GUATEMALA CITY

October 20, 1944 Most of the city was asleep. Just after midnight, residents who lived along Twelfth Avenue heard the coughs and rumbles of a long parade of motor vehicles, and later the unmistakable cadence of troops on the march. From their windows the neighbors could see the silhouettes of passing motorcycles, of trucks loaded with armed men, and of tanks and cannon. The rebel Guatemalan army units placed their artillery on the large parade ground, the Campo Marte, and along the railroad tracks. Infantrymen and machine gunners took up their positions at strategic locations around the city, many within striking distance of the government’s most formidable redoubts: the two forts known as Matamoros and San José. Within hours, groups of students, teachers and workers would join the rebellious soldiers, all determined to overthrow Guatemala’s dictator, General Federico Ponce Vaides.¹

The Urrutia family, Ester and Manuel and their seven children, were asleep in their home on Avenida Castellana when the shooting began just before 2:00 A.M. The house, modest but nearly half a block long, stood on a ridge that ran above the main thoroughfares of the city and just a kilometer or two south of the imposing gray stone walls of the San José fort, with its panoramic view of the city below. When the night was broken by the crash and boom of cannon fire and the staccato of machine guns and rifles, the Urrutias climbed out of bed to watch the drama. Tracer
bullets filled the air and shell bursts lit up the cold sky as the rebels concentrated their fire on the San José. The loyal soldiers manning the fort vigorously returned the fire with cannon and mortars.

The Urrutias supported the revolt and were apprehensive about the consequences of its potential failure. What happens, they asked themselves, if the movement doesn’t succeed? As dawn began to break over the city, thousands of residents from all walks of life took to the streets to support the rebellion. Many of them crept through the deep ravines in the south end of town and reached the Guardia de Honor, an army base now in rebel hands. There, the civilians were issued rifles and instructed where to take up positions against the loyalist forces. At 10:00 a.m. Oscar Urrutia, just fourteen, slipped away from home to fight with the revolutionaries.

As the battle continued, women left the shelter of their homes to assist wounded rebels and to provide food and water to the combatants. “A single ideal united soldiers and civilians,” the press later reported: “the overthrow of a tyrannical regime.” It was probably the last time unity would flourish and prevail in Guatemala.

Sometime during the morning a rebel artillery battery under the command of Captain Luis Valdés Peña fixed its sights on the towering San José. The first shot struck the fort, and the second did as well; a direct hit on its ammunition supply. Soon the fort was burning and smoke and flames climbed into the sky. Desperate soldiers abandoned their posts and jumped from the fort’s high walls to escape the flames and exploding projectiles. Fearing reprisals from the hostile civilian population, many of these conscripts threw away their rifles and cartridge belts, their knee-high laced boots and broad-brimmed caps, and stripped down to their underwear in a vain attempt to conceal their identity.

As the San José began to burn, rumors flew among the residents who lived in the streets below it that there was a great deal of gunpowder stored in the fort; soon the entire redoubt would blow up. Eventually, whole families began to stream along the rutted dirt road past the Urrutias’ house, seeking refuge further away from the carnage. Ester de Urrutia opened her home to a number of these displaced persons, served them coffee, and cooked up a huge pot of vegetable soup to keep them from going hungry. When the pathetic, nearly naked young conscripts ran or limped past the house, Ester took pity on them as well and rummaged through the clothing of her husband and sons to provide them with something to wear. “Poor kids. They’re going naked.” Then she sent them on their way.
Loyalist forces from army bases outside Guatemala City arrived to reinforce their comrades in the urban redoubts, but the rebel units and their civilian allies prevented a counterattack. On the outskirts of the city Captain Braulio Laguardia, a dashing rebel officer driving a tank, led a group of soldiers and armed civilians who captured truckloads of government soldiers on their way to defend the dictatorship of General Ponce.6

Ester de Urrutia’s twenty-one-year-old daughter, Julia, was listening to the radio that morning. The government’s National Radio station was broadcasting only music, primarily military marches, a sign that a coup was under way. Periodically, however, the rebels broke into the government’s broadcast to describe their progress. On one of these occasions, Julia learned that Captain Laguardia was driving a tank down Bolivar Avenue, just a few blocks above the Urrutia home, heading for the San José fort. Hundreds of civilians followed the intrepid captain in support of the revolution.

Julia grabbed her younger brother Edmundo, then sixteen, and the two siblings sneaked out of the house. Their mother had forbidden them to leave, but they were just going up to Bolivar to watch Captain Laguardia pass by in his tank. Then they’d come right back home.

When Julia and Edmundo reached the avenue at the corner of Twenty-fifth Street, they immediately were forced to take shelter inside a doorway. They hadn’t counted on the snipers, loyal to General Ponce, who were shooting at Captain Laguardia and his followers along Bolivar Avenue. Moments later Captain Laguardia drove by on top of his tank, “like it was his chariot,” smiling, with hundreds of people running behind him, urging him on with shouts of “Down with Ponce! Down with Ubico!”7 Jorge Ubico was the dictator who had ruled Guatemala for thirteen years before General Ponce replaced him in mid-1944.

Swept up by the passion of the moment, Julia and Edmundo joined the crowd following Captain Laguardia down the avenue toward the San José. Several blocks later, the situation turned more serious. Loyalist soldiers close to the fort were firing at the oncoming crowds. As Julia and her younger brother approached the San José near Eighteenth Street, they were warned: “Be careful because they’re firing from the fort!”8 Moments later, a sniper shot and killed a man half a block away.

Thus cautioned, the two siblings took shelter in a doorway to reevaluate the situation. “We’d better go back,” Julia told her brother. “What do you say?”

“Let’s go on!” replied Edmundo. And so they sprinted past the bodies of several soldiers and into the burning fort.
Inside, the scene was Dantesque. Flames from the burning munitions lit up the sky as Julia and Edmundo ran past stone walls ripped open by shellfire, past headless bodies lying in rubble. They slipped and nearly fell as they crossed a patio whose floor was completely covered by small bits of black shrapnel.

Other civilians were busy looting whatever they could from the fallen bastion of General Ponce. Julia and Edmundo watched as men and women hauled away hundred-pound sacks of sugar and beans, mattresses, and iron beds. Finally Julia turned to her younger brother: “Let’s go, ‘Mundo, because it’s getting late.” But first they had a discussion: “What should we carry away?”

Edmundo grabbed a big bass drum painted with the blue and white national colors of Guatemala that lay in the debris and hung it from his shoulders. He spotted a rifle and grabbed that too while Julia picked up a large framed portrait of General Rufino Barrios, who ruled Guatemala during the nineteenth century. Then they started for home. At other points in the city, government forces were hoisting the white flag. The rebels had won!

As the siblings headed up Castellana Avenue toward their house, Julia began to worry about her mother’s reaction to their unauthorized expedition to the fort. Ester de Urrutia had a quick temper and did not hesitate to demonstrate it to her children. “Our mother is gonna give us—” she started to tell Edmundo. “To you!” he interrupted, understanding that, as the older sibling, Julia would be held responsible for their exploits. And so they marched home, with Edmundo proudly beating his drum.

Julia was right; her worried mother was furious at Julia’s imprudence. “You let me down!” Ester scolded her daughter. “Why did you take the kid? If you were curious, why didn’t you go alone? You’re older! If something had happened to the kid, what would your father and I have done?”

Stung by her mother’s rebuke, Julia went inside the house and right to bed, while Edmundo hid his loot. And so began, for the Urrutia family, the Guatemalan Revolution.

March 1996

Decades later, an old and dusty black file lies on a shelf inside the Argentine Embassy in Guatemala City. The papers inside the dossier, a mixture of dry diplomatic correspondence, emotional letters, and terse instructions, speak from 1954, when hundreds of desperate people sought refuge inside the embassy grounds. The United States gov-
ernment and a small group of Guatemalan exiles had just driven President Jacobo Árbenz, leader of the Guatemalan revolution, from office and quickly formed a new military regime. If the refugees left the embassy they would be imprisoned, perhaps killed, for their support of Árbenz.

I visited the Argentine Embassy in 1996, during the course of my research for this book. Ambassador Jorge Taiana, himself a former political prisoner, gave me permission to review the 1954 file concerning those who took refuge in the embassy after the Central Intelligence Agency drove Jacobo Árbenz from power. Among the diplomatic cables and the lists of suspected Communists, I found a letter that Ester de Urrutia (my wife’s paternal grandmother, a political activist and loyal supporter of Árbenz) wrote from exile nearly forty-two years earlier, which I quote extensively in this story. Ester apparently sent the letter intended for her daughter Julia via diplomatic channels from Buenos Aires to Guatemala City, where it languished unread and undelivered in an embassy cabinet for more than four decades: “Give many kisses to my little ones, regards to Alfredo and to you, adored daughter—receive the blessings of your mother, who doesn’t forget you for a minute.”

In July 1992 Ester’s granddaughter Maritza was “disappeared” after taking her four-year-old son to school in Guatemala City. Maritza was an underground member of an insurgent organization when members of an army intelligence unit dragged her off the streets of Guatemala’s capital. Very quickly, the disappearance of this unknown woman set off a cascade of challenges to the struggling Guatemalan democracy and the institutions committed to supporting it. What was the value of Maritza’s life? Was it worth a blow to the pride and reputation of Guatemala’s president? Was it worth a disruption of the counternarcotics activities of the United States? Could Maritza still contribute to what was, after all, a failed revolution?

When I began writing this book, I believed that Maritza’s story was about the collision of humanitarianism and politics. By the time I finished writing—nearly twelve years later—I understood that humanitarianism is politics. An understanding of the political interests that envelop these issues becomes a fundamental ingredient of effective humanitarian work.

Many people participated in the efforts to save Maritza. In Guatemala, journalists, student groups, revolutionaries, the Catholic Church, human rights organizations, even the distrusted U.S. Embassy assisted Maritza. In the United States and in Europe, many more human rights activists mobilized to pressure the Guatemalan government to keep Maritza alive.
Yet as Maritza’s circumstances changed, the other players’ interests also evolved. An extraordinary “human rights machine” eventually emerged to help Maritza, but at times parts of the machine were out of sync. This book explores Maritza’s disappearance and the efforts that saved her life.

Maritza’s story is a tale of the complex and often cruel politics of human rights, which often seem more Machiavellian than humanitarian. But the broader lessons of Maritza’s story transcend the actions and interests of individuals or institutions: lessons of endurance, intelligence, and courage as a single family, repeatedly torn apart by forty years of brutal war, came together one last time to fight for one of its own.

When Maritza disappeared, I was the legal advisor to the Archdiocese of Guatemala’s Human Rights Office. After Maritza reappeared alive, my colleagues and I protected her inside the archbishop’s residence while we struggled to find a way to take Maritza safely out of Guatemala. After several days of tense negotiations and international pressure, U.S. Embassy officials took Maritza’s passport and her son’s, promising to return them later that day with U.S. entry visas stamped inside them. When I went to the embassy to pick up the documents, embassy officials told me that the visas would not be forthcoming for several days. After a heated discussion with the U.S. ambassador and several of his aides, I returned to my office without the visas, without the passports, and despondent that Maritza and her little boy were unable to travel. In spite of her own exhaustion and trauma, Maritza noticed how upset I was. She came close, looked up at me with those big brown eyes, and said, in her soft voice: “Daniel, I want you to know that I’m very grateful for everything you’ve done for me and I believe you are a marvelous person. Don’t feel bad about what happened at the embassy. I have faith that everything’s going to be OK. Don’t worry.”

Maritza helped me to save her life, and we were married in 1999. Over the years spent researching and writing this book, during my moments of self-doubt or indecision, Maritza and I often discussed the potential costs of telling this story. Would there be reprisals against family members, former colleagues, or ourselves? Wouldn’t it be safer to let this story remain in the darkness, along with the men who tortured her? Perhaps, but Maritza would gently remind me that when torture remains hidden in darkness and fear, then the torture perpetuates itself. The disappeared remain disappeared. Maritza returned from the darkness and for that reason alone this story should be told.\footnote{11}

As an optimist, I would like Maritza’s story to offer some measure of hope and humanity amidst the checkered history of the United States
within Guatemala. But perhaps this is naive. Her experience demonstrates that power, even in the hands of the most benevolent leader, becomes a mix of good intentions and selfish interests. And good intentions, even when exercised by committed human rights activists and government officials, are a poor substitute for sharp political insight. When a victim faces her torturer, the moral dynamics of the situation usually seem relatively simple. We usually know which party represents “evil” and which represents “good.” Little room exists for moral ambiguity or shades of gray. But the efforts we make to resolve and heal human rights violations may say more about our disparate, flawed humanity than the abuse itself. *These* efforts expose our courage and cowardice, our virtue and hypocrisy.

I hope this book will provoke more discussion about what it means to be involved, from Guatemala to Guantánamo to Iraq, in that spider-web of values and interests known as “human rights.” Perhaps in the future those who are already involved, including the United States government, may provide more effective assistance to victims of human rights violations.

*The Hague*

*September 2006*