

Bourne
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workshops

Ursula

by MaryPat Campbell

I've heard them call her She Bear, or sometimes Ursula, but mostly they don't call her anything at all. She slips around the place like a ghost, her long curly hair streeling behind her in tangled ropes. Her face is mostly hidden by her hair, makes me think she does and doesn't like to draw attention to herself. What I can see of her face, her skin looks dark and blotchy, her eyes are brown like hazelnuts, and her mouth is thin as a straight line. The clothing she wears is the uniform for women who reside here, a grey tunic fastened to the neck and heavy rough skirt of an indeterminate brownish green woollen stuff.

I notice a ragged blue ribbon she has fixed in her hair, which can hardly be seen amidst the bulk of her long unkempt hair. She is unusually quiet and doesn't make a noise, except for her clogs on the flagged floor that make their own clatter. She scrapes along with quick moves more than walks. I imagine her playing a harp, her head hung low, plucking the strings with her long fingers to make a melancholy sound.

I've sat many afternoons and watched Ursula, the She Bear as she comes and goes about her business, of which I know nothing, while she has a look of being busy about her. Yesterday I decided to speak to her.

"Why are you sometimes known here as Ursula, and other times as the She Bear?"

She glanced at me and said nothing. I let a few minutes go by, and not knowing whether to repeat my question or not, I sat awkwardly beside her and studied the pattern the sunlight made on the black and red flags under my feet.

Some while later, I could feel the She Bear looking sideways at me. I let it be and decided she was friendly enough, although she didn't seem to like speaking. I decided that, like myself, perhaps she didn't like to be alone. Even more, she didn't like being with people. But I wasn't people, I was a man who had forgotten his own name and liked to pretend I had another. While she had two names, depending on what I didn't know, but I was curious.

I could feel her eyes on me, and when I turned towards her, she opened her mouth and laughed silently, then looked away again quickly. I thought she was pleased with my question, and although without an answer I thought to sit alongside her for a little longer. Suddenly she leaned forward in my direction and spat at me full in the face. I was shocked and disgusted, and took a few minutes to recover myself. I looked up at her warily as I wiped my face on my sleeve, and saw her laughing as if she were making a loud cackling noise, but no sound came from her. She pointed at me with one very long finger, then ran away with her hair flying behind her.

This afternoon, Ursula She Bear came again to sit near me in the hallway. This time I was ready and sat well back from her so that she couldn't reach me with her vile spittle, as I fully expected another gob in my face any minute. But this time she laid a piece of paper by my feet with some writing on it, straightened up and ran away in her noisy clogs, without spitting on me this time.

When I picked it up I saw a map was drawn, of this neighbourhood, with a church marked on it named St. Mary Axe. I knew that this church, be it black or holy I knew not, was named for St. Mary and St. Ursula and was said to house the axe that killed Ursula the Christian martyr and her eleven virgin soldier companions, long ago in the sixth century.

Spitting is one way to keep people away if you don't like being in company, but now it seemed that Ursula wanted to converse with me, by fair means or foul I couldn't yet tell.