Introduction

In 1979, Francisca Romero, her husband, and their six children were living in the mountains of Chalatenango, El Salvador, as her ancestors had for generations. Like most rural Salvadorans, the Romeros were semi-subsistence farmers, growing crops to feed their family. During harvests, children and parents also worked as day laborers at the ranches of wealthy landowners, earning little pay. In the rainy season, they harvested corn on the ranches; in the dry season, coffee and sugarcane. Francisca’s village had no roads for cars; residents traveled by foot. Homes lacked electricity or running water.

Each morning, Francisca would grind corn from the family garden for tortillas and boil beans over an open fire. Using eggs from hens raised on their patio, she baked *pan dulce* (sweet bread) in the outdoor adobe oven and then swept the floor of the mud-walled home. In the afternoons she washed clothes in a ravine with the other women of the village. But their way of life would soon change. Wealthy landowners had amassed most of the arable land, and conditions for *campesinos* (farmers) such as Francisca’s family members had become increasingly abusive. The meager wages and small parcels of land were not enough to sustain the families of the villages. As the women gathered to scrub clothes, they spoke of the
challenges of getting by on even less—and of the danger mounting in the Salvadoran countryside.

A group of nuns had been coming from a nearby convent to Francisca’s village, preaching liberation theology, a Christian ideology that gathered Salvadoran campesinos and other impoverished Latin Americans around the Bible, literacy, and a call for social justice in the name of Christ’s teachings. They advocated for better pay for the farmers and land reform—despite violent repression.

The military had controlled El Salvador since the 1932 matanza (massacre) of thirty thousand indigenous farmers who had also protested for a living wage and land reform. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, the divide between the wealthy and poor widened as military dominance of the government intensified. By the 1970s, an aristocracy known as the “Fourteen Families” possessed most of the nation’s land and wealth. The military had close ties to the wealthy elite and controlled the government. Fraudulent political elections maintained the oligarchy’s power.¹

As resistance grew among a growing base of rural and urban poor, state-sponsored death squads, funded by El Salvador’s elite, suppressed votes and then killed civilians protesting electoral fraud.² In the late 1970s the Catholic Church documented an increasing pattern of government-ordered civilian murders. Although Francisca’s family members weren’t rebel fighters, they were under threat, as were millions of Salvadoran civilians who had become targets in a larger global conflict. Within the context of the Cold War, fearing the spread of communism, US president Jimmy Carter’s administration backed a coup in El Salvador in October 1979—installing a new military leader to prevent “another Nicaragua or Cuba.”³ The United States also had financial interests in El Salvador’s coffee exports and other cash crops.⁴

Francisca recounts that, as Salvadoran military and paramilitary death squads surveilled the countryside, she and her husband joined the nuns. “The armed forces were persecuting us, and we couldn’t take it anymore, so we began to organize around the Catholic Bible. In those days, people who had a Bible were persecuted,” Francisca tells me.

One morning in 1979, Francisca awoke to find the image of a white hand on her front door. The symbol, representing the Mano Blanca death squad, signified a death threat. Francisca, her husband, and their six chil-
dren had no choice but to flee. For months, under constant fear of death or torture, Francisca and her family took shelter in the abandoned houses of other displaced families in the area, gathering food from the jungle and deserted farms.

In the country’s capital, the archbishop of El Salvador, a Jesuit named Óscar Arnulfo Romero, spoke out against the worsening violence and inequality, calling for an immediate end to government-sanctioned bloodshed. Archbishop Romero had initially sought to be apolitical, but the violence had become too reprehensible to ignore. In February 1980 he sent President Carter a letter pleading for the United States to suspend military aid to El Salvador. “Political power is in the hands of the military,” he wrote, and in the face of repression the people are “struggling for fundamental human rights.”5 In March 1980, Romero urged soldiers to disobey commands to murder civilians. The next day, on March 24, when Francisca’s family was still on the run, a sniper shot Archbishop Romero while he was performing mass in San Salvador. One week later, government-sponsored snipers killed forty-two mourners at his funeral. Óscar Romero’s assassination, ordered by the highest levels of the government, ignited El Salvador’s civil war.6

Later that year, in December 1980, death squads raped and killed four US Maryknoll sisters who were en route from the San Salvador airport for a Catholic relief mission.7 Despite public outcry in the United States following the murder of the nuns, US funding to Salvadoran security forces overall increased.

In 1981, five allegedly communist rebel groups united to form the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) guerrilla force, named after the leader of the 1932 uprising for farmers’ rights. Fearful that communism could spread throughout Central America, in 1981, the Reagan administration sent $82 million in aid to back the Salvadoran military-run government. (By 1982 the tiny country became the fourth-highest recipient of US aid dollars.)8 The Salvadoran military, instructed in counterinsurgency tactics by the United States, sought to isolate the FMLN from the social base that sustained it, using a “scorched earth policy” that deliberately targeted unarmed civilians in rural El Salvador, like Francisca and her family.9

Under the policy, the military labeled campesinos as guerrilla sympa-
thizers to justify genocidal tactics of war. US-trained soldiers burned food crops and massacred entire villages, often raping women and children before slaughtering them and placing desecrated bodies in public view to instill terror. Some campesinos may have supported the guerrillas—decades of oppression and death-squad killings had stimulated popular resistance—but many, like Francisca’s family, just sought to survive.

Francisca’s family was in flight when the military carried out indiscriminate massacres of campesinos in 1980 in her department of Chalatenango. In 1981, slaughters of civilians increased, especially in Chalatenango, adjacent Cabañas, and in Morazán, where the elite US-trained Atlacatl Battalion decimated an entire village in the massacre at El Mozote. In May 1982, after three years of flight, running from one abandoned village to another and hiding in the jungle, Francisca, her husband, and their four youngest children were caught in the military operation that survivors call the Guinda de Mayo (Flight of May). Thousands of soldiers, including troops from the Atlacatl Battalion, surrounded twenty square kilometers of rural Chalatenango and attacked one thousand civilians. The FMLN sought to protect the unarmed civilians—referred to as masa—and lead them to safety.

Francisca and her family hid in bushes from soldiers and from helicopters dropping bombs. She covered the mouth of her two-year-old son to stifle sounds that could draw gunfire, all the while praying that she didn’t inadvertently suffocate him. After five days of hiding without eating anything but surrounding vegetation, Francisca’s family and several others determined that breaking through the military siege was their only chance of escape. There was “a wall of guerrillas” to defend against military attack and “a wall of soldiers,” Francisca says, “and we had to run in between.”

By then Francisca’s two oldest sons, including a boy who was only twelve years old at the time, had joined the guerrilla force, and her husband had handed over his only rifle to the FMLN. Her husband told his family the plan he’d heard from a friend. “At 1:30 p.m. you will hear our signal: a grenade explosion. When you hear that signal, get up fast and run!” He told them not to stop for anything. “If you see me dead or injured, leave me. Continue ahead.”

Moments later, as Francisca was about to bite into a piece of papaya, the only fruit she’d found for days, the grenade sounded. She gathered her
children and ran. They sprinted, “not knowing where the bombs and bullets came from.” Francisca carried her youngest son while her two daughters held on to her arms. As they raced through the bullets and bombs, Francisca yelled to her husband to take charge of their youngest daughter, seven-year-old Elsy. He grabbed Elsy by the nape of her neck and they ran. When crossing a ditch under a wire fence, Francisca became separated from her husband and Elsy. Her older son had run on ahead.

During a break from the bullets, Francisca hid behind a bush with her toddler and her eleven-year-old daughter. Francisca heard shouting. “Come out comrades! We are the guerrillas.” She stayed hidden, covering the two children with her body—and watched as soldiers grabbed emerging civilians by the hair. “The soldiers didn’t use bullets to kill,” Francisca recalls. “They just got out a knife and cut people’s necks, and the people fell, their legs jumping.”

Still hiding, Francisca saw from across a bloodstained rice field that soldiers had captured Elsy; she recognized Elsy by her dress. Francisca resisted the urge to run to Elsy—death was near-certain if she did. “The soldiers had taken my girl, and I could do absolutely nothing. That was the hardest for me.” Francisca watched the soldiers gather Elsy into a group of dozens of children. “It was two in the afternoon,” Francisca says through tears. “They grabbed the children by the hair and put them in helicopters.” She could only watch as the helicopter lifted off and faded into the horizon. Francisca surmised that when Elsy was captured, soldiers had likely slain her unarmed husband. She felt listless, but the thought of saving her three remaining children powered her to keep moving toward Honduras, the safest place for them.

The military hunted Francisca and the other survivors of the Guinda de Mayo as they fled toward the Sumpul River, which forms the border with Honduras. Francisca recalls, “There were helicopters and A37 planes that dropped bombs, little planes that we called la gradilla [the rack] that just roamed, and helicopters that were shooting machine guns. We had breakfast: bullets; lunch: bullets; dinner: bullets, bombs, and grenades.” She continues, “We ran but stayed in the mountains. We didn’t brush our hair. We didn’t drink water. We didn’t eat or sleep. We didn’t carry underwear. The only thing I carried was my two-year-old boy. We passed a family—all six of them were dead. Ahead of us, they were dead. Behind, dead. On all
sides, dead. Only God saved us.” All told, soldiers killed an estimated six hundred civilians during the Guinda de Mayo, which lasted from May 24 to June 10, 1982.14

For months Francisca and her remaining children scavenged to survive while hiding to evade the military. Francisca learned to eat the fruit of the cactus with the needles, the shrubbery, and the sticks of the papaya plant. They took refuge in a home occupied by three dead bodies. In November 1982, the military launched a second operation, and the attacks against civilians intensified. Francisca describes, “There were two big piles. The soldiers were so disgraceful. In one pile there were twenty-five heads of children ages zero to about eleven years old. Another pile had the bodies. We hid in a deep gully. You could hear the shouts, and you couldn’t come out or they would kill you.” Francisca managed to flee. “We didn’t stop. When my boy wanted to pee, I had him use a little jar. And when he asked for water, I gave him the urine to drink. When he asked for food, ‘a little tortilla,’ I covered his mouth so he would stay quiet. All this time,” she adds, “I didn’t know what happened to Elsy.”

At last they reached the Sumpul River. They dodged bullets from both sides of the river, as Honduran soldiers sought to keep out refugees and Salvadoran soldiers continued to chase them. “Many people jumped in, but they couldn’t swim. The planes and the armed forces were coming, so the people tried to get away, but they couldn’t. Many people died there. By the grace of God, I’d learned to swim in a stream by my home as a child,” Francisca says. “I crossed the Sumpul River with my eleven-year-old by my side and the two-year-old boy in my arms. The river was high like the mountain, but we crossed by the great will of God.”

Francisca reached the Mesa Grande refugee camp in Honduras. Once there, she approached humanitarian organizations for help locating her missing daughter. She gave her only photograph of Elsy to the Red Cross to assist with the search. The photograph was not returned, and Francisca received no help. Still, she believed that Elsy was alive, and Francisca was determined to find her.

Mesa Grande felt like a concentration camp to Francisca. Honduran refugee camps held twenty thousand Salvadoran families during the war, clustered in tents bordered by barbed wire and Honduran soldiers to prevent escapes.15 Starvation and disease were rampant. Along with other
exiled Salvadorans, Francisca lobbied for repatriation to El Salvador, writing letters to the government and even going on a hunger strike so that she could return to her land and find her daughter.

In 1987, after five years in exile, Francisca relocated to Los Ranchos, a resettlement community in her native department, Chalatenango, El Salvador. The most violent years of the war had passed, though the military still targeted campesinos, especially returning refugees.

There, in a community comprised of hundreds of Salvadorans returned from exile, Francisca first met Father Jon Cortina, a Jesuit priest from Spain. “Father Jon was like an angel for us. As soon as I met him, I felt that I had God there with me,” says Francisca. “Everything had been destroyed. We didn’t have anything, but with Father Jon we celebrated a mass.”

Francisca approached her friend Magdalena Ramos, known as Maida, who’d also been forcibly separated from her child during the war. Soldiers had ripped Maida’s six-month-old son from her arms while holding a gun to Maida’s head during the Guinda de Mayo. Francisca said, “Maida, let’s tell the Father [about our missing children]. He goes to San Salvador. Maybe he’ll see them.” After mass one day, Francisca kneeled next to Father Jon, who sat before her, and said, “I want you to help us look for our children.”

Father Jon responded, “Francisca, how do you know that your daughter has not died?”

“I saw, Father, when they took her. They took so many children that day.”

Calm and present, Father Jon told the mothers, “Be patient. One day the war will end.” He promised to help when the time was right.

That time came in January 1992, with a United Nations-negotiated ceasefire between the Salvadoran military and FMLN through the Chapultepec Peace Accords, signed in Mexico City. With more than seventy-five thousand people dead, seven thousand reported disappeared, and one million displaced (one-fifth of the population at the time), El Salvador’s twelve-year civil war drew to a close.

“The rifles of the guerrillas fired from happiness because the war had ended,” Francisca recounts. “Father Jon came to celebrate a mass.”

Tears traverse down Francisca’s cheeks as she recalls Father Jon’s gentle command. “Francisca, now we are going to begin. You are going to begin
the investigation. She is your daughter, and you have to fight hard. You are going to fight hard.”

Father Jon’s words gave Francisca the resolve to search for Elsy and unite with other mothers who had lost children in the Guinda de Mayo. Despite the fear and mistrust still pervasive in the countryside, Francisca went to the Salvadoran police and to a judge in Chalatenango. The police asked for a birth certificate, but it had been lost in the home she’d fled under threat of death, over a decade earlier. The judge accused Francisca of abandoning her daughter. “I didn’t abandon her. She was kidnapped,” Francisca replied.

Francisca and the other mothers led demonstrations alongside Father Jon. In 1994, three days after a national television appearance to raise awareness about the disappeared children, a colleague of Father Jon’s, Ralph Sprenkels of Save the Children, informed Francisca that a missing child named Andrea had been spotted in an orphanage near San Salvador, recognized by her missing limb. A young woman that fit Elsy’s description was also seen.

Ten days later, on the second anniversary of the Peace Accords, Francisca reunited with her daughter. Elsy was nineteen years old, married, and seven-months pregnant. Mother and daughter tearfully embraced in the home of Elsy’s in-laws. Elsy re-met her siblings.

Elsy didn’t travel to the group reunion in the countryside because of her pregnancy, but Elsy’s friend Andrea and three other disappeared children from the orphanage reunited with their families that same day in the soccer field in Chalatenango. Father Jon and other villagers observed and celebrated. Four of the five children were matched with their families based on shared memories and family resemblance. Maida re-met Juan Carlos, the baby that soldiers had ripped from her arms at gunpoint, now a boy of twelve years old. But, given Juan Carlos’s young age at separation, the orphanage requested confirmation of their relationship—a problem soon solved with DNA.

The reunions brought hope to families in surrounding communities who wondered about the fate of missing children. Francisca tells me, “Father Jon paid for the first reunions with his own money so that others would begin searching, bringing cases and more cases. It got to the point
that the majority of the people [in the resettlement communities] had cases of disappeared children.

The United Nations Truth Commission for El Salvador report, released in 1993, attempted to tally the devastation caused by the war. The report attributed 5 percent of the wartime violence to the FMLN and 85 percent to the military and death squads, citing gross violations of human rights. Yet the missing children were not mentioned, an omission that motivated Father Jon to search.

Hundreds of families filed cases of missing children, but the government did not assist with the searches. So, led by Father Jon, the people mobilized. “Father Jon thought it was time to open an office, and he named the organization Pro-Búsqueda [Pro-Search]. That’s how it started,” Francisca explains. Founded in 1994 by Father Jon Cortina, Francisca, Maida, and forty-six other relatives of missing children, Pro-Búsqueda’s mission is to search until every disappeared child separated from their family during the war is found.

I thank Francisca for her testimony. We’re seated on plastic chairs under the shade of a tree, about fifty feet away from her home so that her many grandchildren do not disturb the interview. Ripples of green mountains pour around us to the northwest, forming the valley of the Sumpul River. I can see Honduras from where I sit. I’ve traveled from California to Francisca’s home in Los Ranchos, Chalatenango, to interview her for my master’s thesis on the family separation and reunification of El Salvador’s disappeared children. I’d started the interview by saying, “I’d like to hear about Elsy and a little bit of the history of Pro-Búsqueda.” With that request, Francisca shared the account summarized above. It’s January 2006, and today is my last day of interviews with disappeared children and their families. In two days I will return home to resume my coursework in the UC Berkeley–UCSF Joint Medical Program, where I study medicine and public health.

When I stand to leave, Francisca hugs me, her eyes full of expression. She kisses my cheek and says, “May things go well for you,” with unusual
fervor. Then she offers me a second hug and looks me in the eye, placing her hand on my arm. “When you go home, tell people what happened here. Let them know the reality of El Salvador—how the war was and how the children were lost so that young people in other countries can be in solidarity with us.” With arms open and a wave of her hands, she gestures for the truth to be spread. Just before I head out for the next interview, Francisca’s granddaughter climbs into Pro-Búsqueda’s red Toyota pickup truck to show us the way to the home of a grandfather of a disappeared child. Francisca smiles and yells to us, “Go see Maida!”

I felt surprised to witness Francisca’s tears during our interview, tears from a woman so strong that she survived years under military attack and then spawned the search for El Salvador’s disappeared children. Francisca’s courage and resiliency compel me to share her story and those of families like hers: stories of mothers, fathers, grandparents, sons, and daughters; of bones that can be mourned or of long-awaited reunions; and of new separations caused by slow violence in the aftermath of war. The stories of those who’ve survived and continue to survive the reality of El Salvador.