

Sabrina: An Awakening

Though descended from a line of shamans, as a youth Sabrina Villard rejected her own confusing and nascent powers. This is the story of a reluctant shaman, whose harrowing personal journey through spirituality has enabled her to release traumas long embedded in our minds and bodies

I met her in 2019, at the kind of wedding you'd expect to attend on the island of Ibiza: a haze of blazing sunsets, faces new and old, neon lights and dancing bodies. As this beautiful stranger worked her way through a crowd, she paused as she passed me, and said: "I'm a unicorn." I didn't quite understand what she meant, but in this land of hedonism and spirituality, I could feel a gravitational pull towards her, and though much of the rest of this evening passed with little conversation between us, and she left the following morning without us exchanging much more than names, Sabrina Villard would soon become my friend, and I hers.

Back in Hong Kong, I learned she was a shaman, and experienced a session with her that gave me purpose, clarity – and curiosity. In my journeys through wellness and spirituality, I have learned that things we think cannot be explained often can, as long as the mind is open. Things like journeying, past lives, energy healing, feelings, manifestations and blockages – we do have the vocabulary for them, if perhaps not the open-mindedness. For me, with Sabrina, things have always been easy to grasp, as if she is a bridge that connects the intangible with the earthly. And yet, while many come to her for spiritual guidance, to release their traumas and guide their paths forward, I understood early on that I was drawn to her in order to tell her story.

Sabrina was born and raised in the south of France, in a small, religious town, where she would attend church with her grandmother on Sundays. Her connection to spiritual things came early, and the games she played were not the typical ones – instead of Barbies, she played with a deck of tarot cards she purchased one day on the way home from school; in lieu of Snakes & Ladders, she'd hand-draw Ouija boards with her friends and use them to answer the pressing questions of young girls.

"I'm not sure where that came from, but I was attracted to this, and obviously I was attracted to people who were attracted to this. Not many people were, especially because I came from a town in the countryside, a religious town. I didn't call it spirituality – I didn't know what it was."

She had just entered her teenage years when she began studying at a boarding school, not too far from her home. She shared a room with two girls: "One of them, I didn't know until later, but she was called a 'witch'. She had a reputation of being a witch at school. She was much older. The other girl was a normal girl who didn't know anything about spirituality but was very religious."

A month after she arrived, she began to hear a sound in the middle of the night, as if water droplets were hitting the top of a cabinet. All three girls could hear it, and though they would turn

on the lights, move the cabinet, the sound did not go away. And then came sounds that Sabrina alone would hear.

“I started to hear voices. My friends could not hear them. They were calling my name. The only thing that made me realise that I was not crazy was that each time, I could feel things – electricity, and then I had massive electric shocks. I was turning into a gate, and I would jump from my bed. And when you’re sleeping, you can’t jump. My friends would hear, and turn on the light and ask, are you OK? My hair would be flying from static. [The voices] were talking about gambling, or games, random things. Nothing bad. But I could hear them. And then they would say OK, we’re coming. And they would come through me and I would jump. It lasted four nights.

“The girl who was a witch explained to me that I was a gate, a portal for the spirits to go through to the other side. She was explaining to me things I did not understand, but I was scared. What the fuck was going on? I went to school in the morning, and the ‘witch’, she said, I want you to meet my boyfriend. I saw him with devil eyes, and blood pouring onto his face. I saw her in a different shade as well, with a dark cloud. I didn’t know what was happening. I kept going about my day but I had this with everyone. Could be very bright, or not bright.

“Then the math teacher, he had a game, to pick a number, and see who would have to go up to the board to do the problem. You cannot guess it, and there were 30 students. My best friend was next to me, I told her, something is going on, but I’m not crazy. Before we started the game, I turned to her and I said, you’re going to the board. And then she went to the board. So she knew, and she said, You’re not completely crazy. I’m going to test it. Let’s go talk to this guy and you tell me what he thinks.”

They went up to a boy, and her friend instructed him: “Say something in your head, and Sabrina is going to tell you what you’re thinking.”

In the beginning, it was funny. “The guy looked at me, and I said, you’re telling me you want to date me. Is it true? He said yes. She took me as a guinea pig, and we went on and on, and I laughed too, but at the end of the day I was not laughing anymore. I could feel people’s pain – physical, mental.

“At the end of school, I went to the room, I packed my suitcase. I had a moment where I was hiding under the bed, praying. Please don’t do this to me. I was carrying my tarot cards and asking, is it going to go away? And at that moment I was crying, and I packed my stuff and went home. I think my mom felt something. She never asked me. I told her: I am an only child, I cannot live with other girls, I cannot stay in my room. The way I said it, she didn’t say a word, she opened the door and said, I will talk to the school tomorrow and say you are no longer going back to boarding school. My mom still doesn’t know what happened. That same night, I lost half of my tarot cards. I was living in my own little house, my first night home alone. And I thought, if this happens tonight in my house, I’m fucked. I don’t know where to go. But it didn’t happen.”

Instead, one morning a couple of weeks later, she awoke to find every muscle in her body had stiffened to the point that she could barely move, as if a severe arthritis had invaded her bones. For two years, no doctor could diagnose the source of her pain; no test could uncover any inflammation or medical issue. And so she was prescribed painkillers, and anti-inflammatory medication that controlled the aches but could not resolve the stiffness. One doctor she saw, who dabbled in alternative medicine and techniques such as hypnosis, talked to her about mental health, emotional blockages.

“He told me, It’s something coming out of your Pandora’s box – and you’re blocking it. It got me thinking – but I rejected it,” she says. One day, two years later, just as suddenly as the pain had come, it disappeared. She did not question it, she only moved on with her life.

“I lived a completely normal life away from tarot cards and spirits and anything for 15 years,” she says. “And then, it happened again. Through dreams. I was older, I was mature, and the dreams were nice. They were not talking about gambling. They were images, pure energies, light. I knew it was not a dream. You’re sleeping, but you know it’s not a dream because you feel it through your body. And then I started to project outside. There were messages for me about how to do things, how to see things. Or things that would happen. I had a lot of episodes [that were happening] in the future, and there were activations. Sometimes I would wake up and I could feel things in my hands. Or I would wake up and my gift would evolve or increase. Or there were people that I knew, my family from the shaman side. “

On a girls’ trip to Da Nang, Sabrina signed up for a reiki session without knowing what it was. Expecting some type of new massage technique, she jumped from the bed when the energy, and not a pair of hands, touched her. “I could feel the heat and electricity. I opened my eyes and I was angry, I was upset. She looked at me, she said, I’m doing reiki, it’s just energy. Do you feel? I said ‘Yeah, and you’re going to stop right now.’ I didn’t finish. It brought me back to those electric shocks I could feel.”

But she did go back the next day, and found that once she relaxed, she enjoyed this type of energy work. She decided to learn it for herself, back in Hong Kong. There, the instructor could sense her gift, and suggested she go further in the practice, but Sabrina knew that this wasn’t her calling. “I said, I don’t think that’s my thing. I like to touch people. I’m warm. I see things. But I started to practice. For charity. I didn’t know what I was doing at all, it was just like reiki, but I had thoughts coming in. I was like, no, no, no, I cannot tell them, it’s crazy. But I used to talk to them during the sessions, very politely; not like now, where I’m very blunt. And then they started to open up. I realised that those thoughts were part of their energies. Then I started to see. And then I started to touch. And when I touched, I could see more and more.”

Her best friend, who lived in Switzerland, introduced Sabrina to a healer who could work from a distance, and over a Skype call, she was the first person to use the term “shaman”.

“She said, ‘I don’t want to scare you, but you’re a shaman. You have to go back to your grandma.’ Because my grandma was very secretive, [my father] never knew where we came

from. She was scared of it, and it was something we were ashamed of at the time, in the desert. So she opened up and said yes, there are things there, but she did not completely open up. So I flew back to France and saw my grandma and explained what was happening. She opened her arms and said: Welcome. And I thought, fuck you.

“I’m over 30 now. I was so shocked. How come you never told me? And she said, a true shaman should learn how to see and listen to their own spiritual guides. If you can’t reach the spiritual realms, then you are not a true shaman, and the gift was lost. It was your own path to reach and connect. If you connect, then I can tell you. If you can’t, that means you’re not there yet. You have to be ready.”

By then, Sabrina began to truly come into her own, and felt stirrings of what it could mean to make her own practice. “I started to get a grip of my skills, but then I didn’t fit in any box. You have a shaman who does Ayahuasca. Or a shaman that lives in the jungle and calls upon spirits to talk about Mother Nature or bigger scale things. But me, I was only linked to physical things or emotional things. Traumas. Mental health. I didn’t know how to describe it, to explain it to people. So I thought, I need something tangible.”

She came across Sekhem, a type of healing that originated in Egypt, and which brought her closer to Arabic roots. But still, none of these official modalities she learned seemed a perfect fit. In a book about the goddess Sekhmet, she saw a diagram of the human body, showcasing all its energy channels. It looked identical to ones shown in acupuncture centres delineating the meridians, and led Sabrina to the University of Hong Kong, where she earned certificates in acupuncture and tui na. “That helped me more, because I understood the channels, and if you look at a chart, each channel and body part is linked to an emotion. That helped me create my own box, my own practice, my own belief system, based on acupuncture, what I knew, what I learned and my own experiences.”

In a session with Sabrina, which lasts around two hours, clients spend 30 minutes lying on a massage bed as she touches various parts of your body: ankles, wrists, head. She sees images – typically from the past, which are blocking your self development, but occasionally messages from the future – and releases things that need to be released from you, in the form of tears, hiccups, sighs, goosebumps or gas. And then you talk, interpreting the visuals and signs. And then, as she is a vessel for the messages, not a diary... she forgets.

Sabrina is what is known as a wounded healer, whose personal traumas increase her abilities. And so her journey does not end with the discovery of her power – like all of us, she is an evolving creature, who needs to suffer life’s slings and arrows in order to understand and advise. Like all of us, she needs to deal with issues of self and ego, to find methods of catharsis and release.

“As a shaman, I thought, I need to try Ayahuasca. In three days, I gave up everything I had. Ego. Shame. All my belief systems. In my first ceremony, I died 12 times. I had to give up my life. Only shamans die during Ayahuasca. You feel death, but it’s a peaceful death. I was killed

by elements: water, fire, air, earth. Then I turned into a field that could grow food, trees. Animals started to come. I was becoming Mother Nature.

“On the second night, I had to give up on ego. That second ceremony, I actually shit my pants. That was the biggest shame ever. I was laying there, during the ceremony. There was this huge image in my brain, exploding. It exploded there, and then in my pants. And I had to go clean myself, wash my clothes, in the middle of the countryside, and hang my clothes in front of everybody, so they all knew I shit myself. I needed to lose my ego. And then the next day, I had to talk about it in front of everybody. And I never felt so good.”

“On the third night, I grew into a tree, and I stood up in front of everybody, stretching, and I could feel my own energy. And people started to come around me and sing, they started to sing, ‘Hallelujah’. And I saw so much light. I got on my knees and said, I accept who I am. After this, my life changed. I didn’t see life the same way. All the signs, alignment, I started to see where I’m supposed to go, what I’m supposed to do.

“I decided not to get married. I decided that the man in front of me was perfect, but not for the totality of me. I gave up on my job. I was supposed to take on a promotion, but I said no, because this is not where I want to evolve. I gave up on some relationships that don’t resonate anymore. I got closer to all my masters, because I needed to learn. I got very comfortable being alone, traveling alone, experiencing alone, because I trusted that nothing was random. I gave up on the value of money. That’s a hard one. I gave up the way I was built, how I see myself, how I would pose in a photo, how I would smile, laugh out loud, like a crazy witch. A lot of people did not recognise me.”

It wasn’t, however, necessary for her to remove herself from her city lifestyle, and so she continues her life as an urbanite. She continues to work at a fashion house by day, doing healing sessions on nights and weekends. She goes trail running, has dinner parties, drinks and parties (although hard liquor is a no-no now). “A lot of healers tell you they can’t function [and separate their own lives from their lives as a shaman or healer]. It’s bullshit. It’s all about intention. For me, I want to have a practice that can be any kind of society. For me, I can’t get along with a lot of woo-woo people because I’m not woo-woo enough. But we live in a real world. We need to function. How do you help people to live on this planet if you don’t understand them or live like them? The people who say they can’t, maybe they don’t want to, maybe the spiritual side is more peaceful, or they’re happier and don’t want to deal.”

Though it happened some two or three years ago, I remember distinctly my first and only session with Sabrina, though perhaps she may not: she saw my tree of life, my animal spirit guardians, rainbows, hearts, flowers. She reminded me to trust my gut, to embrace my seasons, and to leave open certain doors that I preferred to have shut. She swept her palms across her arms constantly as we spoke, brushing away goosebumps and errant energy. She left me with profound insights and an unusual lucidity that persisted like a drug high for the week or so to follow.

Afterwards, she cleaned her face of my tears, summoned an Uber, and went to Yardbird.