

Book

Love in a Time *Post* Of Terror *3/23/97*

SEARCHING FOR EVERARDO A Story of Love, War and the CIA in Guatemala

By Jennifer K. Harbury
Warner. 329 pp. \$24

By Marie Arana-Ward

YOU WOULD BE hard-pressed to find more compelling fare during Women's History Month than this memoir, which tells the story of a lone American widow waging war against seemingly insurmountable foes, all in the name of love. When Jennifer Harbury, Harvard-trained lawyer and wife of a Guatemalan revolutionary code-named Everardo, set out in 1992 to learn what had become of her *comandante* husband in the Guatemalan highlands, she knew she was going up against a military machine with the blood of 150,000 indigenous Mayans on its hands. What she did not know was that her search would lead her into a vortex of contradictions, and hand her clear evidence of CIA complicity along the way. Harbury's story is hardly over, but her rock-stubborn, single-minded pursuit of a simple question, Where is Everardo?, has rendered some hard truths about her husband's country and her own.

She met Everardo (Efrain Bamaca Velasquez) at the top of a volcano in 1990. For years before that, Harbury had been working

as a legal-aid lawyer in a Texas border town, assisting refugees who had fled the genocidal terror that was sweeping Guatemala. By the end of the '80s, however, she felt disillusioned and powerless. Within the space of a few nightmare years, 440 Mayan villages had been wiped off the map. The U.S. government was pouring arms and dollars into the Guatemalan army, and U.S. immigration officials were finding it increasingly uncomfortable to accept as truth the grisly tales of massacre and torture that villager after villager brought with them as they streamed through Texas border stations.

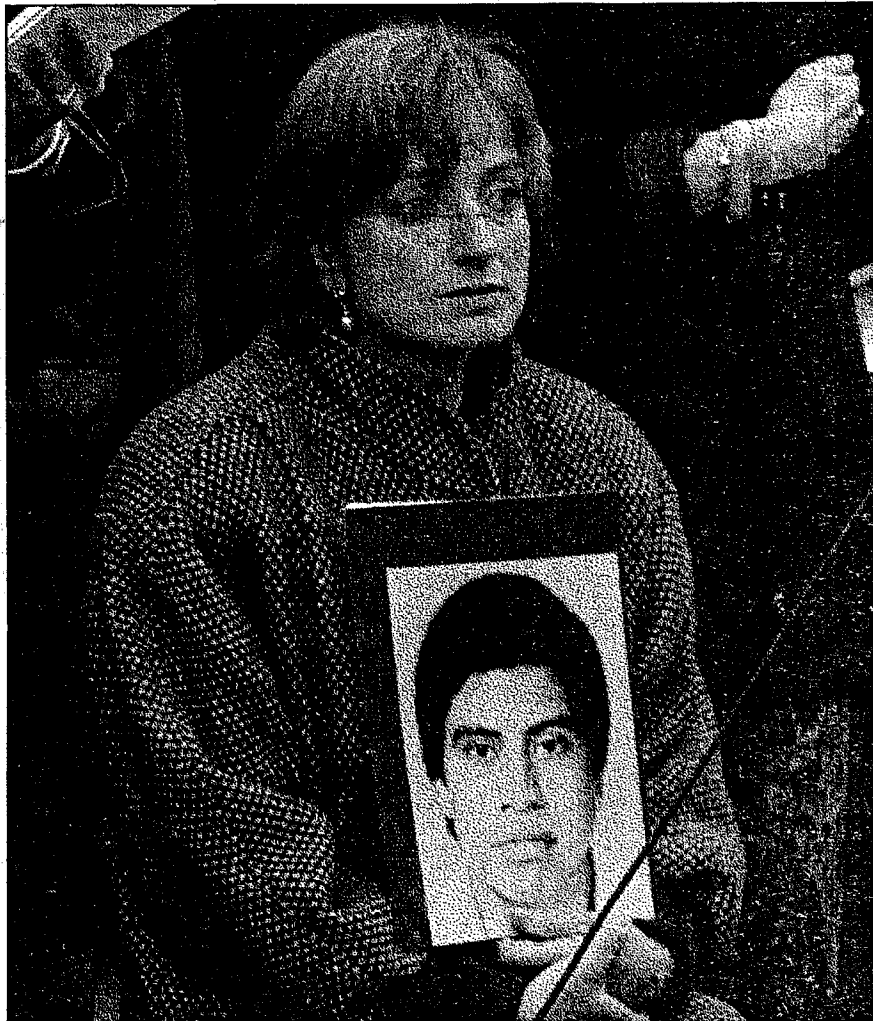
When the United States began turning Mayans away and sending them back to potential extermination, Harbury left her law office and headed for the heights of Tajumulco, where she intended to write a book about the resistance fighters who lived and trained on that volcano. She had not intended to fall in love.

"At first blush we were an unlikely pair, weren't we, Everardo?" Harbury writes when they eventually descend Tajumulco and slip off to Mexico City. "You with your perfect Mayan features and fierce black eyes, gliding across the pavement with that lithe mountain walk of yours . . . me at your side, a bit taller, a middle-aged, middle-class gringa with the disoriented look of a tourist just off the bus." They spend a blissful stretch of weeks together—she writing her book, he planning the next wave of revolution. And then, in Texas, some months later, they are married.

Harbury tells of her own ideological voyage, making it clear as her memoir progresses that, if she ever —Continued on page 10

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World



BY JOE MARQUETTE—ASSOCIATED PRESS

Jennifer Harbury with a photograph of her husband Efrain Bamaca Velasquez in 1995

Searching for Everardo

Continued from page 1

had any distance from the politics of Guatemala, by the time she and Everardo are man and wife she is a firm believer in the terrorist cause. "In the thirty years of war, not a single prisoner survived in army hands. In the city, the urban underground went down in flames, the soldiers taking safe house after safe house with tanks and bazookas. Children died with their parents. Those who survived the mortars and the fires were dragged away and tortured until they told of yet another house and yet another leader. And so it went."

EVERARDO, a full-blooded Mayan who grew up starving and illiterate on a coffee plantation, was a radical by the age of 16, joined the fledgling ORPA (*Organizacion Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas*), and then rose to commander of the URNG (*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*) in the remote jungle of Peten. He had lost two wives to the struggle: one shot through the heart during an army ambush; the second captured by a death squad, tortured and left to die. His cohort in general had been pierced, hung, crushed, and shoveled into mass graves—one, blown apart on a charred field, had left nothing for his *compañeros* to bury save his perfectly intact brain. Guatemala had become an inferno, and Everardo one of its leading avengers.

When he returns to Guatemala in early 1992 and is captured by the army, Everardo is quite possibly the biggest fish they have ever pulled in, a trove of underground intelligence. With 17 years of institutional memory, he knows every *compañero's* name, every combat unit, every move in store. But he doesn't talk.

Harbury's book recounts the initial reports of Everardo's death that suggested his end was a probable "suicide," her nerve-wracking trip to a Guatemalan village to

identify his remains, and the moment when she realizes with chilling certainty that the skull they pull from the grave cannot be his. It is the first step in a terrible pilgrimage. For years she is sent from office to office, from Guatemala to Washington, and presented with bizarrely contradictory stories: He is most certainly dead, he is most certainly in captivity, he has run off with another woman, he is lost in the jungle, he has deserted the cause.

And then quite unexpectedly an escaped *compañero* arrives to tell her he has seen Everardo with his own eyes—in a cell in an army prison, stripped to his underwear and strapped to a cot. "His entire body was grotesquely swollen and he was speaking in a strange voice, as if drugged, raving almost." Next to him is a tank of gas. Standing over him are three army officers.

Harbury takes this information and confronts the Guatemalan minister of defense, the U.S. ambassador, the OAS and human rights networks, the chief of army intelligence, anyone she can think of who can help her find out if her husband is still alive. Her account of the web of duplicity that both governments begin to weave around Everardo's case is detailed and mesmerizing. First, they all say that the Guatemalan army never had Everardo. And then they insist he is dead. "But if they never had him, how would they know he's dead?" she asks everyone she can corner. As they grow impatient with the woman's dogged persistence and casebook logic, the Guatemalan potentates mount a frustrated defense. They accuse her of insanity, of falling for terrorist disinformation. And then, when all fails, they tell her it is impossible to believe she was ever married to Everardo in the first place. How, after all, could an educated white woman be attract-

ed to a miserable *indio*?

Enraged now, Harbury stages three hunger strikes: one in front of the Guatemalan army headquarters in 1993, one in front of the presidential palace in 1994, and a third in front of the White House in 1995. On the 12th day of her third strike, her body ravaged by hunger, then-Congressman Robert Torricelli (D.-N.J.) calls her to his offices and presents her with the products of his own research. Not only is Everardo dead, he died in the hands of a Guatemalan CIA asset, an army officer who was paid \$44,000 of U.S. taxpayer money for his ghoulish labors—the very man Harbury had suspected from the very start.

HARBURY's memoir is hardly perfect. She attempts parts of it in second person, writing from time to time as if she were addressing Everardo himself. The technique, which worked passably well in Oriana Fallaci's memoir of her Greek resistance lover, *A Man*, seems jarring here: spotty and contrived. The book is also, in its initial chapters, horrendously edited, so that Everardo's eyes are always "ferce," his hands forever "small and brown," his courage relentlessly "legendary." A good editor would have cleaned this up and encouraged Harbury to spell out what the URNG *compañeros* were up to in the hills anyway. As it is, army atrocities are reported in full whereas any allusion to terrorist strikes is entirely glossed over. One can forgive Harbury her biases; she has endured a hellish ordeal. But her publisher should have known better.

Nevertheless, the reader who makes it past *Searching for Everardo's* bumpy beginning will be well rewarded. There are heroics here. There is a bold reach for truth. And, most memorably, there is a clear-eyed gaze into a labyrinth of lies. ■