaking of cyberspace, I now open an email from Brenda. Subject: "Oh God."

Message: "I missed my plane because my passport was expired. I'm sorry." She's not coming for one, two, or three more days? What? So, I guess I am not getting picked up

at 5 PM today. Where will I stay? My belongings are at Pro-Búsqueda, including passport and money, not to mention my wet or moldy-but-dry clothes, which hang on the rooftop clothesline outside. The clothes are moldy because mold grows faster than the clothes can dry in the humid heat of El Salvador. As soon as the first drops of rain fall, Pedro comes to tell me to bring in my clothes.

Margarita laughs when I tell her that I am not leaving today. “It’s for something, Liz,” she says. “*No hay mal que por bien no venga.* [There is no bad that does not reap good.]”

Dora teases, “Bad news for us.”

I tell the journalists “It looks like I’ll be able to join you tomorrow.” They are glad to receive this update, telling me that they see me as a link between the high-tech genetics lab and the families in El Salvador.

Dora and I step out for lunch. My belly is squealing like a piglet that does not want to be slaughtered. I ate lettuce last night and my gut is holding together, just barely.

Reflections...in between the steps I take on our quiet walk to the supermarket...There is silence inside and I can hear this: For two months, I have been absorbing the feelings of others. I have become an instrument, a conductive antenna that receives emotions and retains them long enough to type them out. For two months, I have been playing the game of “what was it like for you?” Very clever. And finally, on this walk to the

supermarket, I catch on to my own trick—I have been hiding from my emotions, ignoring how I feel when hearing about the horrific accounts of lovers, children, mothers, sisters, fathers, brothers, grandparents buried in the war.

Dora and I return to Pro-Búsqueda, each carrying a grocery bag. Eduardo asks Dora for food, so we invite him and Pedro to join us for lunch. My \$2 contribution to the pot of bananas, breadsticks, and cheese-dip feeds lunch and snack to many. Oops, the bananas that I bought are not ripe. Pedro proclaims that I will not be leaving for Santa Ana until the bananas are ripe, and then wishes aloud that I not go to Santa Ana at all. His ounce of friendship pulls me from sadness. We spent a month and a half not talking, and now...

22 July 2005

Friday: To Cabañas with the journalists

I wake up with the dawn and I leave Ali's house (her roommates took me in last night) around 6:30 AM. I walk to the eatery *El Económico*, which is around the corner from Pro-Búsqueda, and burn my mouth on *pupusas de ayote*. Delicious! I call Santa Ana to figure out if I am departing today. It turns out that Brenda did make last night's red-eye, but no one had told her that I waited for her in San Salvador so I missed the ride and am happily stuck as Mama Ofelia forbids me to ride the bus to Santa Ana. I arrange to meet Brenda's group tomorrow, when they come to San Salvador for sightseeing. Just as this gets sorted out, Lucio and Margarita are climbing into the jeep to go on a DNA-collection

adventure accompanied by the Canadian journalists. I run to the moving jeep and hop into the backseat.

The scenery weaves between views of lakes and cornfields; we've reached rural Cabañas. Lucio, the crew of two journalists and their cameraman, and I wait on the dirt road while Margarita walks ahead. She will ask an *abuelita* for permission to videotape the collection of her DNA. In the meantime, I converse with Donna, the CBC journalist who is pretty but wears too much make-up for this heat. She manages to tell a significant chunk of her life story in a few minutes, or is that her resume that she just recited? There are tears in her eyes because she was working in Africa when her daughter needed her and now life is calling her back to Africa, she confides.

We walk through a *pipianera* [field of squash] to the *abuelita's* house. I realize that the camera is rolling after I have hiked my skirt above my knees because it's hot and I'm tripping on tendrils while dodging a swarming cloud of black insects.

The *abuelita* is sweet. She lives alone. Margarita, wearing a microphone on her “*¿Donde Estan?* [Where are they?]” Pro-Búsqueda T-shirt, performs the DNA-collection.

After DNA collection, the journalist, Donna, sweeps in for an interview. I am standing back observing, but it's painful to watch the *abuelita* crying. With her tears, her entire body trembles, especially her legs. Oooph. And it's scorching hot.

When the interview is safely over, I approach the *abuelita*. “Do you have a latrine I can use?” I ask. She puts her arms on my shoulders and grabs me into a hug. “Do you have a latrine?” I gently repeat, thinking she did not hear my first request.

“They killed three of my children, and my husband. I am here alone.” Now she is crying in my arms, on my shoulder, the poor *abuelita*. Still crying, and I have to leave her on this patio (the others have started making their way back to the cars). Leave her in tears! It hurts to go.

Now we are driving the beautiful bumpy road again. There’s the magnificent view of the crisp blue lake.

House # 2. The bearded cameraman films every bit of our visit here. But it’s not a case of a child who was disappeared as a direct consequence of the civil war; the infant was abducted from the hospital. We interview the missing child’s grandparents. The mother had been told that the baby died at birth, but its body was never given to the family. The baby was sold somewhere, the grandparents of the missing child explain. I marvel at the huge imposing camera and the poofy sound microphone that looks like a bushy raccoon tail, which constantly dangling, threatening to tickle the nose of the interviewee. When rain comes, Margarita fetches an umbrella to protect the camera. I speak to the daughter-in-law of the household. She raises her brother’s four children and her own on a weekly remittance of \$50 sent from the USA. Her husband works in the cornfield, growing corn for the family to eat.

Could we drive that road again, pretty Donna asks, the one that leads past the home of the weeping *abuelita*? The journalists want to “shoot us” driving over a bumpy country road to collect DNA samples. We have to drive even more slowly because of all the cows. This feels silly.

Driving back to San Salvador, Lucio pulls over. Why? He wants to inspect an unexploded missile dug into the dirt about eight feet from the road. “This is where it landed,” Lucio declares. It seems like “they forgot to pack it with explosives.” Lucio reads phonetically and I translate the English writing engraved on the weapon that the *gringos* sent.

I ask Margarita where I could have hidden. “Behind that tree?”

“No.” She points to a ditch on the opposite side of the street, which is below ground level. “You would have had to throw yourself there. Maybe you would have survived. This [bomb] would have left a huge hole.”

At Pro-Búsqueda, I pull out clothes for the evening; I will sleep at Lucio and Julia’s home. Re-packing my backpack, I think to lend Sancho my iPod for the week. “I’m not good at buying gifts but I know you’ll enjoy listening to music.” He laughs and with a toothy smile, says that he would be thrilled to explore my music library.

Luzecita and Julia have already ordered *pupusas* by the time I arrive at the house. It amuses me that while Pablito is on the toilet pooping, Rosita suddenly insists that she has to poop too. There is only one bathroom. Rosita shrieks but it all works out. Later, when Julia asks Rosita how she cleaned herself, Luzecita mentions that she wiped Rosita. I am still amazed by the teamwork in parenting by these two sisters, sisters who aren't sisters, Julia and Luzecita.

Just before bed, little Rosita opens the door to the bathroom and tells me to pee before I sleep. Lucio, Julia, and Rosita sleep in the queen-sized bed under the mosquito net, and I lie in the twin bed that they use as a couch in their bedroom. "Good night, thanks for having me over," I say.

We all fall asleep by 9:30 PM but at 10:15 are awaked by a phone call from Mark. He forgot it was late because he is "so excited that you are coming home soon." Sleep.

23 July 2005

Saturday: To the UCA [Universidad de Centroamerica] to meet Brenda

The roosters start singing at 3 in the morning, the catfight strikes at about 5. Roosters are still calling when I stretch in bed at 5:45 AM. Lucio leaves the house by 6 AM to meet Margarita for a collection trip in Chalate. Julia and I wake up slowly, each in our bed, talking. I learn that Luzecita pays Julia for getting Pablito ready for pre-school and

picking him up, and for washing clothes. Julia says that she did not want to accept money but Luzecita had insisted.

At 7 AM, Pablito comes over with crayons in hand. We eat a little-bit-of-everything breakfast. On the table there are: *pupusas*, cornflakes, beans, tortillas, cheese, yogurt, and milk.

Pablito, Rosita, Luzecita, and Julia escort me to the bus stop of the 44; they do not want me to walk alone because the “crazy drugged guy” is still about. I receive lots of kisses on the cheek, and then step away to catch a bus. “No,” Julia says, freezing my movement. “Take a mini bus. Lucio says that they are safer. There are less assaults on them.”

Yesterday I had invited Julia and Luzecita to come with me to the UCA. Julia had said that she would come if Lucio permits her to ride the bus without him. I offered to pay for a taxi so that they could join me. Neither Julia nor Luzecita have been to the war memorial of the Center Monseñor Romero at the UCA...So I get on the bus alone, and am now riding towards Metrocentro. Amazing, I think to myself, I am not even Salvadoran yet I feel more confident riding the bus by myself than does Julia. But who am I to judge? They know their country better than I do. And they have lived through much trauma; I can understand their aversion to risk...

The kind, proud mini bus driver informs me exactly when to get off the bus for the UCA. The UCA. Tall trees! Peaceful. Beautiful. I see the offices of the professors, where Father Jon's office is. I admire revolutionary art on the walls of the chapel; a painting of Monseñor Romero and the six murdered Jesuit priests that would have been seven except Father Jon is still alive. I pay respects in the garden of roses, which blooms in honor of the deceased and mutilated Jesuits. Maybe I'll just walk myself into the Center Monseñor Romero while I wait for Brenda. I tour it slowly. I am surprised that it is not even more difficult for me to view the tattered, blood stained clothes of the six massacred Jesuit priests. SIX. The saddest loss for me is the death of Ignacio Martín-Baró, the assassinated Jesuit and community psychologist who wrote about the collective trauma of the civil war. I admire his smile in the photograph, the way he carries the guitar; the cozy navy-blue alligator T-shirt that he wore on the evening of his death is before me, bullet-holed.

The glass case in the center of the room shows me the bullet that was meant to kill Father Jon. I know that bullet. Father Jon had told me about it after we ordered our food at the Thai restaurant in Point Richmond. Struck by his faith, I had listened intently as he calmly described the government's multiple assassination attempts on his life. That bullet had trespassed through the driver's window of his car, traveling just a few centimeters too high to pierce Father Jon's skull. So much has come out of his being alive, including the successes of Asociación Pro-Búsqueda—the government's failure to assassinate Father Jon has been fortuitous for humanity. I wonder what would have

happened, where El Salvador would be, if the other six Jesuits and the “prophet” Monseñor Romero had also lived.

Oh, there’s Brenda. And a bunch of white people. Hello, hello, hello. Sorry, I’m a bit out of sorts. I’ve been here looking at the exhibits.

Brenda’s group starts to explore.

A photograph taken after the killing of the Jesuits shows brains smeared on the sidewalk, puddles bleeding off the page. It seems that they raped the housekeeper before killing her too. I can’t describe why I say that but it appears evident from the photos. Her bloody corpse is discarded beside the couch. The photos. They won’t pop up in my dreams tonight. Lucio has prepared me for worse. But still, this was a tremendous tragedy and waste for humanity.

Brenda’s group wants to see the chapel. “Will you tell them about El Mozote?” chipper Brenda asks. Tell them? Rusty jaws (me) opens her mouth to speak to young people (the children of Brenda and her partner) about the atrocities committed during the Salvadoran civil war. Sure, I can play tour guide briefly. I like educating attentive ears about these important topics...but it’s funny to hear squeaky-jaws speak. Even if what I say is an articulate recount of Rufina Amaya’s testimony, the emotions still feel funny as they crawl out of my lips.

I get in the van of Asociación Buena Salud [Association for Good Health], the NGO that Brenda volunteers with in Santa Ana. We go to Cebollines, a restaurant similar to Acapulco's in the United States. I am neither in El Salvador nor the U.S., but somewhere in between. U.S. prices, Salvadoran and *gringo* faces. So, this is where the rich Salvadorans go. I am fully American all of a sudden, lunching at a large table with a group of Americans. And by virtue of being American, with American stuffed wallets, I am rich today. Wealthy. Really? This seems a striking contrast to the humble El Salvador I have already observed and will also experience in the coming week when I assist Brenda in providing healthcare to the rural underserved.

24 July 2005

Sunday: More tourism

No talk of war today. We dine at a luxury restaurant embedded in a resort at the shore of a crater lake. Is this the same El Salvador?

The rose naked of her spines—I miss the real El Salvador, the one I felt when I really talked with the people. I would rather be in the home of the *abuelita* with the *pipianera* [field of squash] in Cabañas, listening to her, hugging her, as she finishes her cry.

25 July 2005

Monday: Workshops on rural health

Today I am pure *gringa* medical student. I join Brenda in leading a workshop on human sexuality for Asociacion Buena Salud's team of health educators and observe a community meeting on dental health.

26 July 2005

Tuesday: Virgin of Santa Ana

Today is the festival to honor the Virgin of Santa Ana. This means that it is too dangerous to be on the streets of Santa Ana and we cannot do health work. Although I enjoy our visit to archaeological ruins and savoring sweetly liquored tiramisu at a plush patisserie, I am uncomfortable being a full-time tourist.

27 July 2005

Wednesday: Santa Ana to San Salvador

As a finale to my work with Brenda, this morning I accompany her on a visit to the "Healthy Children," Asociacion Buena Salud's school for indigent children.

At 2 PM, my friends from Pro-Búsqueda, Margarita and Don Jaime, come to pick me up.

We laugh in the jeep—I'm so glad to see them.

We arrive at Pro-Búsqueda. What? The CBC journalists want to film sweaty me as I walk back into the office?

I am wearing my red dress, which incites my co-workers to rejoice that their country has fattened me up. “You’re chubbier,” they tell me in chorus, except for Pedro who says that a “special wind” in San Salvador pouches out my dress. Oh, and after that round of commentary, the journalists have their camera on me again, filming my dirt-crusted fingernails as I type. I am transcribing an interview into the computer database in preparation for the departure of the samples tomorrow. The samples leave tomorrow? That means I leave.

Sancho and I say goodbye. He returns my iPod, grateful for the music that I shared with him. I’m working diligently on the computer so I say, “Please put it [the iPod] over there in my purse [on the other side of the room].”

Sancho gives me a CD of songs that we listened to in the psychology office. “Thank you for your contributions to Pro-Búsqueda this summer. Mark is a lucky guy.”

“See you next time, Sancho. Thank you.”

Lucio calls me on the telephone from his office. “It’s time [to go home],” he says.

“Okay. I’m sorry about your legs,” I quip.

“What?” he asks.

“Well, you weren’t able to walk down the hall, so your legs must be broken.”

We chuckle as we head off. In the car, Lucio reports, “I was interviewed today.” Lucio conveys a unique passion and focus with the expressions of his face when he reflects on his past vocally or internally.

Lucio, Luzecita, and Julia invite me to Pizza Hut for a farewell gathering. I am like my mother—I do want to cry. Luzecita spends \$35 on her credit card to pay for the banquet meal: pizza, garlic bread, soda, and chocolate cake. She refuses to let me even pitch in because it is a farewell in my honor. Her generosity astounds and humbles me.

Now I am playing with little Pablito. When he gets upset, he often says with a pout of his lip, ‘you don’t love me.’ So, I playfully beat him to his own charade. “You don’t love *me*,” I cry.

And I am surprised to hear his reply, “I do love you.”

I re-pack my backpack, offering Julia many of my clothes as I go. “Oh no, something is missing,” I exclaim to Julia. I proceed to search for my iPod but do not find it. Yes, I saw Sancho put it into my purse, but I did not zip the purse. It was foolish of me to leave

the temptation before the eyes of so many. “Julia, it’s not that I mind losing the item. It’s the breaking of trust (that hurts me).” She nods knowingly. How dare I talk to her about the loss of a \$200 electronic toy! She lost her mother because of bombs from my country. That is loss. This loss that I am feeling is not real loss. I realize that I inadvertently tested people while at Pro-Búsqueda. I left items out, including the iPod, and felt good when I saw that no one took them. “Julia, don’t tell anyone I said this, I feel bad, but Pedro and that girl who comes to volunteer were the only other people in the psychology office today.” Yes, I am blaming Pedro in my mind. I can even believe that he took it as a joke and will give it to me tomorrow because he does not want me to leave. All day, he had been telling me that he ‘will take away my bags...no just the DNA samples,’ he had said. That way, I can ‘go home for a week and be with Mark but you [Liz] won’t find the DNA samples,’ he had repeated in his chilling, kind tone. Then I will have to come back after one week to retrieve them. Translation: Pedro will miss me.

I hear the *pha pha pha pha* of Lucio’s sewing machine in the next room as he busily prepares a bulk order of backpacks. The sounds of the machine represent the sounds of honest work. He is diligent. There is not an ounce of me that believes that Lucio would have taken the iPod. “Lu,” Julia calls to Lucio. “Liz is missing something.”

“A blue colored device?” he asks over the wall. “Yes, I saw it in the psychology office,” he says. He also tells me to look under the bed in his bedroom. Oops! I had kicked it there when I packed. Now I am the guilty one, guilty for having blamed an innocent man in my mind. Lucio, guessing correctly that I am blaming Pedro in my mind, asserts,

“Pedro would never take anything.” He tells me about the two *jovenes encontrados* who occasionally visit Pro-Búsqueda who are known to steal. But Pedro, Lucio insists, does not steal. “It hurts to be accused,” Lucio says.

Lucio takes a break from sewing and joins Julia and me in their bedroom. “Would you rather be a victim or a survivor?” Lucio asks. Julia would rather be a survivor. Lucio nods in agreement. “They [the Canadian journalists] asked me that during the interview today.”

I am grateful for an early bedtime and plunge happily into sleep.

28 July 2005

Thursday: Goodbye San Salvador

I had a wonderful sleep. Julia rolls out of bed and goes directly to Luzecita’s home to bathe and dress Pablito before preschool. I follow her, still in my pajamas, with a sleepy face. We speak to Luzecita through the bathroom door and in doing so awaken Agustin. He comes groggily out of sleep to sit on the couch and socialize. Now Luzecita steps out of the bathroom. She is wearing a tank top. This is the first time that I see her stump. A little bit of her left leg still exists, a few centimeters of it. She is also standing without shoes or socks on. I can see that her feet orient themselves like a ballerina in first position; that is her at-rest stance. As a result of flesh-searing shrapnel, her legs turn out in the hip socket. I had wondered to what extent Luzecita dresses herself. I can see that

she does almost everything on her own. She does walk over to Julia for help tugging the right sleeve of the white sweater down from elbow to wrist.

Curious Agustin gets out a map of the Bay Area. He wants to know where the airport is, where the bridges are, and where I live. Berkeley and even Tilden Park, I find them on the map and while Agustin continues to study it, I make an exit. “Umm...I’m just going to go shower.” I run out, escaping the goodbye with Luzecita. It would make me sad. And showers are like my morning coffee. I expect to see Luzecita again, I rationalize, but not really, and it’s too early to feel sad.

At Pro-Búsqueda, I feel honored to transport the 248 samples that we collected this summer. I am humbled by the dedication of the capable team at Pro-Búsqueda. Father Jon has kind words for me and I tell him that I expect to see him soon in Berkeley. We do not talk for long because he has to prepare for an interview this evening where he will be discussing a book that he has not yet read. Just like a procrastinating schoolboy, getting by on the last minute. Funny.

We realize that the DNA samples are too bulky for my backpack so Lucio runs home to make a duffel bag that will fit the samples “just right.” Before Lucio leaves, he shares the news that someone was killed at a nightclub last night. His unspoken message: ‘That is why I told you not to go out dancing.’

I say goodbye to Father Jon. “Whenever you want to come back, you will be welcome,” he tells me. There is something of a blessing in his eyes, and in the way he rests his hands on the side of my shoulder as we say goodbye.

Pedro and I walk into the outdoor garden adjacent to the foyer where he had planted roses with Dora. None of the rose bushes currently have flowers but he tells me what colors the blossoms will be.

I am in the psychology office, happily savoring my last chocobanano, given to me by Eduardo, when Pedro comes in and seats himself in the psychologist’s chair. What feels funny? Pedro occupies the therapist’s seat. This bears a resemblance to our previous conversation except this time, I am in the position of the patient. Pedro looks to me with concentrating eyes and then initiates a conversation. “I have a favor to ask you,” he says.

“Okay.” I see there is a piece of paper in his hands. Easy, he wants me to deliver a note to someone in the USA.

“No, I am serious,” he asserts. He really does seem serious by his tone. Oh, he is just fiddling nervously with the paper, an item he grabbed off of Sancho’s desk; it’s not a letter that he intends to send. “My life is private,” Pedro tells me, surprising me with a calm seriousness. “What I told you, no one else knows, and I just want it to stay between you and me. Nobody knows me. They found me on the streets but they do not know more about my past. What we talked about is private.”

He has waited until 40 minutes before I leave to tell me this. What timing! I remind Pedro about the fieldnotes. I explain that I do have notes about his story and that I will not do anything with them without his permission. In the course of this conversation, he explains back what I have said, demonstrating that he understands and feels comfortable knowing that I have documented his testimony for my thesis. He wants me to hold his story and trusts me to share it in a manner that preserves his anonymity. ‘Testimony’ is the word that Pedro uses. Of course, I will respect his request to preserve his privacy. Yet I ask anyway, “No one else knows the things you’ve told me? Not even Reina? Not even Lucio?”

“No.” Is he deluding himself into thinking that people here do not know about his violent past? Has he forgotten all that he confided in Reina? Or, is he just saying that relative to most people, he has told me a lot? It’s funny but I guess it is not surprising; this morning’s request for honesty and privacy has opened a new door of trust between Pedro and me. I can feel it in the gentleness and silence of our conversation now.

“When I first spoke with you [about my testimony], I found you to be with fear, confusion, and honesty,” Pedro reveals. (Did he sense I was screaming ‘murderer!’ in my head?)

And, now, Pedro invites me into hearing more of his life story. I am beginning to understand the basics of the Salvatrucha gang structure. There are 12 bosses in El Salvador. “What is the leader of all the bosses called?” I ask.

“You could say ‘President’,” Pedro replies. He tells me that he had a high-ranking position in the *Salvatrucha* hierarchy.

“How did you get to have that position?” I ask.

“I entered *M.S.* [*Mara Salvatrucha*] when I was nine years old. No one enters that young. I was raised with a boss. And then he died.”

“How is it that you are still alive?” Surely if he had a high-ranking position he would have been murdered by the opposing gang. Is he a liar, is he deluded, or is this true?

“God confuses faces,” he tells me again.

“Do you own a gun now?” I ask

“No, but I have the right to arm myself at any time. I have not had a gun since I gave myself to God.”

“How many people have you killed?” (Here I go, asking that question again. I am fixated on the number, something to make this nonsense a little real. Violence is not part of my world; his stories feel unreal.)

“I cannot reveal this.” Same answer as before. But he does say, “There are fights for power between the bosses and the president.”

I am still eating my chocobanano, lapping the last bites. Still sitting in the patient’s seat, while Pedro shares about life in the gang. “Liz, come here for a moment,” Dora calls me from down the hall. My farewell party! All are gathered in the foyer. They give me a Romero t-shirt, snap photographs, and send me on my way home with words of love and appreciation.

After my last touches at packing, Pedro carries the duffel with the 248 samples to the jeep, the one he had threatened and is still threatening to make disappear so I have to stay. Eduardo asks if he can carry my backpack. I hug everyone in the office except for Pedro; a wave and a smile are enough. Pedro is at the car asking if he can come with me to the USA. Julia and Rosita are in the backseat, as they too will deliver me to the airport. Margarita also sits in the backseat. We will drop her off at the entrance to the road to her community.

After my goodbye to Margarita, I borrow Lucio’s cell phone to call Luzecita. “Luzecita, I didn’t say goodbye to you this morning because it made me sad.”

She laughs. “Me too.”

At the airport, the Salvadoran family, Lucio, Julia, and Rosita, wait for me while I check into my flight. I treat them to one last meal, a small token to express my gratitude, eating gross-greasy-overly-microwaved-beans while they munch on fried chicken at Pollo Campero.

A goodbye. Lucio and I do not hug but we shake hands. I hug and kiss Julia. I kneel to Rosita, scoop her with my arm, and she sits on my squatting knee. “Rosita, I love you,” I say, surprising myself with my words.

“Me too,” she responds, still sitting on my knee. I look up and see her parents smiling at us.

The metal detector, the passport, walking past duty-free.

I am on my own, on my way home now, and what was that world that I left behind in Berkeley? It’s a TACA flight and there is just nothing like Latin America—I can’t help but smile. A giant parrot mascot entertains those waiting for the non-stop flight to SFO. The person dressed in the parrot costumes dances and sings “*Tengo cara de yo no fui* [My facial expression says I didn’t do it]” while dancing. I want to cry, to expel the pounding emotion within. And just as I think the word “Sad,” Agustin, wearing a TACA uniform

and security pass around his neck, comes running up from the ground through the gate for my flight. He catches his breath and I give him a hug. I am so happy to see him. Fun! We talk briefly. He told me he gave the plane a “little inspection” as he is the mechanic assigned to check it out.

I joke that I want a “big inspection.” We smile and I snap a self-portrait of us.

“I have to get back to work. They are probably wondering where I am.”

“Bye!”

I am one of the last to board the plane. There he is again, smiling, standing at the door of the plane. This time I give him a huge hug and kiss on the cheek, and scribble a goodbye note to Luzecita. It reads, “Luzecita, I adore you.” I tear the page out of my journal.

Agustin grins, exits down the stairs, and onto the tarmac again.

I am enjoying talking with the Cuban man and his Salvadoran wife who are seated next to me on the plane. Someone had told me that the plane would smell of Pollo Campero. It really does! The Cuban man tells me that the “*olorcito de pollo* [chicken smell]” is making him hungry. I love my culture. And I love where I have been.

2 August 2005

Tuesday: Back in California

My sister and I go on silly errands. The real point is to spend time together. I have been in California for one week. She is four months pregnant and her belly is showing now. Our excursion takes us to Fruitvale. I observe a Latina cashier preferentially speaking Spanish to a Latino customer. Fruitvale! Tastes of Central America: a cart with bells pushed by the man with a sombrero who sells popsicles (Margarita's husband sold popsicles); a stand on the corner with tamales and peeled mangoes in plastic bags to be eaten with chili and salt.

In the afternoon, I go to Farmers' Market. Lupe, a friend of two years and the farmer with the sweetest strawberries, introduces me to her father who is visiting from Mexico. Another friend, the Mexican woman who sells the tamales that her mother makes, wonders where I have been for the last two months. We speak to each other in Spanish. She tells me that 12 relatives (in-laws of hers) have been in town for one month from Tijuana. The in-laws leave tomorrow. "17 in one home," she says. She continues, "Don't tell me when you go back to El Salvador. I would be too worried. I see so much [about El Salvador] in the news." She also says that I have gained weight. It's funny that the *gringos* here don't notice while the Latinos notice and say it. My American girlfriend who is with me appears shocked that the tamale lady would say such a comment to me. I laugh. There is home within home.

Glossary

Abuela= grandmother.

Abuelita diminutive of grandmother; granny.

Abuelo= grandfather.

Aldeas SOS= orphanage in San Salvador where a number of disappeared children were found.

Campesino= farmer

Chocobanano= chocolate-covered banana.

Coyote=one who helps shuttle illegal immigrants into the United States.

El Norte= the north; refers to the United States.

Gringo= person from the United States.

Guerrilla= guerilla.

Guerrillero= guerilla fighter.

Guinda= flight of civilians during war.

Guindar= to flee; to partake in a guinda.

Hermana=sister.

Hermano= brother.

Joven encontrado= literally means ‘youth who has been found’; this term is used by Pro-Busqueda to refer to disappeared children who were located by the organization. (Note: “*Joven*,” meaning young adults, is used by Pro-Busqueda interchangeably with “*joven encontrado*.”)

Maiz= corn.

Marero= gang member.

Masa= a group of civilians.

Niña= literally means 'girl'; respectful term of address in El Salvador to an older woman.

Novenario= ninth day of remembrance after a loved one's death.

Pandillero= gang member.

Pupusas= stuffed tortillas; a typical Salvadoran food.

Pupuseria= eatery where pupusas are sold.

Reencuentro= reunion of a disappeared child with his or her biological family.

Salud=literally means 'health'; used as 'goodbye' in El Salvador

Salvadoreño= Salvadoran.

Tía= aunt.

*The ending "o" in Spanish adjectives and nouns denotes masculine singular, "a" denotes feminine singular, "os" denotes masculine plural (or masculine together with feminine plural objects), and "as" denotes feminine plural. For example, *joven encontrado* refers to a young man who has been reunited with his family while the term *jovenes encontradas* describes a group of young women who have been reunited with their families.

Conclusion

“Not knowing one’s family is like feeling a wound in the heart—I don’t know how to describe it—an emptiness that does not fill. Whatever little problem that comes makes one weak because people say that if you do not have a family you are worthless. I have felt that [worthless] many times...I have missed my mother my entire life. I have anguished to see her.”

-Disappeared young woman who searches for her family

Key Findings

I have chosen “storytelling” to present my findings precisely because after living in El Salvador among the disappeared children and their families, I felt strongly that their experiences with family reunification simply could not be neatly summarized. Each family reunification is unique and continually evolves in the life of the individual and the family unit. Nevertheless, I can make the following generalizations:

1. *The process of family reunification was multifaceted and extremely difficult.*

When reuniting with their families, the majority of the *jovenes encontrados* experienced a range of feelings that included anger, abandonment, terror (as they relived past trauma), joy, sense of wholeness, and pride in their resiliency. A minority of the *jovenes* experienced emotions only on one side of the emotional spectrum (e.g., anger without joy or vice versa). While reunification presented an excruciating challenge for the *jovenes*, in

many cases it also provided immense joy and healing. It allowed many to overcome the ambiguous loss of being disappeared without even knowing if one's family members were alive (Boss 1999), and by virtue of coming into contact with missing family members, it facilitated reconciliation with their past. All the 26 *jovenes encontrados* whom I interviewed about family reunification stated that with hindsight, if given the hypothetical choice to reunite or not reunite with their families, they would absolutely choose the former. This affirms the healing potential of family reunification as a dynamic, long-term process with staggering emotional potency.

2. Family reunification enhanced the disappeared children's sense of identity; however, this did not necessarily equate with well-being.

Consistent with Erikson's theory that identity formation is the key developmental process in life, *jovenes encontrados* who were able to learn about their history and who felt a part of the family unit achieved a sense of resolution about their war-torn lives. Interestingly, young adults whose attempts to forge relationships with their families resulted in less than satisfactory bonds also achieved a higher degree of identity formation upon meeting their biological families despite negative associations with them. Erikson posits that identity formation is tantamount to emotional maturation and happiness. As described in the literature review, this parallels the human rights framework's emphasis on children's right to identity. While family reunification was an important catalyst for identity formation, the words and behaviors of many of the *jovenes* countered Erikson's theory that identity formation is the central pillar of a satisfied individual. As one *joven encontrado* expressed during an interview, "*I always felt alone. The fact of finding them*

[his biological family] *did not mean that I filled all my emptiness. No!! Finding them just served to clear up my doubts, to clear up my true identity. But that did not resolve for me all my problems in life... Finding my family did not help me to overcome [all the difficulties in my life], no, but it did help me to realize my true identity.*” In short, while family reunification was a catalyst for identity formation, identity formation did not necessarily equate with well-being or emotional satisfaction, as I had initially postulated. Family reunification is poignant, evocative, and life-changing but it does not solve all of one’s “problems in life.” As they struggle to raise families of their own, the *jovenes encontrados* who reside in El Salvador face poverty and horrific violence everyday. Rather than identity issues, overcoming these day-to-day challenges takes precedence for them as their major determinant of well-being.

3. Asociación Pro-Búsqueda fostered a sense of community among the jovenes encontrados, which was protective for their well-being.

After several interviews I conducted in isolated regions of rural El Salvador, the *joven encontrado* would ask, “*When will Pro-Búsqueda hold another workshop? Please let me know when there is a workshop.*” Being a *joven encontrado* provides a sense of community, which is nurtured by Pro-Búsqueda, one in which the *jovenes* are proud to belong. Many of these *jovenes* previously lacked a social identity in which they were proud to ascribe membership—as children they were disparagingly deemed orphans and treated as pariahs. Upon reunification with their biological families, regardless of their degree of success in forging relationships with them, these young adults shared an

understanding and derived a sense of belonging from their connection to one another as *jovenes encontrados*. This sense of community fueled their resiliency.

Notes on Autoethnography

As I was climbing into Pro-Búsqueda's jeep after an interview with the mother of a *joven encontrada*, the mother approached me and tugged at my hand. "When you go back home [to the United States], tell others about us. Tell them what happened here [in El Salvador]." She, like other members of the community, was asking me to tell their story, the story of the disappeared children and the families that faithfully searched for them. Autoethnography allowed me to relate their stories in what was probably the most honest way I could have written it—ripe with my own confessions of biases and while highlighting the subtleties and emotional complexities I was observing without pretending to understand. Autoethnography provided me an artistic, self-reflective license and a legitimate academic backbone through which I became a researcher-storyteller. As the mother of the *joven encontrada* asked of me, I hope that someday this storytelling may reach a wider audience.

The primary limitation of an autoethnographic approach is the issue of its validity. If autoethnography will endure as a respected genre it must develop clear methods for ensuring validity. In order to address this in my study, I closely examined the literature on autoethnography for strategies to enhance validity, open coded several of the interviews, and did my best to be transparent when conveying the methods for this study. Yet in several respects I also "winged it" as this is an evolving genre. Having chosen

autoethnography as my methodology, I now question with which audiences I will have gained or lost credibility. A quote I cited in my fieldnotes reads, “The poet is intimate with the truth while the scientist approaches it awkwardly.” For myself, autoethnography encouraged artistic expression but required extra effort to maximize its structure and rigor.

Recommendations for Asociación Pro-Búsqueda

Given that family reunification is a multifaceted, long-term process that presents a unique yet challenging opportunity for healing for affected young adults, it is critical that Pro-Búsqueda provide sufficient psychological support to *jovenes encontrados* before, during, and after the reunification process. The organization does strive to achieve this, and its deliberate and thorough steps to support *jovenes* and their adoptive and biological families before and during family reunification are exemplary. However, Pro-Búsqueda currently lacks the resources (both financial and structural) to adequately support *jovenes encontrados* after family reunification has occurred. This is the largest gap in their services and is especially problematic for *jovenes* raised in developed countries; when an internationally adopted *joven* leaves El Salvador after his *reencuentro*, Pro-Búsqueda does not maintain regular contact with him unless the *joven* himself takes the initiative. The danger is that these *jovenes*, who are in an extremely vulnerable emotional state, may feel abandoned by the organization and by their Salvadoran families. Furthermore, if the act of reunion was difficult or overwhelming (as it usually is) then without continued contact from Pro-Búsqueda, the *joven* can easily submit to the temptation to pretend that the family they “left behind” in El Salvador was merely a dream that can be ignored.

Since the organization often serves a crucial role in helping internationally adopted *jovenes* to overcome communication barriers with their biological families, without the continued involvement of Pro-Búsqueda, there is often minimal to no contact between *jovenes* and their biological families after family reunification has occurred. Without continued psychological support, the newly created, delicate union between *jovenes encontrados* and their biological families can disintegrate.

To enhance the long-term success of a family reunification, I have the following specific recommendations for Asociación Pro-Búsqueda. These recommendations are aimed at increasing the support available to *jovenes encontrados* after the initial meeting has occurred:

1. *A psychologist at Pro-Búsqueda should meet with each joven encontrado at least once after family reunification has occurred to discuss expectations that the joven has of himself, of his adoptive and biological families, and of Pro-Búsqueda; proposed communication methods; and strategies to nurture the re-forming relationships. Ideally, the first meeting in this series should occur one to three days after family reunification.*

This recommendation would take minimal effort for Pro-Búsqueda to implement and could potentially dramatically improve the outcome of family reunifications for *jovenes encontrados* who reside in El Salvador and for those who live abroad.

- 2. Pro-Búsqueda should form a network of *jovenes encontrados* through which these *jovenes* can offer peer support to one another throughout the life-long process of family reunification.*

This recommendation calls for both the literal establishment of this network, which Pro-Búsqueda is in the process of building, and the facilitation of the use of the network so that *jovenes* derive maximum benefit from it. Steps that Pro-Búsqueda can take to enhance the effective usage of the network include sending out newsletters to all *jovenes*, holding conferences of *jovenes*, and eliciting and responding to feedback from *jovenes* as to their experiences in the network. This resource would be especially valuable to *jovenes encontrados* who were adopted internationally as they tend to have less contact with other *jovenes encontrados* compared to *jovenes encontrados* who reside in El Salvador.

- 3. Pro-Búsqueda should establish alliances with NGOs or other mental health providers in order to enhance access to psychological support services for *jovenes encontrados* in the years following family reunification.*

For *jovenes* who reside in countries outside of El Salvador, collaborations with partnering NGOs or other mental health providers in the countries where the *jovenes* now live could help to increase access to culturally appropriate psychological services for this group. Talking about family reunification with providers who are connected to Pro-Búsqueda in the nation where these *jovenes* reside could strongly enhance these *jovenes*' ability to integrate positive experiences with reunification into their lives and mitigate negative ones. If limited resources preclude Pro-Búsqueda from establishing this network, at the

very least, the organization could encourage these *jovenes encontrados* to seek support on their own. With respect to *jovenes encontrados* who reside in El Salvador, the government of El Salvador could play an important role in promoting the longer term well-being of this population by either directly providing mental health services to them or by providing Pro-Búsqueda with funding to carry-out this task. With only a moderate increase relative to its overall funding, Pro-Búsqueda could be equipped to attend to the longer-term psychological needs related to family reunification of the *jovenes encontrados* who remain in El Salvador.

Recommendations for Further Research

This research will inform Asociación Pro-Búsqueda about the dynamics of family reunification and the needs of *jovenes encontrados* who reside in El Salvador. A study of these *jovenes* through a longer time period could elucidate valuable information about the long-term processes of family reunification and recovery from the trauma of forced disappearance. I also recommend that further research focus on understanding the experiences of *jovenes encontrados* who were adopted by families in developing countries. This research could provide insight into international and transracial adoption, and could strongly contribute to the development of a psychologically sensitive protocol for the application of forensic science in the search for the missing. Unfortunately, situations such as war, immigration, and natural disaster continue to tear families apart. Acknowledging this and conducting research that seeks to understand the process of family reunification serves an important role in supporting families as they reunite. It is

even to be hoped that by means of heightened awareness, research on reunification will, in the future, contribute to preventing family separation.

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