

Revolutionary

by MONONA WALI

The pistol sits in my palm, cold, black, mocking. Maria has put it there. I'm lying in a hammock in her home in Arcatao, El Salvador. It's December 1988, and the country is in its ninth year of a brutal civil war.

"Monona, *guerrillera*," she says to me. "*Revolucionaria*." It's her pistol. The one she carries in a holster strapped to her waist. She has taken my hand and placed it in my palm; a taunt and an invitation to join the revolution.

I know the import of the gesture; I know she is offering me a fork in the road.

I take the pistol and tuck it into the front of my pants. I'm smiling, but even now, thirty-five years later, I remember the answer clearly in my head.

How does one become a revolutionary, someone who takes up arms, who risks one's life, to bring down the government? It is vital to get the answers to fulfill the mission of the documentary film which we, co-director Pamela Cohen, cinematographer John Knoop, and I are making to put a human face on the civil war, a war that has ravaged the country, and left 70,000 dead, mostly civilians. The subject of the film is Maria, Maria Ofelia Navarette de Dubon, a thirty-eight-year-old mother of three who has become a leader in the FMLN, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front. It will be called *Maria's Story*.

Arcatao is a small pueblo on the Honduran border in the very northern end of Chalatenango province and it is here, in Maria's hometown, that we hope to get some answers to the question. Pam, John and I are American citizens, and our government is giving aid to the Salvadoran government to the tune of 1.5 million dollars a

day. The conflict has been painted as a cold war era fight against the communist influence of Cuba and Russia in Central America. We are here to expose the absolute lie of this policy and we are going to do it by telling the story of Maria, her family, and the journey of her life from campesina to armed revolutionary. To make the film, we are pioneering a new consumer video camera just put out by Sony. We plan to transfer the footage to 16mm once we return to the US. This will enable us to give the film a theatrical release. John Knoop has adapted a simple solar power charging system for the batteries that run the cameras. Without this new technology, it would not have been possible to make the film. We had learned the hard way—several months earlier we had arrived in Chalatenango fully equipped with 16mm camera, Nagra sound recorder, and reels of film. We had not counted on a military offensive in the area that lasted over a month, and that kept Maria on the run. Weighed down with all our gear, we would have been a risk to her and to the guerrillas, not to mention ourselves. We had regrouped, and this time all our gear fits into our backpacks.

If anyone can tell the story of the civil war that can grab the hearts and minds of the American public, it is Maria. She is like a small round Yoda, her broad face framed by short hair (we had filmed a scene where José, her husband, gives her a haircut), her stocky body clothed in a tee shirt and a simple blue cotton skirt. Her feet are clad in black boots that are worn and coming unstitched. Arcatao is central to Maria's life story, but because of army presence in this area, the road, accessible only by foot, has been off-limits until now. We are excited to be here and be able to film her in the home she and José lived in before the war came violently to their doorstep nine years earlier, forcing them to flee into the mountains and survive on roots and berries.

We are gathered in their outdoor kitchen—chickens are roaming about, a tall mango tree provides a shady canopy for the brick-laid courtyard, and smoke rises in a thin trail from the small wood fireplace. By now we have spent almost two months with Maria,

the camera trained on her at all times as she moves between guerrilla encampments hidden in verdant mountains not unlike the Southern California hills where Pam and I hiked to get in shape for the film. Maria plans war strategy with other guerrilleros, but her main role is to rally the civilian population to join in the resistance.

Over the next few days in Arcatao, we film Maria walking the rough cobblestone streets, walking through the school where she had only been able to study until fourth grade, before being forced to work as a maid to help her mother and nine siblings survive. She loved studying—and even at thirty-eight, it is still her dream to return to school, to get her college education. Before agreeing to marry José, she made him promise that he would allow her to go back to school.

She takes us into a building next door to their home, now an empty shell of a building, eerily quiet and strewn with broken bricks, that had been converted to a National Guard headquarters while she was still living next door. She tells us the story of hearing the screams of people being tortured, no doubt people she knew. She's spooked being in there and hurries out. We're spooked too.

Later, she and José snuggle into a hammock together. José is small and muscular, a man whose body has been toughened by hard work, who looks like a cowboy, not in the romantic John Wayne mold, but the real thing, with broken teeth and gnarled hands. He also works for the FMLN as a supplier of food and other goods. Because of their work, they are often separated, and their reunions are grand occasions. This is one of them, and to see them both together is very moving.

Together they tell the story of the day the military came rolling into the town with tanks and trucks to round up young men not already conscripted into the army, and union organizers of which Maria had been one, organizing coffee plantation workers for better wages, health care and education. They stayed trapped in their home and started to sing so as not to let on their fear. It was shortly after that they fled into the surrounding hills with their

young daughters. The writing was on the wall. If they stayed, they would have been killed. It was in the hills that Maria began to organize other peasants who also faced near starvation and only had each other to rely on. They started to encounter FMLN soldiers, young men and women who had taken up arms against the government. She was always clear about what she was fighting for—food, healthcare, and education—basic humane living conditions, none of which she had experienced growing up. It was in the hills that she decided to join the FMLN and take up arms. By then she had seen enough of what her government had done to its people.

On the way to Arcatao, we had stopped at a high bank looking down on the Rio Sumpul. The bridge over the river had been bombed and had only recently been boarded over with planks allowing foot crossing. We filmed Maria as she recounted the story of the massacres that the Salvadoran army had perpetrated in 1980, 1982 and 1984. "This river is a mute witness of so much pain of our people," she said. "Hundreds of bodies have passed by here." Her face tightened in anger and anguish, the two emotions that seem to fuel her. The story of the massacres at the river had become one of the legendary atrocities of the war, but that went unreported in the American media.

And there were many more stories. One day as we filmed, Maria and José told the story of how their own daughter, Ceci, the eldest of three, had been killed in an army ambush. She was just nineteen. She joined the FMLN when she was fourteen. Maria said, "I've never felt so much hatred for the enemy. Not so much because they killed her because we are making war, them against us, and us against them. But after they killed her, they stripped her and mutilated her. They slit her from bottom to top. It was horrible. the anger I felt. It revives my rage!"

We had seen many young children carrying rifles in the FMLN. We knew this would be a point of controversy for American audiences. We confronted Maria. How could this be justified? Her answer had been very clear. "If you adopt the armed struggle, it's

not because it's the most wonderful thing in the world. It's that love of life is instinctive. Even animals have it. When you see the possibility of saving your life, you save it. And if that means picking up a gun you pick it up." That, in short, was her reason for taking up arms against the government, for becoming a revolutionary.

Ironically, it was this answer that helped me define my own answer to her invitation to join the revolution. Looking back on that scene, the gun neatly tucked in my pants, I see myself, thirty-three years old, my long black hair in a braid, wearing khaki pants, and my feet clad in very broken-in and beloved lace-up boots. I was so thin from a diet of tortillas and beans that I had stopped menstruating. Making *Maria's Story* had been the grand adventure of my life. The project had drawn me the moment Pam approached me about co-directing with her. We had come to the project very differently. She had instigated it out of her work as a Central American activist. Like me, she was from a liberal east coast upbringing—in her case Jewish, in mine, Indian immigrant, daughter of two academics who believed deeply in the words "with liberty and justice for all." I had recently completed an MFA in filmmaking from UCLA Film School and Pam brought me on board the documentary to help craft a compelling dramatic story. By that time, Pam had already gotten approval from the FMLN and was actively working on fundraising. She had met Maria on one of her early forays in El Salvador and brilliantly recognized that Maria would be the perfect subject to put a human face on the war. Every pore of her skin exuded warmth and humanity. She did not have an insincere bone in her body. Who she was on camera was who she was in real life. Yes, she could be a performer, but there was no disconnect between her revolutionary vision and the very essence of her being.

When Maria handed me the gun, I knew I would not join the revolution. Was I just too bourgeois in my upbringing to imagine myself holstering a gun? Was it a deep antipathy to gun culture that I associated with conservatism and Western colonialism? Was it the husband I had waiting at home? The parents I didn't dare break

the hearts of? The children I knew I wanted to bear? I am sure they were already suffering enough knowing I was here. Yes, all those things. But something else too. Some resistance in me that was the voice of a skeptic. Did I want to die for this cause? Was there any cause I was willing to die for?

A few days before arriving in Arcatao, we had been following Maria and some of the FMLN soldiers from one village to another. One of the soldiers got word on his radio that there was a battalion of soldiers in the area. Maria urged us to move quickly. We were in a large open area of tall dry grass with no cover. We began running. We could hear a helicopter hovering nearby. My heart began to race. I remember thinking that if I was shot and bled to death in this field that it would be a pointless death. It was that moment that the reality of war hit me. War is a count of bodies. And those dead bodies seemed to count for nothing. Would there be a story about three journalists dying in El Salvador? Would it change the course of the war? Unlikely. After all, four American nuns had been murdered, not to mention Archbishop Oscar Romero. Those murders, well-publicized, had not altered the course of the war, although they had sparked an international solidarity movement. My death, Pam's death, John's death—none of us mattered enough. The reality of dying at thirty-three hit me. I would be a corpse on the ground, and that was it, mourned only by my family, my husband, and my close circle of friends.

I understood clearly the difference between myself and someone like Maria. She had no choice. I did. Although Pam, John and I decided to put ourselves in harm's way, our stay was on a limited meter of three months.

The choice I made, to be behind the camera, was enacting an identity for myself. As we filmed Maria telling the story of the massacres on the Rio Sumpul, as we filmed her and José recounting the story of the murder of their daughter, and as we filmed a moonlit family reunion, I had felt the thrill of knowing we were getting good footage for the film. There was always a part of my

mind that belonged to the film, and not to the cause. But I think I saw the unwillingness to adopt a cause as a failure of sorts. If I could never be wholly invested in a position, who was I? In the time before identity politics became a thing, I was struggling to figure out what was the most authentic identity for myself. Even before the question of appropriation had become part of the national cultural conversation, I sensed that I should not be appropriating the cause of others. I was still searching for an identity, a voice. My first documentary had been about the Onondaga Nation's struggle for sovereignty. My UCLA thesis film *Grey Area* was a dramatic short about a young black television reporter who fights to use her voice to tell the true story of why black kids end up in jail. Both were honest and successful films, nevertheless, I sensed I should be telling stories closer to my own experience, that of an Indian immigrant, but that story had no legitimacy in my mind.

I think Maria knew that I would never pick up a gun and join the revolution. She also knew that the film had more power to bring about the change she desired than adding one more revolutionary soldier to the ranks. She fully embraced the mission of the film, although she had put herself reluctantly at its center.

The film aired on PBS in 1990 to an audience of over two million viewers. Maria and her story did indeed win the hearts and minds of the American public. The film started the desired national conversation on US funding of the Salvadoran government and military. Senator John McCain decried the film as propaganda on the US Senate floor, using it as an argument to cut funding to the Corporation of Public Broadcasting. But US Representative Ron Dellums said it should be required viewing for every member of Congress. The war was finally defunded in 1992, and the FMLN and the Salvadoran government signed a peace accord. The civil war ended.

The experience was transformative. It had to be. I was beginning to see that bringing about change, even more so revolutionary change, was a nuanced and complicated task. It could not be

measured in years or even decades. At the end of the war, Maria followed her dream to return to school and to keep working for the betterment of her people. She left the FMLN, disgusted with the infighting and lack of meaningful action. In 2019, she was appointed the Minister of Local Development for the controversial government of Nayib Bukele, trying to get bridges and schools built. She remains an inspiration.

How to find my path, I realized, was going to be a constant work in progress. I became pregnant soon after returning from El Salvador and spent the nine months of gestation editing the film. My water broke the day we locked picture. The two joys will forever be linked. I had tentatively started writing fiction before making *Maria's Story*, but the commitment became absolute after we brought the film out in the world. Fiction offered a new door to understanding reality and the human experience, and another way to fight. Sometimes fiction offers me a feeling of unity—activist and writer—sometimes it splits me in two. It's ongoing, finding the balance, figuring out how to hold a gun, but never to use it.