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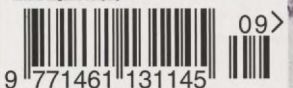
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Sharon Walker, ready
for her shamanic
ritual in the Spanish
mountains of Almería





LAST NIGHT A SHAMAN SAVED MY LIFE

Ten years of therapy in 10 hours, thanks to a legal hallucinogenic high: that's the promise made by shaman Anna Hunt. Bonkers or bona fide? Sharon Walker was willing to give it a try

Photographs Retts Wood

The call from *Red* comes out of the blue. 'We'd like you to go on a trip to Spain,' short pause, 'to, um... take some drugs.' Another pause. 'Don't worry, it's all perfectly legal,' the editor says, breezily. 'Oh, and it would be best if you had an *issue* to work on.' It turns out I wasn't being invited to party in Ibiza. Rather, the drugs in question are the psychoactive extract of a cactus, San Pedro, that form part of a shamanic ritual. It's billed as 'the equivalent of 10 years' therapy in 10 hours'. And the native Peruvian name of the cactus means 'the gateway to heaven'.

The truth is, I *do* have an issue to work on, quite a hefty one. I am still reeling from the break-up with the father of my two children, my husband of 16 years. At the time of the call, the decree absolute was sitting unread in a kitchen drawer, because I couldn't bear to open the envelope. Despite having therapy of the traditional kind, four years after the initial break-up, I was still waking most mornings at 4am, in a tangle of anxiety-drenched sheets.

Maybe a shamanic ceremony in Spain could help piece together the eggshells of my broken heart? News of my upcoming 'drug trip', as it's referred to in the *Red* office, is met with a wildly varied reception, from the awed, 'You've agreed to do WHAT?', to the concerned, 'Please *do* be careful.'

But before long, shamanic devotees start to emerge from the woodwork. A smart London lawyer tells me about a not-strictly-legal ceremony she attended in London using the Amazonian hallucinogenic ayahuasca. Another credits a >>

shaman from Kensal Rise in London for the turnaround in her business fortunes. Shamanic ceremonies are taking place in Ibiza, Devon and Bali - it feels like a tipping point of sorts. Then a friend, recently returned from a life-changing trip to Mexico, hands me a book she insists I simply *must* read: *The Shaman In Stilettoes* by Anna Hunt. Hunt is the shaman I've been assigned to work with and, suddenly, it feels like fate.

The day before we leave for Spain, I meet Hunt at her St John's Wood flat for the first stage of the process. Her home is particularly unshaman-like: light wood floors, chrome and glass staircases; not a wind chime in sight. My shaman is dressed in a short silk shift dress that shows off her slim, bare legs. She has perfectly manicured toes. Despite a sharp, highlighted haircut and slender and angular physique, she's softer than I expect. Unlikely as it may sound, in her former life she was a high-flying celebrity hack, with a minted banker boyfriend and a shoe habit that could fund a small South American country.

Anna makes me a cup of tea and asks me what I'm hoping to get out of this experience. Her bright, professional manner is reassuring, but in truth I feel a bit disheartened to be dragging along this old issue, which I feel makes me look a bit sad. I'm in the right place, however. Shamanic work, Anna tells me, is all about releasing the emotional blocks that stop us from leading fulfilling lives. Hunt discovered her calling on a sabbatical in Peru, after burning out and meeting a charismatically seductive shaman, a former professor of archaeology at Cusco University, who trained her as his apprentice. 'A shaman is a man or woman who helps clients shift energy - stuck emotions - using a range of techniques: visualisation, acupressure, herbs, crystals,' she says.

Today is about clearing my mind, so the plant can do its work on the trip. 'The point is to bring the mind to a neutral position,' says Anna. She does this by challenging the scripts I play out in my head. So, for example, my guilt about the effect of the break-up on my children, aged 10 and 13. By making copious lists of the good and bad effects



Sharon (right)
with shaman
Anna Hunt

'THE CRUSHING GUILT I FEEL
LIFTS AND SUDDENLY I FEEL MORE
LIKE AN IMPARTIAL BYSTANDER'

of the divorce, I do end up with a more neutral view. The crushing guilt I feel around our children lifts and suddenly I feel more like an impartial bystander in the story of my marriage, rather than the star of some tragic soap opera. From here, we move on to a series of visualisations, imagining my 'guru', who turns up in my mind in the shape of a huge rose. I have to ask if my guru has a message, and it comes back as, 'You don't need a relationship, you're okay as you are.' All strange, but positive.

After our session, I celebrate with a frozen yoghurt on St John's Wood High Street, before remembering sugar is just one of the foods that's strictly *verboden*. In preparation for my trip, I am to avoid coffee, alcohol, red meat, sugar and citrus fruits. This is to clear the liver so that the plant can be more easily >>

'IT'S AS IF THE BRIGHTNESS BUTTON HAS BEEN TURNED UP ON MY LIFE... THE SUN IS BRIGHTER, I'M BRIGHTER'

absorbed; also, no sex for two days, because sex is an 'exchange of energy'.

After a horrifically early 5.50am flight to Almería, I'm rewarded with the sight of our home for the next four nights: an idyllic, whitewashed finca, studded with cacti and trailing bougainvillea. The next evening, Anna and I take a taxi through the mountains to the small yoga centre where she holds her ceremonies. The ceremony will last at least five hours - we'll be up all night. While I wait outside, Anna clears the room by burning sage and spraying citrus-scented water. I go in and she has laid out a cloth with scented waters, rattles and a variety of crystals next to her yoga mat. Despite all this regalia, I'm relieved to see she looks like herself: she is wearing tracksuit bottoms, rather than flowing shaman robes.

The first thing she does is light up a cigarette. It seems like an odd time for a fag, but I guess we've got a long night ahead. I'm vaguely wondering if a glass of wine is out of the question, when she tells me that this additive-free Native Indian tobacco is a good way of clearing energy. She then hands me a glass of the murky green San Pedro. It tastes bitter, but not too unpleasant, and I knock it back in big gulps. Anna drinks a glass herself. And then we wait.

It takes about 40 minutes for the plant to kick in. San Pedro is said to be gentler than ayahuasca, the more famous hallucinogenic 'medicine'. The active ingredient is mescaline; the concentration is only about 2%. And if you aren't ready, I'm told, your mind can block its effects.

After a few minutes, Anna tells me to lie down. I feel an overwhelming whoosh of hot anxiety shoot up through my heart into my throat. 'It's your mind,' says Anna, handing me an amethyst the size of a 50p piece. The panic subsides. Then I begin to feel doubtful. What if I can't cope?

Anna gives me a rose quartz to balance on my forehead. 'It'll calm your thoughts,' she says. My lower back is hurting so I roll on to my side. 'Good,' says Anna. 'Your base chakra is releasing.' But I don't feel any sense of relief. 'It's just my bad back,'

I say, grumpily (though by the end of the ceremony, I can lie flat without any pain).

'The plant chooses how to work with you. The plant will give you what you need, not necessarily what you want,' she says. It turns out what I need more than anything is sleep. As I drift in and out of consciousness, I can hear Anna rattling and whistling like a bird, and singing songs called *icaros* said to invoke the spirit of the plant. The next thing I know, light is streaming through the stained-glass window. There have been no grand visions, no epiphanies; the last thing I remember is a dream about a parking ticket. I'm mortified, but Anna is completely unfazed. 'What your body needed was rest,' she says. 'In our society, we drive ourselves forward with our mind as a way of maintaining control over our emotions and uncomfortable experiences. It's why you've not been sleeping. And it's exhausting.' All is not lost, though, far from it: 'Sometimes the plant works better when you are asleep because the mind can't block it,' she tells me at breakfast. 'Last night's ceremony was about resting. Tonight will be different.'

She's right, when I drink the 'medicine' that evening, a pain starts in my lower back, before shooting up to my throat and engulfing my chest. Before long, I'm covered in enough of Anna's crystals to stock a small shop at Glastonbury.

A stream of images flash through my head: laughing with my husband on our wedding day, my son sighing over an old picture of us together. My mind flips through holidays, Christmases, birthdays. Suddenly, I'm swallowed by sadness and I feel horribly alone. Eventually, I manage to squeak, 'Anna, I miss him.' Immediately, she is next to me. 'Where do you feel it?' 'In my heart,' I say, tears streaming. In shamanic tradition, the body is considered our autobiography, holding experiences and emotions. As the plant works, emotions emerge as physical symptoms, which the shaman helps to release. Anna gives me a crystal to put next to my skin on my chest, but as the fog of sadness lifts I become aware of a loud fizzing and gurgling. I realise

the noise is coming from me. The pain has shifted to my stomach; Anna runs her fingers gently over the surface of my tummy from my hips to my ribs. My stomach responds by blowing up like a balloon. Gradually the cramps subside until my stomach is still and perfectly flat and the pain has gone.

'Better?' she asks. 'Yes,' I say, 'but I have butterflies in my chest.' Anna uses her hands on my chest until the nerves have disappeared, then gives me a rose quartz to put on my heart and a piece of fool's gold for my tummy. 'To complete the process,' she explains.

Back at the hotel, Anna tells me I look 'light'. I *feel* light. I feel peaceful, Zen-like, as if I've been meditating on top of a mountain in Tibet for about three years. I wake briefly that night but quickly fall back to sleep. For once, I don't think about my marriage. 'The proof of the pudding will be in the weeks and months to come,' Hunt says.

The flight back is a real test. Normally, coming home, I am gripped by panic at the thought of seeing my ex-husband when I collect the kids. But I feel more neutral, confident, more together.

It's as if the brightness button has been turned up on my life: the sky looks bluer, the sun is brighter, *I'm* brighter. Minor irritations flow over me, the four-day mess in the flat that has piled up while I've been away leaves me unruffled.

At school prize-giving, I see my ex-husband and feel detached. 'You look so much better,' says one of the (single) dads. Which I think he means as a compliment. I *feel* so much better. I no longer feel like a broken lightbulb of splintered glass, or a damp firework or a dead dog. I just feel like myself.

A good, sorted, confident version of me. Ten days later, in a bizarre coincidence, I'm back on a plane on my way to the exact same place in Spain. Two of my favourite friends are getting married there. I'm happy for them. I'm happy for me. And for the first time in a while, marriage seems like a good thing. ■

The Shaman In Stilettoes by Anna Hunt (Penguin, £8.99) is out now. For information about Anna's work, visit annahunt.com