

# TURTLE DREAMS

by Lola Wilcox

## October 31, All Hallows/All Saints and Samhain:

*Dream: I am moving carefully through a dark, soft, warm place, one step at a time. There is no light. My hands stretch out in front of me. The nearby walls are so soft I cannot hurt myself. A disembodied voice, androgynous, asks kindly, "Whom do you seek here?" And I say, "The Ancient Turtle."*

I wake up, startled. It's still dark. I'm warm in my cocoon of covers, but not as warm as in the dream. Michael is sound asleep beside me, turned on his side, one arm circling my waist. I turn on the little bed light to write the dream into the leather-covered book Michael gave me years ago. I have this way of working because any dream is easy to forget by morning, and short dreams are important.

Sitting up at sunrise, I can smell the coffee Michael is making. I swing my legs off the bed, tuck my feet in knitted slippers, and read the dream. I feel it – the texture of the dark itself, the warmth, being enclosed in the soft walls, and the timbre of the voice asking the question. The dream is alive in me.

Michael comes with my coffee, heavily creamed and sugared with a hazelnut lightener. I've been gaining weight again, but I'm not ready to give up my hazelnut coffee. Michael is beautiful to me, his hair tousled from sleep, jeans unbuttoned, feet shoeless. "You're up!" he laughs, handing me my coffee and settling beside me with his own.

"I had a dream," I say.

"And I didn't, or at least one I remember. Share yours?"

I read it to him. He asks to hear it again.

"So what about turtles?" he sips his coffee, other hand on my knee.

"'The Turtle and the Hare'—Uncle Remus? No, Aesop. The slow and steady turtle wins the race and the rabbit, fast but over-confident and cocky, loses."

"I remember spring trips to Missouri as a kid, when thousands of box turtles were a tide crossing the roads. Cars couldn't avoid squishing them. We'd rescue a few. I can feel their shell in my hand, their wrinkled legs wiggling in the air."

“What happened to them?”

“Soup?” He laughs my expression. “We would play with them until they wandered off. Except for one that adopted our yard for a lot of years, and may be there still. It would bury down in the flower garden in the fall, hibernate all winter, and turn up again in the late spring.”

“I think sea-going turtles are an endangered species,” I say.

“You do know, don't you, that the Native Americans believe this continent is on the back of the Great Mother Turtle?” I look at him, shaking suddenly, and tears begin to roll down my cheeks. He hands me a tissue. “I guess not,” he says, and grins at me.

I locate the children's funny green plastic toy turtle. Wound up, it walks, extending its neck from side to side. It makes me laugh, and I put it on my desk at work. In the children's section of the library I look for turtle books. They tell how to make an aquarium and what to feed them. Prosaic and Practical - I realize that's why I've never paid any attention to turtles at all.

### **All Hallows to Thanksgiving**

*DREAM: A headline in a newspaper: “This woman should eat only fruit until lunch or she'll lose her sex drive.”*

At my exercise class our instructor gets us moving through space along diagonal lines. I'm carrying more weight than I want, and movement class is helping. Now she says, “Let's dance free-form. Take a recent dream, and move through the dance space as if you are in the dream.”

I close my eyes and start moving down the warm, soft, dark... what... hallway... very slowly. I hear people moving around me in the exercise room, but in my dream there is only my body moving - as if my body were the dreamer, not my mind. On the floor I try to become the Ancient Turtle. I move my legs and my feet and it's slow, tedious, as if I'm crawling across a Missouri road or a sandy shore. When I crawl from the shore into the sea I discover I'm a strong swimmer, with the same appendages that are so slow on land pulling me firmly, steadily through the water, mile after mile. I feel something shift inside me. While driving home I decide finally to go to a nutritionist I've heard about through friends.

## Thanksgiving through Christmastide

*Dream: I'm putting research together on turtles, lots of charts and graphs, articles, working with files of digitized information and library books piled on the floor and my desk. My task is to get a TREND established. The trend becomes clear, and I discover turtles are dying everywhere. Sitting at the computer I realize the price of turtles will go sky high. I decide to invest in turtles. It will be a short-term investment.*

Adelle, the nutritionist, has a thin body with a spine like she's spent years in the military. She's interviewed and muscle tested me. I now eat fruits, vegetables, proteins; meat is infrequent. No sugars. No grains. No milks. No ice in my water. Ginger tea. I'm to think light, think warm. Michael, who used to prepare every other meal, has quit cooking with the new regime. Steaming vegetables is too hard, I guess, resentful.

I tell Adelle I can't concentrate, that I feel like I'm floating, and it's disturbing.

"Can you focus and concentrate when necessary?"

"Yes. But..."

"Your energy is shifting as you return to your natural lightness of being."

"I feel like I'm flitting from one thing to another. I don't settle down."

She sits calmly, with her brown hair and eyes, and her voice that would calm a tornado. "Be open to experience life without structure. Let it fall apart, all life's obligations. Wait and see. Soon you will want bok choy instead of chocolate."

I look at her, sure she's crazy. My family may be lucky I love them and my work.

At home I get out thin, crisp gingersnaps that truly snap when you bite into them. I almost finish the whole tin when, out of nowhere, I don't want the cookies with as much energy as I just did before. I'm relieved that there is a limit – way out there, but a limit.

## New Year's

*"I'm looking at myself in a mirror which reveals just how fat I am. I see my body, the fat around my waist, stomach, hips, lower legs and thighs, exaggerated until I'm obese. Beyond obese. I look like an early fertility goddess, or a great fat shell-less turtle. I am filled with disgust at myself."*

I wake up, and can hardly write the dream down. I feel sick to my stomach. Michael stirs beside me, mumbling, “Are you O.K.?” I say, “Yes,” because I would never, never tell him this dream. However irrational, this is a great fear—to become so fat I can barely move.

On the way home from work I go to our Zoo, into Tropical Discovery, and sit on a bench across from where a pair of turtles are installed. Heavy plastic walls hold the pond water, and I watch real turtles in real shells in real water. They make slow turns, using their flippers, seeming to enjoy the slow flow of their body around the rocks and plants on the bottom of the aquarium. I look at the join between the flippers and the shell. The shell is part of the turtle, forming out of the softer flesh. This is not a snail shell that the turtle will crawl out of and leave. I’ve seen videos of turtles pulling that soft flesh inside their shells when threatened. I sit on the bench and watch one until I can feel in my own body the way the appendages move with and around its shell. When I danced the turtle at exercise class I was not far off about that movement, but I was not in water. I was not graceful, like this turtle is. Hail, Turtle, full of grace.

Sitting there I remember pictures of me as a child, light and slim and full of laughter. I think, “Then I put on fat like a shell.” Turtles’ shells are protection. In all this time I’ve not thought of this connection. Miserable in school, miserable at home, so vulnerable, so easily hurt, I needed protection. I built my shell with comfort foods.

The last Sunday before Christmas we watch a video about the plight of endangered sea-going turtles. They are creatures of instinct more than intelligence, and their instinct is to return again and again to the same place to lay eggs in the sand. Poachers harvest the eggs for international markets. Turtle protectors line the beaches to keep the poachers away. The video interviews both sides and people who work in fishing boats that employ giant nets that drown dolphins and entangle turtles. The camera shows us a turtle found washed up on the shore, cut open by the fisherman, carved up in torture before death.

“Who are these people?” I wail. “Trolls?”

“Frightened people whose world is changing. They can’t allow themselves to be frightened, so they get angry, and take it out on environmentalists who care more about turtles than them.”

He’s right. He’s a systems analyst and complex problems fascinate him. Still, I write out a check and join Greenpeace.

For Christmas Michael and the children give me a large clay turtle statue made and painted in the Pueblo style, with little children riding on it. It's a "storyteller" turtle. I hold it in my hand and weep.

### **January 6<sup>th</sup>, Epiphany, to February 1<sup>st</sup>, Candlemas/Imbolc**

*Dream: The roly-poly gopher (Go for It) works all night digging—she's working so hard digging—clearing away all the dirt, and munching through the cement floor—she has it all done but one piece of cement floor that's too hard to lift on her own. She's all bright eyed when I come to see what's gone on—so much work, such clear areas - the gopher's pleased and happy and I'm amazed—but I do notice the piece that's too hard to lift on her own.*

For the next two weeks every night I dream that I am wandering in an old house and continually reorganizing everything in it. I wake up exhausted.

"Maybe this would be interesting," Michael says one evening, dropping a flyer for African Dance in my lap. "It's on Saturday from 10 to 11:30, over on Broadway."

On Saturday the teacher says, "Just listen to the drums, watch the woman who's leading, and move," She places me into a circle of woman. Three men in jeans and t-shirts sit along the west wall, drumming the shifting rhythms. I find I can lose myself in the drumbeat, and begin to move my body. I am very stiff about the hips compared to every one else. At various moments different women place their hands on my hips and show me how to loosen them up. I learn to move every muscle between my crotch and my neck in at least four different ways. I rearrange everything to have time for this class.

### **February 1<sup>st</sup>, Imbolc, to Spring Equinox, March 21**

*Birthday dream: A creature comes into my dream state. The archetype is a turtle, but huge, shell-less. Grayish skin droops in folds as it galumphs around, upright, feeding voraciously. It has one idea—to eat. I let it come and try to communicate with it. It is interested in nothing besides eating. I am not horrified by it; if anything, I pity it. I don't know what to feed it, to give it, so it can stop eating.*

Michael says "Maybe the task is to find something else it wants to do besides eat. Maybe dance." At African dance I try galumphing about. The women are greatly amused and copy me as the drummers laugh out loud.

On my birthday my aunt takes me for tea at a confectionery. “No sweets?” she asks, all four feet ten of her looking at my decaffeinated coffee with cream—the cream is a bit of a splurge. She is having a layered custard and cream confection. I tell her about Galumpf the Insatiable.

“Maybe it’s connected to your mother’s milk not being enough to feed you. You were starving, but we all thought you were fine.”

I look at her. “Why haven’t I heard about this before?”

“Your mother was ashamed of it. But I did think you knew. I’m sorry.”

I tell Adelle about Galumpf and my mother’s milk. “I have to carry this creature with me. This creature is me, when I’m eating unconsciously, just stuffing my mouth.”

“You are teaching Galumpf to talk, to dance. To live intentionally. Yes or No at every moment in Free Will. Allow all options. Test your desires against the fabric of your being.”

I take notes in these sessions with Adelle because otherwise her words slide down into my unconscious. Maybe Galumpf remembers them, but if I don’t read them over, and aloud, each day, I forget. That night I wake up at two o’clock, wanting bok choy. I sneak to the kitchen, and make a small helping, flavored with slices of ginger. It’s delicious.

### **March 21, Spring Equinox to May 1, May Day and Beltane**

*Dream: I am young and full of whimsy and energy—looking slim in jeans, a pretty blouse, and a pink leather belt. I’m in a strange apartment. The door opens, and a Native American man comes in. He’s in jeans, white shirt unbuttoned at the collar with a red scarf around his throat, long dark hair, no headband. So I don’t miss the point he is wearing a belt with a white shell turtle embossed on it—he is White Turtle. He speaks in a quite tone, and his dark eyes seem to see through me, with love and amused affection. I am aware that I could melt into this man, "lose myself in loving."*

Later, watering the plants at the office, I look at the turtle collection on the table. I am wearing a blue sweater with a sea turtle embroidered on both pockets, and a pair of turtle earrings. I’m going slower in the outer world, more sure of myself in the inner one. I eat a slightly broader list of foods now, but go back to the narrowest path if I feel heavy.

Adelle suggests a liver cleanse.

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“A what?”

“A liver cleanse. Your body is a series of interlinked systems that work hard to get everything done just right. A cleanse instead signals very little work. It’s time to give your liver a rest.”

“What do I have to do?” What can possibly be beyond the austerity of grains and greens?

“You eat vegetables only—very small servings. Eat a few garbanzo beans, or a tiny amount of tofu, with a salad. Plus milk thistle capsules; thistle is the cleanser. If you feel ungrounded, call me.”

Here I am, with the galumphing creature in my spine, undertaking a fast. The second day I call her. “Adelle, I can’t. I’m hungry all the time.”

“You are made of much finer molecules today than you were two days ago. When you are hungry, journal. It will be worth it.”

That night for supper I steam greens, including bok choy, and bake a white fish and an acorn squash. Michael and the children look at the dinner they are being served. No one picks up a fork.

“Can we order a pizza?” my son asks, hopeful.

“Look. I’m cooking all the meals now. This is what I’m supposed to eat. This is what I WANT to eat. If you want to cook something else, or order pizza, feel free.”

“We want to support you, Ellen,” Michael says.

“Then start cooking again, and cook what I can eat.”

“I don’t think I’m a fire person.”

“Then find out what you are. Find out what you can eat. I’ll get you the nutritionist’s contact information.”

“Do we have to go too?” The children both look horrified.

“Why not?” Michael responds. “I’ll make the appointment for the three of us. But for tonight, if you don’t mind, Ellen, we will order pizza.” My son cheers, my daughter laughs, and I finish my meal while they wait for the delivery. When the pizza comes I go to the basement and do the laundry.

I feel I am a war with myself. I try to lighten up, get some distance. It's not a fight for control. It's a fight to stay conscious.

Michael suggests Galumpf's sole job is to keep what's unconscious, unconscious. He hands me a small bouquet of roses, with a Rumi poem attached. Titled *Fasting* it says the task is to be empty, like a flute. He and the children go through the vegetarian cookbook he bought, and choose meals they might like.

### **May 1, Beltane and Pentecost**

*Dream: White Turtle and I walk up a rise of tall grass prairie. At the crest is a sweeping horizon, with no tree anywhere. There is a white walled hogan in the middle of the grassy fields. A chimney to a fireplace comes out one side; I think, "Good, a kitchen." A red narrow flag twirls at one of the entrance poles. I feel White Turtle walking beside me, a sense of warmth with watching awareness. It's spacious and clean inside the hogan, with white pine lodge poles. We lie down where we can look up through the smokehole at the blue sky.*

I wake up. Michael wakes up also, and we talk about the dream, and White Turtle. He suggests White Turtle is Galumpf transformed. I want to believe it.

Later, I tell Adelle my thoughts are scattered like thistledown.

"Well, we have two weeks fasting yet," she says. "Roast some grains, and add some sesame seeds to the gruel. Eat just a little of it when feeling so ungrounded. Get used to feeling light."

The roasted grains help. The last week I add in root vegetables. I love beets.

### **August, Lughnasadh, the Sacred Wedding**

*Dream: White Turtle has food in brown paper sacks marked Health Food Store. A full moon rises as we walk towards the hogan. We put the food away in white pine cupboards. It is good food and everything I like and plenty of it. There is all the time in the world—we are in turtle's shell. He is gentle and firm, his hands on my body. We say together, "I love you. I've been waiting for you my whole life." He is so solid and still and earth. I am lightness and fire. Looking into his dark eyes, I know that I don't want to ever leave him; he is the Beloved, the Soul's Lover.*

“What’s the protocol,” Michael asks when I tell him the dream. “I mean, am I still your husband?” He thumps his chest like a lightweight caveman. “Do we get to make love still?”

“Let’s see. Should I get him checked for diseases so we know we’re both safe?”

Michael chuckles. “O.K. It’s a dream lover. Do I need to be jealous?”

“I think you are my real husband, in the real world, in our real house. Though we might decide to go away for the weekend, and let our children go to my aunt’s.”

When real Michael makes love with me, as he touches me, pleasures me, my body trembles with joy. As my climax comes it is as if I am a shell-less creature swimming in the center of the sea, with a horizon of light, perhaps dawn, all around me, surrounding me, lifting me into itself.

### **October 31. All Hallows/All Saints, and Samhain:**

*Dream: I’m moving slowly through a cave of white rock walls. I am a white turtle, with deep blue swirls etched in the shell, and I’m carrying a bowl of blue turquoise on my back. Outside I swim into the sea. A wedding party rows by. The bride offers me some flowers from her bouquet—I choose white gladioli with a blush of salmon in the throats, and some poppy red flowers for accent. The sun is dancing on the waves around me.*



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