

Wayra and the Dream Snake

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I never believed in dreams or anything I couldn't touch, until I started working in the jungle. Things happen here that I can't understand, and science, which has always been my lens to see the world, cannot explain them either.

A few days ago, I had a dream:

I was walking in the mountains, alone, with the sun shining over my head. I was running, as if fleeing from something; I tripped and fell and saw how a small snake, bright greenish-grey colored, entered my right hand and wound around my hand and wrist under the skin. My heart was beating fast, and I felt as if a knife had been stuck in my hand.

I woke up sweaty and with trembling hands. It was still night; I got up to drink some water, and my hand hurt. My arm was numb. At first, I laughed when I noticed that I had already woken up, but my hand and arm were still asleep. I lay down and I went back to sleep.

The song of toucans woke me up at dawn. When I got up, I realized that my arm was still numb and my hand was aching. Could it be that I had slept on my arm all night? Being the best nurse I know, I did my own checkup: everything seemed normal.

I tried giving myself a massage and putting ice on it, but the discomfort continued. So, I took a sedative and left for work.

At the hospital, while checking on patients, I asked a technician for help filling out the clinical histories and performing the procedures. I couldn't write, change the IV, put injections, or move patients. At lunch, my cutlery fell to the floor because I couldn't hold it. During my shift, I was useless.

When I finished, I made an appointment with the doctor.

—Wayra, did you make any unusual effort with your arm?

—Not that I remember.

—The X-rays show everything is fine. There are no physical injuries. It's probably just stress. Has it been difficult adjusting to life in Leticia?

—I've been here for two months. I'm having a bit of a hard time with food, but nothing stressful, doctor.

—Do you talk to your family frequently?

Why was he asking me that? What did he care if I called my family or not, if I had already adapted or not? I just wanted him to prescribe me medication for the pain and numbness.

—Not much; I don't have time.

—If the discomfort continues tomorrow despite the painkillers, you will have to visit psychiatry.

As I was leaving the office, my phone rang. It was my mom, and I decided not to answer because that day I was not in the mood for her worried mother questions.

When I got to my room, I took the painkillers and went to sleep.

I was running in the woods as if fleeing from something, and when I saw my arm, I saw how the snake was bigger than the night before. The pain in my hand was increasing. I cursed the painkillers and the doctor, and I was afraid I wouldn't be able to work, but I kept running. I tripped again, fell, and hit my head. A slow female voice whispered:

—Medicine doesn't understand any of this. Because in dreams your arm has become sick, in dreams you have to heal it.

In the early morning, I wake up with my robe soaked with sweat. The pain is more intense and it has spread from my wrist to my elbow. I can't go back to sleep. Why is the pain still there? I have to work for three months to sign the contract with the hospital, but if I continue like this, I won't make it. What if I can't go back to work, like I felt in the dream?

I breathe and try to calm down. I stand up, move my neck, and massage my arm, hoping

to feel some change. Nothing, nothing, nothing... Upon contact, I feel a burning sensation, unbearable, and the only way to cope with it is to keep my arm still. It gets repeated in my head the voice of my dream: "Medicine doesn't understand any of this." If medicine doesn't understand, what does?

I'm clumsy without my two arms: it's difficult to bathe, comb my hair, dress, and even turn on a match to light the stove. The pain won't let me concentrate. I don't know how long I can bear this.

I arrive at the hospital and go to the head nurse's office. I explain my situation, and she says to me:

—Are you sure you like this job?

—Boss, I want to keep working, but I don't understand what's happening to me.

—Take the day off, but you know that if you are absent for more than three days, I have to report it.

Her words hit my chest. I won't cry in front of her. The boss tries hard to make her face seem condescending, but she is inflexible, like all hospital bosses.

I lock myself in the bathroom and cry, more from the pain in my arm than from my helplessness. I always boasted of being the perfect student, with perfect grades, who was never wrong. Here I am now, useless and unable to understand what's going on.

Someone comes into the bathroom. I wipe my tears and go out to wash my face. It's María, the hospital cleaning lady, who asks me:

—Are you okay? Do you need anything?

—No, ma'am. Thank you.

A lump in my throat dissolves, and the tears come like a waterfall that I cannot stop.

—Cry in peace, girl. I'm outside if you want to talk.

—I'd like to remove my arm to stop this pain. You can't help me; neither could the doctor, but thank you.

—Girl, doctors can handle the pains of this world, but it could be that the illness of your arm is not from this world, and for that, you need other types of doctors...

—What doctors?

—Soul doctors, girl, who are wrongly called "warlocks" and "witches" around here, but I prefer to call them "curious ones."

—Doña María, I don't believe in that. That's for the people around here who don't know about science and believe in charlatans. I'm going to my appointment with the psychiatrist. Thanks anyway.

As I leave the bathroom, María says:

—If you change your mind, ask for Don Teodoro at the market. He is a "curious one", one

of the good ones. All in all, you have nothing to lose by trying.

Before entering the psychiatrist's office, my phone rings, and it's my mother again, who has the ability to call me at the most inopportune moments. I don't answer.

The psychiatrist's name is Angela, just like my mother. The coincidence bothers me. I go in, explain what's happening to me, and she asks:

—Do you like being a nurse?

—Why does everyone assume I don't like my job? I'm not making this pain up. I can't even lift my arm!

—These are routine questions, Wayra. Don't worry. I'll give you an anxiolytic to calm you down. Please continue taking the painkillers the doctor prescribed, and try to rest. Rest is the key to recovering from any discomfort.

I walk toward the house where I rent my room, and all my worries crowd in: I'm about to lose my job, and they think I don't like nursing and that I'm making up my discomfort. Is my pain just a figment of my mind? Maybe the psychiatrist is right: I just need rest. What if the painkillers don't work?

I stop and breathe. The treatment is going to work, and I'll wake up feeling better tomorrow. I get home, take my medication, and lie down.

I run through the woods, but this time I stop. The snake is wrapped around my shoulder. My

arm is going to fall off. My heart races, and I fall to my knees on the ground. I want to give up. The same voice from the previous dream scolds me:

—Stubborn girl.

I search for the source of the voice. To my right, a few feet away, an elderly woman in her eighties, holding a cane, repeats to me:

—What gets sick in dreams must be healed in dreams.

—How do you heal in dreams?

—Ask Teodoro.

Do I know this woman? Her face looks familiar.

I open my eyes, and my arm is burning. It's still daylight. My mother calls again. This time I decide to answer.

—Daughter, how are you? I've been dreaming about you a lot.

—You with your dreams again.

—Dreams teach us and guide us sometimes. You have to know how to listen. Are you okay?

— Honestly, not much. I have a pain that nothing can relieve. I wish I could take my arm off.

My tears flow like a torrent, and I can't stop crying.

—Daughter, there are illnesses we don't understand. Consult a curandero. Sometimes,

plants and prayers can do more than any medicine.

—Mom, you're and your things again. That's why I don't like telling you.

—If not, come back home. We'll seek help here.

—No, I don't want to lose my job. I'm staying here, and I don't want you to come here either. I'm sure I'll get better in a few days. I just need to change my medication; that's all. —I'm going to pray a lot for you, daughter. The dream was right. It told me that my daughter was lost. Also, I dreamed about a snake. It could be gossip or someone trying to do you harm, my dear. Take good care of yourself and know that you can come back whenever you want.

—Mom, I'm already living my life. Thanks again, but I'll figure it out. We'll talk later.

What if my mom is right? How is it possible that she also saw a snake in her dream? What if I have no choice but to go with a curandero? It's four in the afternoon. The market hasn't closed yet. I wash my face with my left hand and go out in search of Don Teodoro.

The curandero's place is one block from the market. I won't tell anyone I came to this site, not even my mom, because that would be like agreeing with her. Although I don't believe in these things, I don't know what else to do.

In his shop, he has a large display case with candles, jars with macerated plants, and perfumes for love, luck, and money.

An old man in his seventies enters through a curtain.

—I was waiting for you.

—What do you mean you were waiting for me, if I've never come here before?

—In my dreams, I was told that a desperate young woman would come with an “endreamed” arm.

—What do you mean by “endreamed”?

I instinctively grab my arm, as if protecting it.

—Look at you; you can't even hold it up. It looks like a hanging lump. That's what happens when your body gets “endreamed”.

—Okay, let's say I believe that this is happening to my arm. What would I have to do to heal it?

—It depends on what has endreamed your arm. Tell me what you saw in your dreams.

I can't believe what I'm hearing. It's like he can guess what's happening to me, and that I can't understand.

I decide to tell him everything that has happened: all the dreams. When I finish, the elder remains silent, and his gaze on the horizon.

—If the “endreamment” is by a snake, it's more difficult. I can give you some plants to bathe with, but it is you who has to understand why your arm wants to turn into a snake.

—“It wants to become a snake?”

— The dream is clear: your arm wants to turn into a snake. I'm going to consult my teachers to tell me if I can cure you from this, because I've never treated the endreamment by snake. You take these plants.

Don Teodoro takes out three packages of plants and tells me how to prepare them for bathing with them before going to sleep. He insists:

—If you don't find out why your arm wants to turn into a snake, neither I nor any other “curious one” can help you.

It's already nighttime as I prepare the plants in my house. Although it's absurd, I have to try. Although I don't believe it, it won't hurt me.

I dip my arm into the bucket of plants prepared with water and perfume. I breathe for a few minutes there, letting myself be flooded with the relaxing smells of the bath. It relaxes me and gives me the impression that it calms the pain a little, although the numbness continues. I dry my arm slowly with the towel, and I remember the name the curandero gave to my illness: «endreamed arm». It's time to rest.

I'm running in the mountains in my dream, I stop to look at my arm and see it is less swollen. The snake is just as big, but the arm hurts less and is less numb. The old lady appears in the same place, with a smile on her face.

—My little girl is finally starting to understand.

I wake up, and the pain is less intense. The

plants really helped. What if they contain the key to my cure?

As soon as dawn breaks, I go back to the market. I tell Don Teodoro what happened. —I've already received messages, miss. I can't help you.

—But the pain went away!

—Yes, but the snake endreamment can only be cured by Ilvio, a powerful curious one who lives three hours deep in the mountains on the way to Puerto Nariño. If he can't help her, no one can. It is not up to me to cure your illness.

—Maybe if I continue with the baths and other things, you can help me.

—No, the snake endreamment isn't easy to heal. The snake will keep growing and it will endream other parts of your body, until you are no longer you.

—What?

—Ask your arm why it wants to be a snake, and take seriously the old lady who speaks to you in dreams. She sure is the guide who can help you find the answers.

As soon as I leave Don Teodoro's, a tingling sensation along the entire right side of my body throws me into a panic. Could it be that he meant that this illness could kill me? I take a motorcycle, get home, and pack my backpack. I call the hospital to let them know that I have to travel for a checkup. Of course, I'm not saying I'm going to Puerto Nariño, but I do understand if they have to report me.

Before heading to the port, my phone rings and it's my mom. If I don't answer, she'll keep insisting, but if I answer, she'll worry. I'm going alone to a place that I don't know. What if something happens to me? What if I die and she doesn't know where to find me? I don't answer her and decide to leave a note for her in my room with directions to where I'm going, just in case several days go by and I don't return.

At the port of Leticia, I have to wait for the boat to fill up the *peque peque*¹ that goes to Puerto Nariño, which will drop me off in Palmeras, from where I'll have to walk. I sit and wait, and the midday sun lulls me to sleep.

I run in the woods, stop, and see how the snake is already going down my ribs up to my hip. Is that what Don Teodoro meant? I get scared, and the voice of the old lady:

—The first test is coming.

I wake up to the scream of the driver of the *peque peque*, who announces that it is time to leave. I have trouble getting into the boat because my right leg isn't responding well. It's going numb.

The *peque peque* has been sailing smoothly for two hours. The green landscape on both sides of the Amazon River embraces us. Will I return from this trip? My stomach growls, and I get goosebumps.

¹ NOTE OF THE TRANSLATOR: A "peque peque" is a small motorized boat, similar to a canoe, commonly used in rivers and lakes in the Amazon rainforest.

I tolerate the pain better. I wrap my arm in a scarf. I hug it and rock it as if it were a baby. The clouds are getting dark.

—How much more time, sir??

—If we don't have to stop, one more hour.

—Looks like it's going to rain soon, doesn't it?

—Yes. It's better not to sail upriver in the rain because the boat could capsize.

I check with my left hand that the life jacket is securely fastened. Dark clouds cover us, and it begins to drizzle.

If the *peque peque* capsizes, how would I swim with one arm? I shake my body again as if scaring away that thought.

The rain gets heavier, the driver tries to reach the shore, but a whirlpool pulls us in. The man makes a maneuver to evade it, but we hit a log, and I grasp the board I'm sitting on.

The boat flips over, we fall into the water, I cling to the board. Other people need help, but with only one arm, I can't help.

Without my volition, my right arm slips free from the scarf and zigzags through the water. I swim, in disbelief, to the shore.

As I come out of the water, my arm falls back like a hanging log. What just happened? Was this the "first test"?

Other passengers arrive at the shore. The boat driver gathers us under a large tree and checks that we are all okay.

—The engine propeller is broken. When it stops raining, I'll take it to Palmeras, which is a half-hour walk. They can lend me another boat there to come and pick you up.

—I'll walk with you. I'm heading there exactly.

It's almost 3 in the afternoon when the weather starts to clear. I carry my soaked backpack, which now weighs twice as much. Luckily, my cell phone and wallet are tightly wrapped and dry. My luggage is small and I haven't lost anything, but other people with large bags have lost them.

I wrap my right arm with the scarf, and we set off for Palmeras.

It's impossible to walk quickly. My left leg is numb, along with my hip. I walk slowly and carefully, but I still slip and fall. My left hand prevents me from falling on my face. The rest of my body is covered in mud. I'm tired and sweaty. My arm isn't responding. How could I have swum with it to shore, and now I can't even feel it? When I arrive at Palmeras, it's already sunset time. I ask for directions, and a lady from a hostel tells me:

—You'd better spend the night here. Tomorrow some young man can take you. It's deep in the mountains, and you can get lost if you go alone.

—I can't wait. Please, no matter what it takes. I need to get there today.

—Talk to him yourself. See what he says.

The lady calls a young man of about sixteen years old, to whom I tell where I need to go, and I beg him to take me. After a while, he agrees.

We walk for almost four hours because the young man goes at my pace. Walking at night in the dense forest with only the light of a flashlight to guide me and the deafening sound of the cicadas scare me, but I'm even more terrified by being unable to walk in a few hours.

We arrived at a clearing. A very old man was smoking tobacco next to a fire. He must be Don Ilvio.

The young man speaks to him in another language, and the elder man examines me with his eyes. The boy says goodbye and leaves.

—Help me, please. I can't feel my arm anymore, and my leg is getting more and more numb.

—Ummm, your body already wants to be a snake.

He blows on me with the tobacco smoke, and my arm starts to shake as if it's waking up without me moving it.

—Go inside and dry off. You have to start the diet today.

—Diet?

—Yes, the diet to cleanse before you take the dream plant tomorrow. Your right side is "endreamed". Tomorrow, the pain in your leg will surely make it impossible for you to walk.

I gasp, and I fall to my knees, crying.

—Why is this happening to me? Am I going to die?

—Do you want to die?

—I don't want to die.

He extends his hand and helps me to stand up. He points me toward the entrance of a cabin five meters from the campfire. I go slowly. I look for dry clothes in my backpack and change. I go out and sit by the fire.

The fire reminds me of what I have stopped doing. If I die from this, I will have lived a useless life. I think about my mom. I've always blamed her for my dad leaving, and because of that, I couldn't wait to leave too. But if I had never come to work here, this wouldn't have happened to me. I grumble. If I don't know what caused it, how do I know it wouldn't have happened to me?

The old man comes out of his cabin with a bottle, a bucket and a glass. He sits in front of the fire. He rolls another cigar and lights it.

—You have to pay attention to everything, because if you don't follow the instructions I give you, I won't be able to do anything for you.

—I'll do whatever you tell me.

—Then you have to believe, or at least have hope that the journey you are going to undertake will heal you.

—How can you believe in something you've never believed in?

—Look within yourself. Faith is always within. Entrust yourself to your grandparents

and grandmothers and ask for their guidance and protection.

He opens the bottle, blows smoke into it, and sings. He pours a thick and dark liquid into the glass. The smell makes me nauseous. I close my eyes, don't breathe, and drink it in. He pours me water from a jug that is near the fire, and I drink it too.

I vomit in the bucket.

He gives me more water, and I vomit again.

I vomit many times. My mouth has a bitter taste.

I fall exhausted.

He helps me get up and walk to the cabin.

—Rest and don't consume anything. Don't leave the room. I'll look for you tomorrow.

He leaves, closes the door, and I fall asleep immediately.

I'm in the cabin, and the elder woman from my dream visits me. She lulls me to sleep and tells me that everything is okay; she tells me to free myself from anger and disbelief.

My arm moves with the snake. The snake now zigzags freely from the arm to my leg. The pain and numbness continue, but it is not as intense. My body feels loose and heavy, and at the same time, relaxed.

My mother also visits me. I apologize. She hugs me and says:

—I lost my arm when I had you, and I couldn't continue studying.

The old lady nods immediately and adds:

—Yes, I lost my leg when I was married by force, and I could no longer move to the city, as I wanted.

Another old woman appears with bright eyes, she seems older, and says:

—I lost both my arms when they didn't let me study.

Suddenly, I am surrounded by many grandmothers who murmur that they lost parts of their body because they could not decide how many children to have, they couldn't buy land in their name to work, choose whether or not to care for younger siblings or parents, or inherit properties for being women.

Their voices overwhelm me, and I scream:

—It's true; I don't want to be a nurse.

I open my eyes and it's still night. I'm tired; my body aches. I can move the fingers of my right hand.

That was it, I really don't want to be a nurse. My arm refuses to keep doing what I don't want to anymore. But in their case, they lost parts of their bodies because they were limited in their abilities

or desires. What ability or desire am I denying? I fall asleep again.

I wake up and I can't move my right leg or my arm. My fingers move. The old man enters the cabin, helps me sit down, and tells me that my immobility is part of the process. He asks me to tell him everything I saw in the dream. He listens attentively and thoughtfully.

—It's time to take the dream plant; we don't have much time.

—The dream plant?

—Yes, it's the plant that will help you free yourself from the snake or die trying. You will take it right here. As soon as you take it, you will fall into a deep sleep that can last for hours or days. I will be tending the fire, watching over your process. You must ask your grandmothers what you need to free yourself from the snake. Only they know what to do. Do everything that they tell you. Be careful; the snake will appear at any moment, and you will have to confront it.

—I don't know how to do what you're telling me.

—Just listen; you'll know in your dreams.

He takes out of a leather bag he has on him, several large fresh leaves of an intense green color, and hands them to me.

—Swallow them, drink a glass of water, and don't be scared. Allow yourself to begin the journey. The old man sings a song that doesn't seem to be from any specific language. Listening to his song, I fall asleep.

I'm walking on the mountain. The snake walks over my two legs and my two arms; it's bigger. My skin is translucent. I walk awkwardly to get to a clearing where the grandmothers are waiting for me.

When I arrive, the grandmother who always appears greets me and helps me sit down. She hands me a cane with a snake carved into it.

—With this cane, you have my strength. If you feel that you lack it, lean on it. Another grandmother brings a crystal. She hangs it around my neck and says, —This crystal helps shed light on the darkness that haunts our souls. If you don't know what to do, take out this crystal and it will show you the way.

And the oldest of all comes up and offers me a bag.

—This is the ashes of our bones. We are all with you and, since your name has the strength of the wind, if you need us to be there, release a little of this powder and we will help you.

The three of them and other grandmothers form a circle around me and sing the same song that Don Ilvio sang to me before I fell asleep. And, in my dream, I sleep.

I wake up in an empty, white space. There we are, I and the snake that's already over my chest and heads towards my head.

—I'm not afraid of you.

The snake slides out from the side of my crown, laughing, saying with my same voice:

—Now I am you, and you are me.

—I don't want to be you. Give me my body back.

—Your body is already mine.

My legs sit up unwillingly, and I remember the cane. Just thinking about it, it appears at my side, giving me strength and preventing my legs from moving. The snake laughs.

—Your grandmothers help you, but this fight is yours. You chose a profession for the wrong reasons. That's why your arms don't want to do anything anymore.

The snake multiplies, and several snakes appear, and they all go straight for me. I remember the bag with the dust from my grandmothers' bones. It appears in my hand and I release it to the wind.

All the grandmothers appear. Each one confronts a snake. I confront the biggest one. I look it in the eye, and when it comes to attack me, I hit it, and I feel the punch myself. It happens two more times, and it's as if all the damage that I try to do to it, I do it to myself, and I stop there.

—If I kill you, I'll kill myself, right?

—You finally understand.

I remember the crystal that is around my neck, and from it comes out a ray of light with a voice that says:

—Remember.

I see myself as a child playing alone in the yard of my house, making preparations with plants and healing my wrists. The girl stands up, looks at me, and says:

—Your hands know what they want to be.

I look at my hands and I see snakes in them; really, they want to be snakes, they want to stop being and doing what I am.

I shout:

—I stop fighting. I want to be a snake.

Everything falls silent. Each of the grandmothers has a snake, and they help them do what they couldn't. In unison, they say:

—We are now. We can be now. With you, we can be.

Now I'm a snake, and I finally feel my body is mine again. I have no legs. no arms, just scales and skin. And I know what I have to do.

I open my eyes, and my mother is with me in the cabin. I rub my eyes, making sure I'm not dreaming anymore. It's clear she's been crying a lot. She tells me she arrived a couple of days ago. She was worried listening to me raving. I smile and thank her for being there. I'm reborn. There's no pain. My body is lighter than ever.

I hug my mother and ask for her forgiveness.

From that day on, my life changed. I'm learning about the dream plant with Don Ilvio. During the day, I go with him to collect plants and

process them. At night, while I dream, I turn into a snake again and visit others. You can't imagine how many people do things they don't like. Then, I enter their bodies, so their bodies can speak, and remind them of their vocations

and find themselves through their dreams.

Are you doing what you love? If you are not sure, don't be surprised if one night I visit you in dreams.

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