

HAZEL BURGESS

CREATIVE WRITING

DEJA VUE: APRIL 2020

Anne stood on the grassy hillock, looking out over the bleak moorland, a frost in the air and a few snowflakes whirling. She watched a white flake dissolve as it hit the stone by her side and she rubbed a finger over the damp patch. It was nearly Christmas and she was waiting to meet Jack. Her hand rubbed the dip in the stone and she saw the stains left by vinegar and water. What a tale it could tell. Here the villagers had left money wrapped in rags soaked in vinegar, to kill all germs. In exchange they had collected basic supplies such as flour, eggs, oats and other day to day essentials left by helping hands from neighbouring communities. Letters had been deposited for collection; she herself had left billets doux for Jack.

Here was Jack now. He strode towards her, crossing the boundary stone, and she ran into his arms. It was over and she was well. When they had asked George, the local tailor, to make them new finery for the festivities over a year ago little had the villagers suspected that the bales of cloth sent from London would house an infestation of fleas. George Vicars, and then his family, had been the first to die of the plague – the Black Death. In their small village, Eyam, seventy six families had been affected and two hundred and sixty had died. It was only thanks to the Reverend William Mompesson, who lost his own wife to the disease, that the plague had not spread far and wide. The villagers had heeded his words and sealed off the village to save others. They had prayed hard, joining the Reverend every Sunday for church services in the open space named Cucklett Delph, each family standing well apart from the others to stop the spread of infection. Ann's parents had been amongst the last to pass and Marshall Howe, the unofficial gravedigger, had helped her lay them to rest. Each family was responsible for burying their own dead, so as to ensure infection did not spread.

As Ann held Jack's hand they slowly walked across the fields and over the stone stile back to habitation. Along the way they paused for a moment near Riley House Farm, and looked at the Riley Graves, memorials to Elizabeth Hancock's husband and six of her seven children whom she had buried with her own care worn hands as they succumbed one by one to the sickness.

The history of Eyam is still remembered; the cottages bearing plaques of those who died of the bubonic plague in the fourteen months from September 1665 to November 1666. For three months the village had been an island of grief and tragedy. Annie had studied the history as part of a project in the first year of her degree course. Now it seemed very real.

Feeling stifled Annie had hastily donned her coat and run from the house to take her permitted hour of exercise striding across the moorland outside her cottage. Earlier she had had a video call with Jack and later they had agreed the timing of their walk. She missed him so much but it had only been three weeks; there were at least another three to go. How she longed to touch somebody, to give them a hug. There he was, waiting by the stone marker. Annie came to a halt, ensuring they were two metres apart, as advised. They must ensure the infection did not spread, although they both appeared to be quite well. Their words were lost to the wind as they tried to communicate their love and sorrow at being apart.

They knew the news was terrifying – thousands dead and a steady stream of new mortalities daily, in the hundreds. Temporary hospitals had been built to shelter thousands of sick patients, cavernous buildings had been temporarily converted into morgues and mass graves were being dug as trenches so there was time to give the deceased a swift, dignified and lonely burial. Everybody was sealed into their own community, not just a small village but sixty six million

people living in the United Kingdom. Across the world every country was the same – billions sheltering inside to protect their communities. Yet still the virus spread, starting in China and infiltrating across the world through international travel. The tragedy of Eyam magnified. History remaking.

As she paid a hasty farewell to Jack, having espied an unofficial police informer peering out of their window, she took the opportunity to buy some essentials at the village store. The locals were entering one at a time so as to keep their distance. Pulling on her face mask, and donning protective gloves, she made her essential purchase of what staples they had on the bare shelves. There was not much left as the stockpilers had filled their cupboards and freezers. Taking a loaf she paused at the wooden gate of a small, stone cottage. Calling out to its resident, Mrs Jones, she deposited it on the stone wall and took the coins left for her, wrapped in a precious tissue, and hidden in a dip in the stone. As she left she gave her neighbour a wave but there was no chatting or banter. Elderly and vulnerable, Mrs Jones had to scurry straight back indoors with her rations.

Entering her home by the back door she heard her sisters and brothers singing along with the television. They were playing a game – Ring a Ring a Roses – an old rhyming song sung over the centuries by children who did not know the origin of the Plague Rhyme. Annie shuddered.

As she stood outside the front door later that evening, Clapping for Carers, a weekly Thursday ritual at 8 o'clock, she thought back to her studies. She had a sense of Deja Vue. How she hoped they could beat this like the villagers of Eyam. How she hoped it would only be three months of lockdown to stop the spread of the disease. Looking along the street tears came to her eyes as she saw her community standing as one, two metres apart, clapping and banging their pots and pans to thank those looking after them all – NHS workers, Carers, delivery drivers, supermarket workers, refuse collectors, teachers, volunteers and the army of essential workers. Like an open air church service their anthems sounded in the night air – We'll Meet Again and You'll Never Walk Alone, the stirring songs of the day, and of other tragic times in the past.

She looked up and saw the Rainbow of Hope displayed in the window across the road. Taking her phone she took a video shot, the singing in the background, and swiftly sent it to Jack with a kiss and the words Take Care, Keep Safe, We'll Meet Again soon.