

The Very Brittle Badger



I don't suppose you've ever heard of the Phantom Spectacles Thief of Cromers Wood?

The hideous black and white shadowy creature who stalked wearers of glasses through the woods before wrestling them to the ground and swiping the specs from their faces with its yellow gnarled claws?

No? Not ringing any bells? It may have been before your time. But let me tell you, back in 1982 the story sent shivers down the spines of every spectacles wearer in the world and for several months not one person, whether they wore glasses or not, dared step foot in Cromers Wood.

All sorts of nonsense was written about it at the time. It was someone with a grudge against the bespectacled, or an impoverished or crazed optician, depending on your opinion of the profession. But they never did find out the truth which is why I'm here to put the record straight. Because it was, in fact, all to do with a very brittle badger called Ange.

She wasn't prone to break in two, or collapse-into-a-pile-of-tiny-splintery-bones brittle. But brittle as in the nervous, anxious kind. A little bit of a scaredy-cat. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not the bravest badger in the wood but Ange? Well, you had to see it to believe it. Jump at her own shadow, she would, and I'm telling you there are a lot of shadows in this here wood during a bright moon.

And the trouble was, Ange wanted to marry and settle down. Yes, I know what you're thinking. Are we really going to have to suspend disbelief? Badgers settling down to marriage and kids? Really? Well, what do you know, human? Half-wits most of you. We've seen you wandering around the woods with your big boots stomping on our beautiful wildflowers, crushing the life out of the little fellas of the woods, not to mention all the litter you drop. Think no-one's watching while



Illustration by Megan Metcalf

you surreptitiously discard that crisp packet or chocolate wrapper? You humans think you know everything and can do everything. But I bet you can't pause your pregnancies like Ange can. Like all of us female badgers can. See, we can hold an embryo in a dormant state until conditions are just perfect for us to go ahead with our pregnancies. Beat that Mr and Mrs Opposable Thumbs!

Interested now are you? Them scientists from Oxford are pretty interested too. Been researching into how we do it. To be fair, it's not just us. Bears can do it and so can armadillos. We thought we were the only ones until one of you lot dropped your phone and we searched online. Now all of us Cromers Wood badgers are proud members of the Delayed Implantation Support Society run by a group of nine-banded armadillos in Brazil.

What delayed implantation means for us is that we will go ahead with our pregnancies *if* we have enough food and aren't too stressed out with life. But if life's not great and there ain't much food around then we can pause our pregnancies and start them again as soon as things pick up. Trouble is for sensitive souls like Ange this amazing talent of ours can cause all sorts of problems. You see, Ange had been with her boyfriend Reg for years...in fact they were in the same set at school! Get it? Oh, all right...

Anyway, they got married in the Spring of 1980 and both Reg and Ange's parents were desperate to hear the tiny pitter-patter of badger paws and claws. A year and then two passed without so much of a sniff of a baby badger. Meanwhile, all Ange and Reg's friends were busy gushing over their newborns, or how well their cubs were doing with the usual badger skills such as digging, foraging for food and bedding, cleaning setts, claw sharpening and grooming. And every time poor Reg brought up the delicate subject of babies, Ange would run off into one of their outlier setts and dig more chambers for nights on end, refusing to talk to him.

She'd return exhausted from all her excavating and Reg, who began fretting day and night about Ange's health, gave her massages and sang her favourite badger songs to calm her. You see, she had begun to wake in the middle of the night, mumbling about some terrible creature in the pond and though Reg tried to calm her fears, Ange refused to listen and the creature of her nightmares grew more and more monstrous while Reg grew less and less hopeful of ever holding a little baby badger of his own.

It came to pass one summer's day that Reg left home for work in the nearby quarry where he was employed to cut the rocks with his excellent sharp claws. He'd overslept and left his sandwiches behind. So, he scurried back across the field, past the great pollarded, not to mention grumpy, Ash marker tree and into the woods and was just about to go into his sett, when he caught sight of a very familiar figure standing on the decking area next to the pond.

Reg sneaked up through the trees to see what was going on and yes, there was no mistaking it; Ange was standing on the platform, gazing down at something in the pond. At first he assumed she'd taken his advice about trying meditation. But then he realised it was Thursday. Meditation class was on a Monday. Perhaps she'd decided to try it by herself? But as Reg crept

closer, he realised Ange was in no relaxed state. Her hackles were up, making her appear twice her normal size, and he could see now that Ange was grimacing at something in the pond. Reg rushed over, thinking the worst. At school, they'd listened to the tale of Bea and Barnaby and the evil circus witch, as well as the story of the stinky conjurer cast into the pond by Griselle. Could it really be true? Was the evil old man lurking there all this time scaring his beloved Ange during her waking hours and haunting her nightmares as she tried to sleep?

Ange screamed, nearly slipping into the pond as Reg hurtled towards her.

'For goodness sake, Reg. I thought it was...the...'

'The old conjurer?' interrupted Reg. 'That's just a silly story, my love.'

'No, Reg. It's a...it's a were-badger! Look!'

She pointed a shaky claw down to the still pond, the moonlight reflecting Ange's twisted face, her gums pulled back so her sharp pointy teeth were exposed.

Reg stroked Ange's hackles. 'That's no were-badger! That's you, my love!'

'You're telling me that I look like that hideous monster?'

'Ange, my love. Don't you see! That's your reflection.'

'You're so cruel, Reginald! I hate you!'

And with that Ange turned on her heels and fled into the woods.

'No, I didn't mean it to sound like that. You're beautiful Ange! None of us look great when we're trying to be scary or we're frightened! Ange? Ange? Where are you?' called Reg as a cloud covered the moon and plunged the wood into darkness.

Well, the next morning a letter was hand delivered to Reg's sett. It was from Ange's lawyer asking him for a divorce, telling him he could keep the sett and that his wife never wanted to see him again.

But now Reg wondered if she'd ever really *seen* him in the first place because it was as plain as the white stripe down his nose that Ange couldn't see a thing. Everything made sense now. Reg had wondered why she'd agreed to be his girlfriend. All his friends said she was far too good looking to be interested in him. And then he recalled all the strange things Ange had done since they'd moved in together. The time she bought back two broom heads mistaking them for a hedgehog supper, or when she nearly choked to death because she thought shoelaces were earthworms. And then what about the time she'd tried to chew her way through that discarded tennis ball convinced it was a juicy apple? It was so obvious! Why had it taken him so long to realise?

Most importantly, Reg now understood what was stopping Ange having a baby. Every time she looked at her twisted and distorted reflection, she paused her pregnancy. But how could he help her realise that she had nothing to fear? He vaguely remembered a great uncle in Oxford afflicted with failing eyesight. His father had told him how he'd come up with a cunning plan to

steal academics' glasses until he found the perfect pair. And it suddenly dawned on Reg that he had the same opportunity right here on his doorstep. What was right next to the woods? Only one of the largest science parks in the south-east! And who worked in science parks? Scientists. It was crawling with them! And what did most scientists wear? Glasses! He'd glimpsed many a bespectacled scientist out for a walk in the woods during their lunch breaks, pondering some equation or magic formula; the peace and quiet of the woods helping them come up with a breakthrough. Well, now it was their turn to help the badgers of Cromers Wood. They would have to sacrifice their face furniture to save his and Ange's marriage.

So Reg hatched his plan. He took two weeks off work and stayed awake during the day, observing the most popular route the glasses-wearing scientists took during their lunch hours. Then, he stole some string from the back of the ranger's van which he used to quickly set up a trip wire as soon as each glasses-wearer approached. The trap worked perfectly. Once his victims fell, he wrestled off their specs, if they hadn't already slipped off the surprised scientists, and then scarpered to his sett.

However, after a week and a half of mugging scientists, someone had called the police. Several detectives were seen hiding in the woods in a bid to capture the *Phantom Spectacles Thief of Cromers Wood*.

Reg would have to give up, he realised. He'd never be able to win Ange back if he was arrested and sent to prison. Anyway, once he counted up his stash, he realised he'd done rather well. He had in his possession 26 pairs of glasses, though one pair was broken during a tussle with their owner. Surely one would help Ange to see?

He gathered them up in a bag 'borrowed' from one of the rangers and waited outside Ange's new outlier sett for her to come out after a hard night of excavating. At first, she mistook him for a Jehovah's Witness, and then for her sister, before Reg



Illustration by Megan Metcalf

grabbed a pair of glasses from his bag and thrust them on Ange's face and then hid behind a large beech tree. It was a risky move. If the specs didn't work and made her eyesight worse, he'd probably have to pack his bags and move to another territory far, far away.

Reg waited for a few moments before peeking out to see Ange screwing up her face. She then glanced to the left and then the right, surveying her surroundings as if she was seeing it for the first time. She then took off the glasses and put them back on again several times as if she couldn't quite trust what she was seeing. She gazed up at the Will You Marry Tree, seeing the sharp outlines of its branches and leaves, and then up at the sky, marvelling at the individual stars twinkling down at her. Usually they were just one big blurry blanket of lights which made her feel dizzy but now...wow! There were billions of individual stars just hanging there. As she looked back down, she spotted a familiar long nose and a pair of shining eyes peering out behind the beech tree.

'Reg? Is that you?'

'Yes, my love,' said Reg, gingerly, padding towards her.

'I never realised you had such a well-defined stripe down your nose!'

'Ange, my love, we all have well-defined stripes. That's what us badgers are famous for,' he said, taking out a mirror that'd fallen out of one of the scientists' bags. 'Take a look,' he added, passing it to her.

'Oh yes!' she said, admiring herself. 'The world always seemed so scary with lots of blurry things and faces everywhere, including my own,' she said.

'I'd love you even if you had the blurriest face in the world,' said Reg. 'Come home with me Ange.'

And six weeks later Ange, now able to see perfectly, gave birth to a beautiful baby badger called Versace, named after the squiggly writing on the frames of her new glasses.

The End

Story written by Michele Sheldon

**HAND OF DOOM
PRODUCTIONS**



Head Office: Kent Wildlife Trust, Tyland Barn, Sandling, Maidstone, Kent ME14 3BD
Tel: 01622 662012 | info@kentwildlife.org.uk | kentwildlifetrust.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 239992. A company limited in England and Wales by guarantee 633096.



Protecting Wildlife for the Future

