opening extract from

Journey of Dreams

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Introduction

"You can't know how we feel," Herminia, a refugee friend said the night I went to her family's home to check some facts.

I agreed. There are many reasons why I can never know how Tomasa, my character, and this flesh-and-blood Herminia before me would feel. When I moved from Tuckahoe, New York to Tucson, Arizona it was my own choice. Refugees don't have that choice. They have to move to stay alive. I am not indigenous. I am not Guatemalan. I have not travelled the road Tomasa and her family walked.

But I have worked, laughed and cried with people who travelled a similar path. I read the case of a young Central American girl who was wounded and hid in a field all night. I saw the drawings she used to describe her experience. Later she came to Tucson for reconstructive surgery and stayed with my friends who talked to me about her story.

I know some of the brave people who worked in the Sanctuary Movement, who put their freedom on the line to save a stranger.

When Tomasa began whispering her story in my ear, I felt compelled to record her words.

In the highlands of Guatemala, each village was different. Every person who lived at that time had their own experience. But the truth lies in the places where these stories overlapped. It was from that rich soil that Tomasa's story grew.

I wrote this book in the hope of bringing a better understanding of unfamiliar people and situations. And I hope that readers will recognize Tomasa's braveness and maybe even be inspired by her story and walk a little more bravely on their own journeys.

The Highlands of Guatemala, Central America, 1984

Chapter 1

Thwap, thwap, thwap. The high green branches of the pine trees shiver in the wind from the dark green machine whirring above us. My brother Carlos scoops up Manuelito and runs towards me. With his arm around my shoulder, we flee from the dark shadow, which moves swiftly along the ground. As we approach, Mama sees us and pulls back into our *ni'tzja*. We follow her inside our home. Together we sit on the floor, surrounded by the rest of our family. We sit without speaking, until the sound fades and the sun leaves us.

Our family does not talk about the helicopter that slashes the air like a machete. Instead, Papa strikes a match and lights the lamp. He takes on the voice of a storyteller and makes our fear vanish.

"Just before our first child was born, the mice paced back and forth on the roof of our *ni'tzja*, waiting for word of the birth. This house had a male person," Papa points to himself, "and two females." He nods towards Mama and her mother, our grandmother, Abuela.

"It was not a friendly house for mice, because the women chased them and hid the food from them. The mice were so undernourished, they were easily caught and thrown out."

Abuela claps, as though she were catching a mouse in mid-air. "Those mice were not captured because they were starving and too slow," she boasts, "The women of this house were too fast for them!"

I laugh at Abuela, whose swollen legs keep her sitting down most of the time. Mama and I clap and catch an imaginary mouse too.

Papa smiles and then continues. “The mice who dared live in this *ni’tzja* were skinny mice. Our watchful women kept them on the run. Only one man was careless and dropped seeds for them to snatch. They could only hope that another male would be born to this house, to improve their chances of a better life.

“And so, on the night our first child was born, the lookout mouse climbed on to the roof and parted the thatch and looked down. He squeaked out the good news. The mice celebrated. Our Carlos had been born.”

I look at Carlos, sitting on his mat. Carlos looks so much like Papa, with a strong nose and eyes as black as a cave. Their faces are both angular and pointed like the tips of stars.

“The mice danced all night to celebrate their good fortune. The house was now even — two males and two females.”

Carlos smiles at our younger brother, Manuelito, who rests his head on Carlos’ knee.

Manuelito hardly blinks. He walked far today, gathering flowers and roots for Abuela. Sleep is near, but I can see that he fights to stay awake. Soon he will become part of the story.

Papa turns towards me. “Tomasa, when the lookout mouse saw that another female had been born, he was greatly disappointed. That night there was no dancing for the mice. They went to bed early and cried.”

I slap my hands, as if catching another mouse, as I always do at this part of the story. The sound of it helps Manuelito to stay awake. He knows he is next in the story, and sits up.

“Ah, but then our baby, Maria arrived,” Papa begins. He always teases Manuelito like this.

“Papa, what about me?” Manuelito complains.

Papa scratches his head. “Carlos,” he says as he puts out one finger. Then, “Tomasa.” And he puts out another. He looks up as if he has just discovered his blunder. “Oh, thank you for noticing my mistake,” he says.

Now it is Mama who smiles, as Papa resumes the story.

“After Tomasa was born, several of the mice’s ribs began to show. They were so scrawny. They could only light their tiny candles and pray that the odds would be better for them the next time.

“And soon Mama gave them hope again. Her stomach began to swell like the fruit on the trees. She gave birth to Manuelito — a boy. The mice could see from his strong arms and legs that he would work hard in the fields with his papa and brother Carlos. They knew more corn would grow in the field of this family now that Manuelito had arrived. And corn was their favourite food, just as it is the favourite food of the Maya. Once again, there was an equal number of males and females, and the mice were satisfied.”

Content, Manuelito settles down on to his mat. Before Papa gets to the mice’s disappointment at Maria’s birth, Manuelito is asleep.

“And the mice have decided to move on now that Maria has arrived.”

Abuela reaches out and smoothes Maria’s soft tufts of black hair.

I lie down as Papa finishes his story. I listen to the others breathe as I slide closer to sleep.

In my dream, mice scramble to hide from an owl, which hoots nearby.

I wake as Papa rises from his mat and slips outside in to the night. The owl is not a dream. I hear it again, and get up to follow Papa. He looks towards the village. I scan the dark shadows in the other direction.

Hooo. Hooo, hoo. Hooo. Papa and I both turn to the sound. I see the silhouette of the largest of the owls that live in our mountains perched on the top of a pine tree. Papa picks up a rock.

Hooo. Hooo, hoo. Hooo comes from a tree behind us. We turn round.

Carlos joins us in the dark as we stand between the owls. The flesh on my arms rises up like hundreds of tiny anthills. I shudder. Owls kill rats that destroy our crops, but we know that when the owl comes, death and sadness follow.

Papa throws a rock at the centre of the tree where the first owl sits. I hear the rustling of a branch and the thud of the rock hitting the trunk, followed quickly by a smaller thud when the rock hits the earth. I hear the *whish* of wing against air as the owl swoops down and floats just hands above our heads. He slices the air like a helicopter, climbs again to the top of the tree and lands next to the other owl.

Hooo. Hooo, hoo. Hooo, they tell each other.

Papa throws another rock.

Together the owls fly out of sight. I pray that they take their trouble with them.

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Back inside, on my mat, I wait for sleep to find me again.

*In my dream, my friend Catarina shouts. "*Alto!*"*

I stop short.

*We play statues, freezing at each cry of "*alto.*"*

But in my dream my statue arms do not freeze. They sprout deep green feathers like the quetzal's *wings. The red feathers of my bird-breast flash. I fly. Together Catarina and I soar over wooden thatched houses. Under our wings, we see paths paint the earth brown, connecting each of the thirty-seven houses to the village plaza, where the church sits.*

We land in front of my family's ni'tzja. *I see Mama inside. In slow motion, she sprinkles the dirt floor with water to keep the dust down. The drops scatter on their way from her fingertips to the floor, reflecting the sun in mid-air, shining like tiny rainbows. Mama turns and smiles when she sees me.*

And in an instant I am in her arms. She hugs me close. I feel the gentle weave of her shawl against my cheek. I smell sweet yellow flowers from the jungle and smoke from fire of the comal. *She whispers my name, "Tomasa," and my heart fills.*

And then a shadow swoops down and I dive out of Mama's arms to hide from the owl's outstretched talons. The thwap, thwap, thwap *gets louder and louder. The owl has become the helicopter. "Mama!" I shout in my dream, as I see the dark green machine's side open. I pull Mama down with me to avoid the gun pointing at us from the sky.*

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I wake with a pounding heart. *Que'cj a'k* crows his rooster's morning song. I hear Mama get up, watch her part her waist-long black hair. She braids each side with the strip of red cloth I wove for her on my loom.

Maria stretches herself awake. I take her to Abuela, who makes Maria laugh while I help Mama warm the small *tamales* we made yesterday.

After breakfast, Papa and Carlos cross the road and go into the field. Moon-faced Manuelito searches the land behind our *ni'tzja* to find the flowers and roots Abuela needs. Mama sprinkles the floor to keep down the dust, just as I dreamed.

I help tie up the bundles with our herbs and the cloths we have woven for market. I grab my shawl and wrap it around my shoulders.

The early morning mist is already rising as I rush outside to meet the truck rattling towards our house. Even before the brakes squeal the wheels to a stop, I am standing by the road. Before the horn beeps and the engine coughs and goes silent, I am ready to ride with my friend into town to market.

I look down at my toes in the dirt. They peep out from under my skirt, the first I ever wove for myself. I wiggle my toes as Catarina's brother Hector jumps out from the bed of the truck. He races to meet Carlos, who has just emerged from the green of our field.

In the back of the truck, Catarina smiles wide and reaches over the back rail to take my bundle. I notice how her blouse has grown tight against her chest. Only three years separate us, yet at sixteen she looks like a woman, while I still look like a child at thirteen.

"Manuelito!" Mama calls. My younger brother appears from behind the house with yellow flowers in his hands. He runs inside to deliver them to Abuela, who will use them to make a light brown tea for the swelling in her legs. Manuelito charges back outside as I step up on to the chinkered chrome bumper of the faded black truck. I settle in the back next to Catarina.

Manuelito squirms as Carlos lifts him up.

"I can climb in by myself."

"Of course you can, Monkey," Carlos says, and puts him back down on the road.

"Can I walk with you?" Manuelito asks.

"Oh, but then you would be too tired to play your best when you get to town," Carlos says, turning to leave. "See you later!" Carlos calls to us, as he and Hector walk down the road.

When it's clear Carlos won't change his mind, Manuelito climbs into the truck.

Mama joins us from the house. Our little Maria's head pokes over Mama's shoulder from where she is secured in Mama's shawl. Mama calls after Carlos, "Take care son," — *K'awilawib* — is something she now says to us whenever we leave her. She puts her bundle in the back.

Mama frees Maria from her shawl and kisses her before she hands her over to me. Maria reaches out to Mama. She still wants Mama to hold her, even though she is a year old.

"Sit with me," I tell my sister.

Catarina shakes Maria's small hand, "Nice to see you, Hummingbird."

Maria relaxes as I lightly stroke the back of her head.

Mama smiles. Once she sees that Maria will stay with us, she climbs up into the cab and sits beside Catarina's mother, who starts up the engine. We wave to Abuela, who waves back from the doorway with the yellow flowers in her hand. She has folded a red and blue *tzut* and fastened it on to her head as though she, too, were going to market.

The truck bounces and rocks down the road through our family's field. We wave to Abuela until she disappears behind the corn that now stands taller than the top of the truck. I notice around the feet of the corn that the squash's buds have grown fat. My mouth waters at the thought of eating those pale orange flowers. We will pick them in the next few days. Before we do, I will weave their design with the threads of my backstrap loom.

We slow down as we pass Carlos and Hector running past the last houses in our village. Four older boys have joined their race.

"*K'awilawib,*" Mama calls out the window. *Take care* has taken on a new meaning since the soldiers came.

"See you later, snails," Catarina calls.

The boys stop. As soon as I see Hector flick a match to wake the flame, I know what he is about to do. I cover Maria's ears.

He throws fireworks through the dust that swirls behind us on the road. The burst of pops rips the air and erupts behind the truck.

Maria jumps in my lap and squeezes my arms. Manuelito smiles and claps his hands.

"Mama bought those firecrackers for the fiesta," Catarina shouts at her brother. The boys laugh as the distance between us grows. "No more fireworks!" she shouts.

Hector lights one more and throws it towards us.

"Stop wasting the matches!" Catarina yells.

Even Maria laughs with us at the final pop.

As we turn on to the main road, we lose sight of our brothers. They will cut through the fields and get there in half the time.

We stop to pick up a family from our village. We are wedged so tightly in the back of the truck that I feel like fruit in a basket. The main road has almost as many ruts as the village road. Maria's head wobbles with the rhythm of the truck.

Before we have gone far, an Army truck roars up behind us. Everyone in our truck looks down. Catarina and I cover most of our faces with our shawls.

The army truck pulls up next to us and we ride in the cold of its shadow.

My heart races. I turn my head in the other direction and hold Maria close, wishing I could be invisible to the eyes peering at us. "Monkey," I say to Manuelito, to remind him not to stare. He does not want to turn into one of the monkeys who shrieks from the treetops like the disobedient children in a story Papa tells us. Manuelito looks down at his knees bent up against his chest.

A horn blares. I look up. Through the windshield I see another truck coming towards the army truck. Instead of pulling in behind us, the army truck continues along beside us — straight toward the other truck.

I tighten my grip on Maria with one hand and hold on to the side of the truck with the other. A second before the trucks crash, the other truck swerves off the road.

As we pass, I see that the swerving truck has lost part of its load. The driver gets out to retrieve what has fallen.

Surely the soldiers will see that we are not the guerrillas, the *g'oy* who, they say cause trouble! They must understand we are just *ajchaquib'*, people from the village who

are on our way to the market to sell what we grow and weave, what we gather and cook and build.

They must have realised this, because finally the army truck drives off.

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When we reach the market, I help Mama spread her blanket. While she hugs Manuelito and releases him to go off to play with his friends, I arrange the red, white and yellow belts Mama has woven. She is known for her elaborate coloured patterns which have a life of their own and do not always conform to the traditional patterns of our village. I set out the belts I have made in a separate line. Although the difference in our work is clear to anyone walking by, mine now look good enough to bring in money. Last month, two of mine sold. I am glad to be able to help pay our school fees. Not every child in the village has our good luck and can go to school.

"What a beautiful *huipil*," the cheese-seller says as I lay out Mama's colourful blouses. Each time we come to market, this woman stops to admire Mama's work. "One day," she says, "when the design is just how I imagined it, I will buy one."

"What do you imagine?" Mama asks, as she does each time they talk. Every time, the woman describes something different. Each month Mama weaves a *huipil* with a design the woman has described the time before — hummingbirds drinking from blossoms, or *quetzals* seen sideways with their long tail feathers curling, or a braid of flowers that heal, looking as fresh as they are the moment when Manuelito discovers them in the forest.

"The gold stripes sing against the blue," the woman says, "but this is not quite what I had in mind." And she never buys a *huipil* from Mama, but someone else always buys the one the woman has described.

Before Mama finds out which design the woman would like next time, I excuse myself. I take the bundle of herbs and dried flowers Abuela has prepared to trade for soap.

I do not stay long at the stalls as I sometimes do, looking at everything for sale. Instead, I hurry around the square, past the shoes, hats and baskets. I linger a moment at the bright fists of yarn piled up in all the colours of the rainbow. I stop to check the price of fireworks for the fiesta, in case Mama sells enough for us to buy some.

And then I find the soap woman. I pick up a bar and inhale the smell of pine from the green soaps with flecks of red from the flowers Abuela sent last time. I hand the woman the flowers after she has wrapped two bars of black soap. It is made with ash and pig fat. We have not had a pig to cook and eat since before Maria was born.

By the time I get back the boys have arrived. Carlos is leading a cow off the pasture they use for playing football. Hector follows, swatting the top of the cow's back leg with his flat hand. The other boys shout and clap their hands at the sheep to shoo them away.

"*Gracias,* Tomasa," Mama says, taking the soap. "Thank you. Now go and have fun." I wave goodbye to Maria, who chews on one of my belts as she sits on the blanket next to Mama.

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Catarina and I stand watching the football game with other girls and young boys from the surrounding villages. Several children play jacks with stones they have picked up and a small white ball from the market. I watch the smile on Catarina's face. Her eyes follow the boy who will soon be her husband, as he runs down the field.

"Bravo!" Catarina and I call out. We laugh and clap when he jumps over a sheep and scores a goal, in spite of the wooly intruder who has wandered back on to the football field. As the players chase it away, Hector's eyes seek me out.

I blush. I should have looked down sooner. I have never been so bold before.

While the older boys play, Manuelito and his young friends imitate them on the sidelines. They kick the ball to each other, clumsily weave and pass as they drive the ball towards a goal made from a discarded box.

When the older boys' game is over, Hector and Carlos play with the young boys. My family starts to gather in the market square where Mama sits. She hands us each a few of the small *tamales*, and we listen to the boys telling about their games as customers walk by.

"Are you too tired to go with us, Manuelito?" Carlos asks. My younger brother's eyebrows shoot up and his black eyes grow bigger. He looks as though he cannot believe the good news he hears. Mama smiles and nods her approval to Carlos. Her eyes make a silent plea for them to take care.

"How much for the *huipil* with the blue and gold stripes?" a man asks as we start packing up our things.

Mama talks to him while I watch Hector, Manuelito and Carlos growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

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When we get home and out of the truck, Catarina says, “Watch out. The boys might be hiding in the corn.”

I feel a bit disappointed that they don’t jump out to scare us.

“Hector!” Catarina calls towards the field. She wants to start work on her loom. She sold two of her woven shawls today and hopes to sell twice as many before the *fiesta*.

Her mother sounds two short bursts on the truck’s horn.

When the boys still don’t appear, Catarina gets into the cab with her mama.

“*Adios,* Tomasa,” she says, as they drive off.

We put what we did not sell in the corner by my sleeping mat. Mama starts the fire for the evening meal while I pick up some thread and start on my weaving. Maria sits next to Abuela, chewing on her doll’s foot. I hear a loud scratching in the thatch above me — a squirrel, maybe.

Through the open door, the late afternoon sun deepens the blue of the sky. At this moment of the day, the green of the field and pine trees beyond glow. The blue and the green next to each other look magical. The green crops grow from the gifts of the sky and earth. And we, the people of the corn, grew from those crops. Maybe that is why I often weave blue and green next to each other.

Over the rustle of the corn in the breeze, I hear running. The short quick stride says it must be Manuelito. He runs fast. He must be racing with Carlos, whom I do not hear. I smile at Carlos and Hector, who must be letting him win.

Manuelito bursts in. His red, tear-streaked face speaks fear. He runs to Mama; he holds her.

"What, son? What?" Mama asks. I peep out of the door. The road is empty.

Manuelito answers, but I cannot understand his words muffled in her waist.

Mama pulls him back from her and looks at his face.

"Tell me again, son."

And when he repeats the words, my heart pounds.

"Soldiers," he sobs. "Soldiers took Carlos and Hector."

I run through green rows of corn until my lungs scream for me to slow down.

"Papa!" I shout. No answer. I run again. I call for him a second and third time. Finally he calls back and when we reach each other, I tell him what has happened. He drops his hoe with a thud on to the ground.

"Tell me again," Papa says. When I finish, he pushes his straw hat up on his forehead. He touches the thin moustache above his lip.

"Where did they go?"

"Manuelito said back towards the market."

Papa turns and runs. I follow. He slows down, and calls over his shoulder, "Go home, Tomasa."

I stand motionless surrounded by growing things. I wait for them to whisper that it is all a mistake, but I hear only leaves touching leaves. I pick up the hoe and turn to walk home.