

The Shaman's Eyes

By Michael Danese

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The gentle sound of the warm breeze through the tall palm trees made Amy smile.

“Did you ever hear anything so beautiful?” she said, almost in a whisper, to her husband Rich.

“Huh, I don’t hear anything, except for the creaking of this damn chair. It’s killing my back!” he said.

“Never mind,” she said, annoyed, as she buried her head back into her book.

“Greetings!” said a tall black man in a white coat and white shorts. The startled couple looked up at the man, who was silhouetted by the bright sun. He bent down with a tray with two colorful drinks. “These are compliments of the resort to celebrate your anniversary,” he said.

“Thank you. How thoughtful!” said Amy as she removed the drinks and handed one to Rich.

They clinked glasses as the tall man smiled broadly and made his exit.

“Big deal. It’s all-inclusive. Drinks are free anyway,” grumped Rich.

“Lighten up, it was still nice of them to remember,” she said.

“Remember? It was on the registration form. Are you celebrating anything? Yes, our twentieth wedding anniversary,” he said with his usual sarcastic tone.

“It was still nice. Just try to force yourself to relax and enjoy yourself.”

“I am enjoying myself. This is me having fun.”

“Fine. Remember, we’re going to the steak house tonight. I’ll put out your nice slacks and your new shirt,” she said, always trying to lighten the mood.

“Great. More mystery meat,” he snarked.

“And tomorrow I booked us on a tour into the mountains on a big ATV. I’m so excited for this!”

“Great, I can’t wait to be tossed around on that. If I throw out my back, it will be on you.”

“You’ll live,” Amy said. “We’re going into the mountains, we’ll tour a sugar cane plantation, then we’ll go through a village and see how the people here live. It will be fascinating!”

“I guess,” he said.

“I’m going for a swim, coming?”

“No, you go ahead,” Rich said. “I’m saving my strength for tomorrow.”

A while later they were in line at the BBQ set up on the beach. Rich piled ketchup onto a mountain of fries, and some mustard on his burger. Amy added some dressing to her salad.

“Typical, every table is taken,” said Rich.

“Over there,” Amy said walking towards a picnic table. “Let’s join that young couple at that table.”

“Great, small talk, my favorite,” muttered Rich.

“Do you mind if we join you?” asked Amy, as she flashed that big smile.

“Please, sit down. I’m Sue and this is John.”

“Thanks. I’m Amy and this is Rich. Isn’t it so lovely here?”

“It certainly is. This is our third time here. It’s the perfect place to escape that Vancouver winter,” said John.

“Not to mention a few nights without our little son,” said Sue. “Do you have any children?”

“Yes, we also have a son,” said Amy. “He will be twenty this year. He’s in the Marines.”

“I know what you’re thinking, and you’re right, I knocked her up before we were married,” said Rich.

“I wasn’t thinking anything of the sort,” said John.

“Richard! Please, sometimes it’s best if you don’t talk at all!” said Amy. “Please don’t mind him. It’s our first time here, and tomorrow we are going on the tour,” she added trying to change the subject.

“You will love it, especially the witch doctor!” said Sue.

“Sounds like tourist trap mumbo voodoo to me,” said Rich.

“Well, maybe it is, but it was special for us,” John said. “We lost a baby the year before, and right before we came here the first time, we found out that Sue was pregnant.”

“He laid his hands on my hand, then on my belly. I was taken aback at first, then he whispered something that I couldn’t understand and said we would have a beautiful, healthy baby,” Sue said with a tear in her eye.

“Did you tell him you were pregnant?” asked Amy.

“No, at that point it was too early to tell *anyone*. We hadn’t even told our parents,” said Sue.

“After little Tommy was born so perfect, we thanked God and asked him to bless this man and the people of the village,” said John.

Amy was so touched by this story that she put her hand over Sue’s for a moment. Rich went to get another beer and burger.

That evening they dressed for their night out. Amy looked great in her tight blue dress and strappy white sandals. She was in her early forties but looked younger. Her shoulder-length brown hair was pulled up in a high ponytail. She was tall and thin, not because she worked out a lot, but because she spent so much time on her feet racing around the hospital where she worked as an RN. She averaged about fifteen thousand steps a day.

Rich was around her age but looked much older. His bald head and gray fuzzy beard didn’t help. Neither did his large belly, which was winning the battle with the buttons on his tightly stretched Hawaiian shirt. He unbuttoned the top two and gave some relief to the grateful colorful garment.

Soon they were feasting at the steakhouse. Rich enjoyed his steak and lobster and seemed to appreciate it when the staff brought out a special chocolate fountain dessert and wished them a happy anniversary.

“I’m so thrilled that you liked your surf and turf,” Amy said with a smile as she put her hand over his.

“Yeah, it wasn’t like home, but I didn’t hate it. Listen, why don’t we skip the tour and spend the day lounging on the beach tomorrow?” he asked.

“Absolutely not! I’ve been looking forward to this tour all week. Come on, it’ll be fun, and maybe you’ll even learn something!” she said.

“Learn something? Like what?”

“I don’t know, like how to survive without cable TV, internet, and Sports Center?”

“Okay, okay, I give up,” he said.

The next morning Amy woke Rich bright and early. He was still groggy from too many Mexican beers the night before. “Come on, get up and take a shower. You smell like a brewery,” she said.

He stumbled into the shower and then pulled on a tee shirt and shorts. They were the last couple to get in the vehicle. It was a large, military-like ATV, with eight extremely large tires and a ladder to climb to get in the door. It held twelve people besides the driver and tour guide.

“Are we going to war?” asked Rich.

After a few minutes of a vertical drive up the side of a steep mountain, Rich realized that the vehicle was the only tour bus that could possibly handle this rough terrain. He held onto his wife as they were being tossed around.

Soon they were at the sugar cane plantation. They heard about how it was grown, harvested, and packaged. And how a large portion was designated to the local rum factory. They enjoyed chewing the samples of the sweet plant and sampling the rum.

The next stop was the village. There were several huts lined up and the tourists wandered through them and talked to the inhabitants. The people mainly nodded and smiled because they didn’t speak English. Their smiles grew as people offered tips and candy for the children. The homes were quite tiny, but immaculate. They were brightly painted, and the people made nice use of the limited space.

A little way out of town was a cockfighting ring. The tour guide warned the group that this could be disturbing and asked people who may be offended to wait in the village. About half of the group skipped this part of the tour. The ring was about twelve feet across, with several bleachers around the perimeter. The guide explained how men would bring out their chickens, people would place bets and the birds would have at it. They didn’t allow them to fight to the death, but close to it. They wanted the birds to heal so they could fight again. Rich found this all very interesting, while Amy wished that she had remained in the village.

When they returned to the village, the guide explained the next stop. “We are going to the edge of the village to that large home that’s painted with bright greens and yellows. That is where the man that they call Isangoma lives. There is no direct translation, but you can think of words like witch doctor, shaman, voodoo priest, and faith healer. He is the most important resident of the village. He is their spiritual leader and doctor. No matter what ails these people, physical or emotional, he is there for them. I’ll ask you to please be extremely respectful as we enter. First, we will gather in a room with sage burning where we will be cleansed and blessed. Then, one by one, your group will be able to spend a minute or two with him.”

“What a crock,” Rich said in a too-loud voice. “I’m definitely not going in there. They’re just looking to shake us down for more money.”

“Excuse me, sir. I assure you that it isn’t a *crock*,” said the guide. “I’ll ask you to keep your voice down and please *do not* condemn the culture of these fine people.”

“Knock it off. You’re going in and you’re gonna keep your mouth shut. Do not humiliate me here!” said Amy in a loud whisper.

Some of the other folks on the tour moved away from Rich and Amy.

They moved into the large front room and the smell of sage filled the air. A large man entered with feathers on his head. He was wearing a vest made of alligator skin, had bones in his hair, beads of animal teeth around his neck, and stripes painted on his cheeks.

“Isangoma, this is our tour group. They are from several countries and are here for your blessing. Group, please remove your hats and meet Isangoma,” said the guide.

Rich let out a loud sigh and chuckle that caught the eye of the witch doctor. He glared at Rich momentarily and Rich saw a red glow in his eyes. The guide said, “Please draw closer everyone, and repeat after me – I wish to be cleansed.”

The crowd did as they were asked. Amy had to push Rich forward, and they all joined in the chant. After the chant, Isangoma nodded and drew back. He left the group and retreated into the larger inner room.

One by one, the groups entered the larger room, and then after a few minutes, they exited by the back door.

“I’ll bet there’s a gift store in the back that sells little voodoo dolls,” said Rich.

Amy poked him in the ribs and the guide frowned and tried to ignore him. “Okay, you can go in now,” he said to Rich and Amy.

“What a bunch of crap!” said Rich.

“Please sir,” said the guide, “Again, I implore you to please be respectful. This man is all these people have for religion and medical help. Your negative comments can deeply harm their culture!”

Amy grabbed his arm. “Please honey, you don’t have to believe, but just be *quiet*.”

Amy and Rich entered alone, with Amy pulling Rich by the arm. They were greeted in the dimly lit room by the smell of sweet incense enveloping them.

Rich looked around the room and whistled. All of the walls were covered with dried and stuffed animals and animal parts. A large bat was mounted above their heads. There were stuffed rats, snakes, birds, and insects.

Isangoma closed his eyes and reached out for their hands. He took Amy’s soft hand gently. He squeezed Rich’s hand, then opened his eyes and almost glared at him.

“We are pleased to meet you,” said Amy, trying to draw his eyes from Rich.

“I am also pleased, Mister and Missus. Happy anniversary. You are truly blessed to have each other for these twenty years,” said Isangoma.

“Thank you,” said Amy, bowing her head.

“The guide told you to say that, right?” accused Rich.

Isangoma squeezed Rich’s hand harder and glared at him again.

Amy quickly said, “Please sir, I have terrible migraines. Do you think you can help me?”

“Yes, Missus.”

The large man placed his hands on her head and gently rubbed while chanting quietly to himself. He opened a small box and removed a tiny jar. He took his thumb and wiped it in the jar. He then rubbed the powder on her forehead. He gently took her hands and looked into her eyes. “This will help you with the pain, Missus. Do not wash it off. Let it wear away on its own.”

Rich broke the tranquil moment by saying while looking around the room, “At least we have something in common. I’m an exterminator too.”

“Exterminator?” questioned Isangoma

“Yes,” said Rich, “I rid people’s homes of all of these vermin. I kill them all.”

“Vermin? *Vermin!* They are certainly *not* vermin! They are all gifts from God!” said Isangoma.

“Gifts? No, they are dirty, disease-spreading pests,” said Rich.

“Oh, Mister. No, no. I assure you that each is a gift from God. The bat has poor eyesight, but all of their other senses are heightened. I give people the essence of the bat to help them to see what can’t be seen. The rats are nature’s great survivors. A small amount of their dried brains helps my people to face their greatest challenges. Bees are social models for us. I grind them up to help people fit better into our society. A bit of the owl gives our people the wisdom to make difficult decisions,” said Isangoma.

“Come on, man! That is a load of dung! They just need to be eliminated,” said Rich.

“Richard! Please! Show some respect!” said an angry Amy.

The guide interrupted, “I think we are done here. Let’s give the next people a chance.”

The witch doctor’s eyes were now glowing. He grabbed Rich’s hands and pulled him closer.

“*Dung* you say! The next time that you kill one of God’s gifts, don’t be surprised if they rebel against you!” The Shaman pulled him closer; his eyes were glowing red as he breathed on Rich, then pushed him away.

“Ha! Come on honey. Wadda hoax!” said Rich as he pulled Amy out of the room.

“You are a complete imbecile!” said Amy when they were outside. “You embarrassed yourself and me too. Didn’t you hear? These people *depend* on him. They *worship* him! You deeply insulted him and all of the people in this village!”

As they walked away, the sky grew darker. A cool wind blew through the area. The people in the village moved away from them and pulled their children out of their path.

“Let’s get outta the dark ages and get back to the beach, Missus,” said Rich. “I can’t believe that you buy into all of this voodoo mumbo-jumbo crap!”

They returned to their room and changed, then went to the beach grill for an early dinner, leaving the unpleasant witch doctor event behind them.

After dinner they headed for a walk on the beach. Along the path, Rich's hand brushed a wasp nest in a bush, and he was stung twice.

Amy, seeing it as a sign, said, "See – he was right!"

"Come on," said Rich, "I've been stung thousands of times. I'll survive. I'll just put my hand in the salt water. It will be fine."

The next day was their last full day on the island. They decided to make a full day of it. After a big breakfast, they went to the beach. Rich signed out some snorkeling gear and disappeared into the surf. After a few minutes, he swam under a jellyfish and was stung on his face and back. He rushed out of the water and went back to show Amy the welts on his skin. The attendants at the resort saw this, and quickly poured vinegar on the stings. It was obviously a recurring event there. Soon, he was feeling a little better.

"I guess you think this is part of the curse," Rich joked.

"I didn't say a word," Amy said, as she said a prayer to herself.

They took it easy for the rest of the day. That evening they had a relaxing late dinner.

The next morning, they flew home with some memorable stories for their friends.

Monday was a normal workday for Rich. He slid right into his typical routine. Since Amy was scheduled for the evening shift at the hospital, she had the time to cook them a big breakfast of bacon, eggs, hash browns, and toast.

Rich had a hectic day. This time of year was usually busy for the extermination business, and today proved that. He faced an ant infestation, a house with mice running rampant in the kitchen, and a squirrel in a garage. He handled them all in his usual way.

He came home from work a bit more rundown than usual, still recovering from a week of drinking, overeating, and too much sun. He cracked open a beer and removed the plate from the fridge that Amy left for him. He popped the plate into the microwave. Soon the aroma of spaghetti and meatballs filled the kitchen. He ate in front of the TV, then collapsed into his recliner and popped the top on another beer.

He fell asleep while watching the ball game and was startled by the cheering on the TV. He wiped his eyes, got up to visit the bathroom, then grabbed another beer. While he was in the kitchen, he thought he heard some scratching and chewing. His experience suggested a rodent of some kind. He looked around outside but didn't see anything.

He returned to his chair and opened his beer. He heard the tapping of little feet in the walls and ceiling. "Damn, mice," he thought.

The sound got louder as he noticed the numbers increase.

He looked outside again, and while the door was open, a swarm of bees entered the house. He ran to the garage and found his bee spray.

When he went back into the house there were mice and rats climbing all over the furniture and kitchen cabinets. He swatted at them and tried to chase them away. The bees began to attack him, and the rats bit at his ankles.

He thought of escaping to the basement. When he opened the door a cloud of bats flew into him and almost knocked him over. They grabbed at his face and hair and latched onto his beard. He

became disoriented as he flailed his arms at them in vain. He got bit on the ankle again and turned around, then he tripped over a rat the size of a Buick and fell backward down the basement steps.

Amy returned home about 11:30 pm after a long and busy day at work. She turned off the TV then checked the bedroom where she expected to see Rich asleep. When he wasn't there, she became worried and called out for him several times. She saw that the basement door was open and called down the steps to him. Hearing nothing, she slowly ascended the steps and found him there, lifeless, with a horrified look on his face. She panicked, then called 911. Rich was pronounced dead at the scene. The coroner said that he likely had a stroke and was dead before he even hit the ground.

When she returned home again, she tried to keep busy. She put his dish and utensils in the dishwasher and cleaned up the beer cans as she wiped at her tears. She saw a dead bee on the rug, then another. She also saw some mouse droppings on the counter in the kitchen. She lowered her head and slowly shook it. She knew no one would believe her.

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