

The Shaman

“I really enjoyed your talk Rachel. Of course, as a practising shaman I already have a wide knowledge of medicinal and culinary herbs, but it’s good to hear elders sharing their own wisdom with the community.”

This was my first encounter with my new neighbour Marc. He was tall, thin, and pale with a straggly clump of ginger locks tied back in an unruly ponytail and had a small, gold stud shaped like a crescent moon in one ear.

“How interesting,” I said through teeth bared in the conventional manner. “I give a talk on a horticultural theme at the village hall every year, it’s always well received, but I’ve never had a shaman in the audience before. I would have thought shamans were all busy being medicine men for far off tribal folk. Which tribe are you associated with then?”

“Oh the world is my tribe,” he replied shaking his matted locks “I’ve studied the lore of the first nation tribes and the ancient people of many places, and now it’s my duty to share my knowledge wherever I settle.”

“How philanthropic of you,” I said raising an eyebrow “but whatever attracted you to a sleepy little village like this? The only excitement around here is an occasional bring and buy sale or the odd newspaper story about a thatch fire or supposed sightings of the Beast of Barbury.”

My new neighbour nodded his head and produced a somewhat patronising smirk. “If you understood the principles of shamanism, you would know that our kind all have a spirit animal guide, in fact the higher level of adept such as myself, are actually able to transfer our own spirit into the form of our totem animal. My totem is the bear and the “beast” that you refer to is in fact my spirit bear.”

I glanced at my watch pointedly “Gosh it must have been waiting for you a long time, there’s been stories about that beast circulating since I was a teenager. I’ve never heard it described as a bear though, usually it’s dubious tales about big cats or wolves roaming the woods”.

Marc threw out a dramatic arm towards the dense woodland that surrounded the village “You have nothing to fear, I will draw the village into the protective circle of my powers.”

Thus, reassured of my safety I was able to make my escape down the high street to get my shopping, still grinding my teeth about being described as an “elder” at just fifty years old. Goodness I thought sourly, he must be in his thirties, but he’s like a deluded man child prancing around spouting all that new age nonsense. Before you know it there’ll be another rash of “beast sightings” with fuzzy out of focus photos of tom cats and German Shepherds appearing everywhere. I wondered idly which local domestic animal might have the honour of being identified as a bear.

The adverts appeared in the local newspaper within a fortnight of this encounter. It seemed Marc was able to offer a range of mystic and spiritual services from the cottage next door to my own. Mindful meditation, shamanistic healing, aura reading, psychic channelling and drum therapy, were just a few of the enticing items on his menu. I had my doubts about the popularity of these offers in a place where a trip to a nail bar was considered an extravagant and rather wasteful use of money. However Mrs Jessop the village gossip told me that she'd seen the same advert in a free paper on "Green Events" that was circulated in libraries across the county, and it soon transpired that there was a client base for this sort of thing.

I first became aware of this early one weekend, when I awoke to hear a cacophony of wails and crashes. I dragged myself up from bed and peered blearily out through the bedroom curtains. In the garden adjoining my own, Marc sat cross-legged on the ground with a small circle of rather scruffy people bashing on wooden drums and bongos while howling and wailing some unintelligible mantras. In the middle of the circle a ramshackle bonfire burned, sending out puffs of sooty smoke that wafted straight across the hedge towards the washing I'd left out on my line overnight.

I threw on a dressing gown and stamped out into the garden to rescue my laundry.

"Greetings from the goddess, don't worry about the smoke," said Marc pausing his frenetic drumming briefly "the fire has been imbued with fragrant healing herbs, so the fumes carry only beneficial vapours."

I nodded curtly and continued gathering in my washing which now smelt overpoweringly of a mixture of patchouli and woodsmoke.

The next few weeks produced more of these interminable drum sessions in the garden, along with other meetings featuring Marc and his acolytes dancing around similarly noxious bonfires “releasing their totem spirits” via animalistic screeching, howling, and yelping.

My new neighbour was proving very tiresome, but I kept my resentment in check, and tried to remain civil. One August evening as night drew in, I made the most of a period of respite from Marc’s new age antics and was tending my herb garden. As I knelt beside the beds, the familiar lock framed face appeared over the hedge.

“Hi Rachel, I see your herbs are flourishing,” he said “I’ve been so busy that I haven’t had the chance to plant mine yet and I’ve got a healing session scheduled for the morning. Any chance you might be able spare a few aromatic herbs?”

I managed a thin smile. “I’m sure I could spare a few suitable stems, but you should try a foraging session in the woods. You’d be surprised at what natural treasures you can find in there, and I’m sure a chap with your knowledge of plants could find plenty.”

I used my secateurs to clip a small assortment of herbs and stood up to pass them over the hedge and gestured towards the woods that backed on to our gardens. “You’ll find lots of useful plants in there. Brambles, elderberries, hawthorn and some yarrow and meadowsweet on the outskirts. This is a good month for fungi too if you know how to identify them safely. Turkey tail, ceps, and puffballs, you can find them all in the wood, there’s even a little clump of liberty caps, the ones people refer to as magic mushrooms in there.”

Marc’s eyes lit up “Really that’s useful to know, I might just take a trip over there now and look. Where did you see the liberty caps?”

“They’re in the clearing down beside the little bridge that goes across the stream. According to my old herbal books, they’re most potent if gathered at midnight during a full moon, but I expect that’s just one of those old wives tales, and I’m sure you wouldn’t want to be wandering around Barbury woods with a torch at night.” I said tucking my secateurs into my gardening pouch. “Though given that it’s illegal nowadays to be found with them, I suppose foraging them at night has its benefits.”

“There’s a full moon due tonight as it happens,” said Marc gazing towards the woods.

“Really?” I said, “I didn’t realise, I don’t keep a track of that sort of thing.”

The next day I slept late, there was no noise from next door's garden to disturb me, but I was tired, my muscles ached, and I didn't make it downstairs until past mid-day. I made myself a cup of tea and chewed slowly on a slice of toast with honey and switched on a local radio station just in time to catch the news.

The body of male Barbury resident had been found in the middle of the woods early that morning by a jogger. He appeared to have been the victim of a fatal vicious dog attack.

I paused between bites of toast, feeling something like a loose filling stuck between my teeth. I extracted the offending object with one tentative finger and found myself looking at a small gold ear stud shaped like a crescent moon. I smiled, placed it on the edge of the plate and continued eating.