

Jaguar Dreams

Nearly 80 years old, Chitu was tending her garden deep in the primeval Amazonian forest. She watched a furry capybara and her brood of pups cautiously ascend the riverbank. The rodent's eyes darted in search of a predatory snake or toothy caiman. "Allí p'unlla," Chitu said softly, greeting the plump animals in her native Kichwa. Chitu was happy to see the warm morning sun settle them into munching wild grasses nearby.

She scooped moist earth around the *yuca* stalk she was planting. As she patted the dirt in place, the stalk began to vibrate. Crumbling earth spilled over her hands. Tremors growled underground. Treetops swayed and loosened palm branches fell to the shuddering soil. The tremors grew like rolling thunder, loud and jolting. The capybaras raced into hiding.

Chitu spread her arms on the ground to keep her kneeling balance until the rocking stopped. She had felt tremors once before. A rare earthquake years earlier had shaken the village houses and sent birds and animals fleeing. The event had passed without causing harm. The earth had quieted. Life had moved on. She thought this must be the same.

To calm herself, she hummed a soothing chant her mother had taught her when they tended the garden together many years ago. It was a song about *Pachamama*: mother earth. It praised all the visible and invisible beings of the forest. It often gave Chitu solace and trust in her world. In this moment, it offered reassurance.

She began ritual movements to accompany the song and to bring life to the *yuca* plant and its neighbors: the *papá china*, *maize*, *frijol*, and medicinal herbs all growing near several fruit trees. These ancient gestures also calmed her. The morning became peaceful again. The capybaras returned from hiding to resume their meal, the mother still on high alert, nose sniffing the air, eyes darting in watch over her pups.

Chitu's garden was in the Kichwa village of *Nunayaku*: the name meaning "soul water." Kichwa women were masters of their family gardens; a man was not allowed there, unless he was the woman's secret lover. Chitu followed her mother's teaching and shared the land's secrets with the younger women in her family group who would replace her in time. Her own daughter had married into another village and had taken Chitu's plant knowledge with her to cultivate her own family garden.

All the family gardens were changing. Chitu knew this. She lamented the lack of buzzing and chirping and the occasional grunt of a peccary rooting for tubers. The gradual extinction of so many plants, animals, and insects in the whole rainforest made her task difficult. She knew her beloved home was in trouble. Wet and dry seasons were less predictable. Relating the movement of the moon and stars to land cultivation was more challenging. Nature was no longer in balance, and that was hard for her to remedy in her garden, though she tried.

Chitu rose stiffly, her aging legs bearing her small weight. "Tullu nanay," she grumbled aloud, complaining of her "aching bones." She balanced herself using her walking stick, a three-foot, stilt-like root of the Cashapona tree. This was her *tawna*: her cane. She had heard the legend that gave this tree the name "walking palm." She, too, believed that its long above-ground roots allowed it to "walk," its new roots growing toward the sunlight to replace old roots.

Chitu's *tawna* almost equaled her height. It offered the support she needed to carry herself across her forest home. The grip of her strong hand, over the years, had worn it smooth in the middle. She walked several miles each week from village to garden, to the river, and back again.

She gathered bright green leaves from one of the many sacred *guayusa* trees to bring home to make early morning tea. She thanked the tree for its generosity, placing tobacco at its base in return, reciprocity essential to good living. She gently pushed the leaves in her *kuruta*: carrying pouch, and attached it to her belt. Then she headed to the riverbank and eased her bare feet into the shallow mud. Lifting her blue cotton skirt, she crossed to her canoe, stepped in and lowered herself onto the middle

plank, carefully storing her stick. Reaching for her paddle, she pushed her craft into the glittering river stream.

The river had changed shape over time. Once straight, it now curved around her garden and eroded its riverbanks on the two sides of the curve. This created a “head” for the garden and a “neck” that bridged the garden to the shoulders of the village.

Chitu’s father, Mayu, had told her long ago about this changing river. His knowledge of geological shifts came from the ancient teachings of the Quijos, the ancestors of the Kichwa. Mayu had also taught her that the Quijos had fled from the Andes mountains down into the Amazon lowlands to escape Spanish colonizers and the horror that they brought.

Mayu knew the erosion would cut through the “neck” of the garden, the river then flowing straight through, separating the garden from the village. Then you would only be able to reach the garden by canoe. The solution was to build a hanging footbridge over the river.

Not being an immediate concern, Mayu’s knowledge became lost to most others in the passage of time. Chitu did not forget, however, and repeatedly warned the village leaders of this change. They told her not to worry. They thought it would happen only after a very long time. Chitu knew that a very long time would be sooner than they knew. “Nachu?” she scoffed aloud: Isn’t it so? It angered her that Kichwa women did not hold the strong leadership positions that their sisters in other nations held. She had often seen that women’s valuable insights were overlooked. Her own warnings went unheeded.

Continuing on, Chitu took stock of the wildlife she passed. It was the quiet midday, when the warming sun and humid air eased mammals to rest and birds to nest. She delighted in seeing the tapir on his daily route, snacking on shrubs along the shore. Its hog-like body brushed through the rustling undergrowth, its long snout curling and sniffing for fresh food. “Wayllunka wiwa,” she called to the tapir: beloved animal.

Like much wildlife now, tapirs were rarely seen. Chitu remembered how years ago giant otters slid down the riverbanks, capuchin monkeys swung in the trees, and colorful toucans graced the air. Now, with so many forest trees cut for lumber or agriculture, these creatures were disappearing. *Where were the pumas?* Chitu wondered. *What’s become of the jaguars?* “Maypi?” she asked aloud: where?

She glided along riverbanks colored with sedimentary layers of clay and sand. The striations were like the wrinkles in her long, brown arms and the gray streaks in her black hair. Chitu recognized past years in the sediment. Over a long time, she had realized that climates were shifting, even in the largely-sustained Amazon Basin climate.

Wanting an educated daughter, Mayu had taught Chitu as a child that these markings of the ages would be visible or not according to the river’s flood-pulse over the course of each day, just as tides rise and fall. But in recent years, she had seen the lowest striations become completely submerged by the rising river. She had heard that the Amazon tributaries were swelling from the melting Andes glaciers to the west. As the riverbanks and low lands became submerged, there was less vegetation for feasting animals. That worried her.

Chitu reached the opposite side of the garden and slid her canoe onto the bank. She hauled it onto the soft mud and tied it to a shrub branch. Doing so alerted a caiman that was sunning itself. It scrambled its lizard legs toward the river.

She ambled through the warm mud and up the drier bank, with her walking stick, her pouch of *guayusa* leaves slung over her shoulder. She found her footing on the familiar path to the most rewarding of the day’s tasks. Before her stood the magnificent kapok tree from which she would harvest seed pods. She would stuff their rich fibers into pillows and mattresses for the village families.

Chitu knew this kapok tree from her youth. She had watched it grow to its gigantic size, supported by a buttressed trunk. Its crown rose majestically above all other trees on the flat plain of the rainforest. It was her *waka yura*: sacred tree. She ran her hand up one of its flanks, breathing deeply and rhythmically while offering silent gratitude for its thriving life: *kawsaykay*.

Opening a loosely-woven carrying bag, Chitu gathered as many fallen pods as it could hold. She

took her time, enjoying the tranquil “hoooo” of a nearby cotinga, its blue wings flashing through the brush, in search of food. Eventually, she lifted the full bag to her back, took her walking stick and walked on.

Leaving the kapok tree to walk to the village, she whispered her gratitude for its gifts. She would reciprocate by making gifts for the community. As if in response, the branches of the tree, 100 feet up, bowed and swayed. Chitu felt the embrace of the tree’s spirit and welcomed the warm interchange between herself and the tree, between two living beings.

Chitu left for the village, her gait slowed by the weight of the seed pods. As the day grew hotter, droplets of sweat ran down the creases in her aging face. She leaned forward, shifting the weight of her carry bag further onto her shoulders. Suddenly, the earth jolted again and threw her off balance, followed by waves of tremors coming faster and harder. She fell to her knees. This was no earthquake. This was different. She thought the ground would open and swallow her. *That sound was not the same. It was too loud, the tremors too fast.*

The shaking finally stopped. She hurried as quickly as she could to the village, though the distance seemed long as she bore a heavy weight and made her aging legs run fast. She went straight to the community center and dropped the bag on the wooden table at one end. She raced to Sacha, her daughter-in-law, and spoke rapidly in Kichwa about the rumbling.

“No, Chitu. We felt nothing.” answered Sacha. “Perhaps it was *Pachamama* speaking to you. She is angry in these times. Man is treating her roughly.”

No, thought Chitu. *Not Pachamama. Something else. Something dangerous.*