

THE QUARRY

Lucy Ross

Ring a Rosies

Ann ran, clutching the bouquet to her chest. Every so often she would bring it up to her face and nearly crush it against her nose to smell the sweet flowers. But she dared not smell it too often, lest she take away its power. She had lost the little boy that was chasing her, sent by his Father to try and catch her. No doubt he would be beaten for losing her and the precious posies. She would have bought them, but her family could not afford it and her Ma was dying.

On the Outskirts of London, on the other side of the stone wall, where the little moat was filled with the dead that had yet to be carted away, was Ann's house. Amongst the slums the streets were quiet, filled instead with heavy air, bodies and rats. Ann crept along the streets, trying to watch all the rats at once before finally reaching home. She quietly pushed her front door open, trying to sneak in before her Grandma caught her and threw her back out. Grandma always caught her. Sure enough there was a frail hand round her wrist in moments, tighter than usual.

'You shouldn't be here child.' Her Grandma's voice was raspier than it had been this morning.

Ann held up the bouquet as high as she could for Grandma to see, 'For Ma.'

Grandma looked at the bouquet, before pulling Ann in tight.

'I want to see Ma. When is she getting better?'

Grandma knelt, holding Ann by the shoulders, 'My sweet child. Your Ma isn't ever getting better.'

Ann frowned, 'The men said the flowers will make her better.' She continued, determined, 'If you give Ma the flowers then she'll get better.'

'Oh Ann.' She led Ann over to a corner, putting a small, old backpack over her shoulders and putting the flowers inside the backpack, hidden away, 'Ma is no longer with us.'

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Ann walked behind the cart filled with bodies. The final trip of the day to the mass grave. She recognised the familiar black lumps all too well. The Black Death was upon them again. In one hand, she gripped a small black pouch that hung from a rope around her neck. The pouch felt heavy. She remembered the last time...and the Bricking. Oh dear God she should have to Brick again. Ann made the sign of the cross rapidly.

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Ann screamed and kicked, reaching out for her Ma. Her Grandma holding her back, 'Listen to me!' she croaked. Ann kicked, falling over under the weight of the backpack, before reaching where her mother lay in bed. Her skin still warm, puss and blood still oozing from sores.

'Ma!' She wailed; dirty, clumpy hair sticking to her face. She slumped. For three days she had watched her Ma fight the disease, her Grandma keeping her away for her own safety. Even now she felt her Grandma's bony hand grab the scruff her shirt and haul her away from the body. Outside she kicked and screamed until her Grandma hit her. In silence she let her wrap a scarf round her head and face, covering her mouth and nose.

Holding her hand, her Grandma led her away from the house. Ann struggled against her, trying to pull the scarf away with one hand but it was tied too tightly. Down the other end of the street, she could see people starting to brick up houses that had sick people in it. She could hear their cries for help and mercy.

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With her free hand, Ann pulled her scarf up to cover her face. The scarf was old and stained, but it kept death out of her mouth. The two donkey's struggled under the weight of the bodies, it was a heavy cart.

'This is gonna be a good pay,' John said from beneath his scarf, rubbing his hands together. 'Three hundred bodies in one day, and at least another three hundred tomorrow with no other Collectors in sight.' He tried to chuckle but it caught in his throat.

Ann looked away from the cart. It would be a good pay. They would head back to the next town, which was half empty, and pre spend some of that pay on good mead and food, after they had been blessed by the priest and had a strange smelling plant rubbed over them. The townsfolk insisted it stopped the spread of disease.

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Ann ran, dragged along by her Grandma. Thirty years old and she could still run. The streets in this area were abandoned.

'Why are we running?' Ann asked.

Her Grandma stopped on a street corner, panting heavily, clutching her chest.

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Across the street, a child looked at them wide eyed and ran away.

'Why do people run from us?' A young girl- no more than ten- asked. She led the donkeys.

'They run from Death. We work closely with death, and so they run from us.' Boss answered. The young girl looked at him.

'Why would you run from Death? Death always catches you.' Her eyes were too empty for a ten year old. Ann looked away; she had been younger when Boss had picked her up. She and her Grandma had tried to run. But Death always catches you.

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Ann ran away from her Grandma after she had managed to escape her grip, running back towards her house. Her Ma can't be dead. She heard her Grandma call after her desperately, but she pretended not to hear. She knocked a barrel of apples over, stumbled over a chicken and ran past bodies that lay in the streets, back the way she had come. One of the Brickers working in her street tried to grab her but she just slipped past.

At the house, someone had already carved a cross on their door, which she pushed open. The air seemed suddenly heavy. Ann hesitated at the door, unsure that this is what she wanted to see. From the door she could see the sunken skin, pulled tight. Crooked fingers stiff, as if reaching out to grab something.

Ann felt someone grab her bag.

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Outside the man held her up, like a rat, peering at her from beneath the scarf wrapped around his head. Three others peered at her, including a young boy.

'She don't look sick.'

'Then don't brick her.'

She heard her Grandma's voice, 'Put her down!' She was panting heavily when she reached them, 'Please...we're trying to leave...and get...to safety.'

One of the men poked Grandma with a stick. 'You have lumps on you. You aren't going anywhere.'

The third folded his arms, looking Grandma up and down. 'The girl comes with us. Granny gets Bricked.'

'As you say, Boss.'

It was only when Grandma let out a wail that she comprehended what being 'bricked' meant. Ann kicked and screamed, but the man just held her higher. He was kind enough to turn her away so she wouldn't see her Grandma pushed into the house.

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Half an hour later Ann put a hand on the new brick wall, cement and dirt already drying. Ann tried to claw at the wall and push it over, but it wouldn't budge.

'Grandma?'

'Ann. You need to leave.'

'I'm sorry for running away Grandma.'

Saying sorry always made things better.

Ann sat back and looked at the brick wall covering her old front door. From this angle it looked as if it stretched to the sky.

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The following night, all the bodies had been dumped into a mass grave just outside of the now desolate town. Back in the next village though, an outbreak had occurred. Ann stood outside the house with a cross carved into the front door. A family shouted at onlookers from within, who stood along the street with pitchforks, ready to kill anyone who tried to break free from the house.

'Brick 'em,' Boss turned away from the house and looked at Ann.

'You're the only one in my crew who was old enough to remember the last time. Is this the same? I don't want to believe it's the same.'

Ann spat, 'You might as well Brick up the whole country.' She turned away, clutching the pouch around her neck and did her best not to run away. Not that she could get far, she had been so tired lately, unused to all this extra work.

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Grandma's cries had quieted down when the man called Boss knelt down next to her.

'What's your name?'

'Ann.'

'You should leave this part of the City. It's not safe here. You'll get sick.'

'And then you'll have to Brick me?'

Boss didn't say anything.

'I won't get sick, I have these.' She took her backpack off and pulled out the posies, which were already damaged.

Boss smiled, and gently took them off her, 'What pretty flowers.' He took off a small pouch that was hanging around his neck and took a ring out of it, which he slipped on his finger. He created the flowers in his dirty hands, and ever so careful put the flowers into the pouch, which he then hung around Ann's neck.

'You'll grow into it. And they'll do a better job there.' He stood and held out his hand, 'Come on.' Ann looked up at him, afraid. 'You have no where else to go child. You will die here.'

'Leave her alone!' She heard her Grandma throw herself against the door.

Boss picked Ann up, holding her head close to his neck while Anne started shouting for her Grandma. 'Hush,' he cooed, 'It will be alright. Pretend you can't hear her.' Back down the street, at the cart one of the men stopped working.

'Another worker Boss?'

'Aye. Another worker.' He held onto Ann while she cried.

Ann could hear her Grandma calling her name from behind the brick wall. She did her best to not hear, like the kind, scary man said.

Boss held her for three days and nights.

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'Where's Boss?' John asked, putting another brick on the wall.

Ann frowned and looked over her shoulder. She eventually found him slumped behind some shack, fresh alcohol stains covering his clothing.

'Come on.' He shrugged her off and muttered something indecipherable. She pulled him to his feet but he pushed her away.

'Do not touch me!' He clutched his head as he stumbled on the spot.

'I don't want to brick no more.' He cried before falling down.

'You gotta brick. Someone has too. We have to save those we can,' Ann said with little sympathy.

'I couldn't save my family.'

Ann looked away; it was never pretty when he got like this.

'Bricked my wife and eldest daughter, to save my two youngest. They still died. What kinda of Bricker am I? What kinda of father and husband bricks his own family!'

Ann wiped sweat off her forehead and brought the pouch up to her lips

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'Wait!'

The family were being herded into the house after a brief escape attempt. It was the third family that had fallen ill in as many days. Ann grabbed the youngest boy away from them while the crowd looked on, hands over their mouth. She adjusted her scarf to be more secure for checking his eyes and inside his mouth and under his shirt for lumps.

'Do you feel ill?'

He shook his head.

'This one doesn't need to be bricked.'

His mother let out a sob as they were pushed into the house, 'James! James!'

Ann picked up the boy and walked away with him as the others started laying bricks. She held his head into her neck as he cried. 'Hush James, you'll be safe with us...pretend...pretend you don't hear them.'

'Ma.' She heard him whisper. Ann held him tighter. It was more than she had given her Grandma. If James survived, maybe it would make up for her abandoning her Grandma.

For a week, James slept next to her.

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'I don't wanna Brick.' She cried. She had been with the crew for two weeks, and Boss had finally decided to make her help with the walls, rather than trying to place bodies in another cart.

'You gotta brick. Someone has too. We have to save those we can.'

Inside the family cried and coughed and begged.

'Bricking saved you Ann. Your grandma was sick, she would have infected you. You would be dead by now,' Boss said, with little sympathy.

Ann quietly picked up another brick, dipped it in the bucket of cement that Mo constantly mixed, and placed it next to the other, wondering who this wall will save.

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Ann sat atop the cart of bricks. It was her usual spot, up high where she could see everyone around her. Her hands were calloused and scratched but were clean from being washed whenever she could. Boss enforced good hygiene. She looked around at the towns folk who stayed away from the cart she guarded. They looked an all too familiar ill. And ill of fear, grief and genuine sickness. It was the Flu before the black lumps appeared. She could look at people and know when they would sneeze and fall down. Most will be dead by the time the year was out. But some of them good be saved, saved by the cruel work they did. Next to her was the young boy she saved two months ago. He had bricked his first house today, and had finally stopped crying. She put an arm round him.

'We save a lot of lives doing this.'

'But we take away more.' James responded

She removed her arm from him, uncomfortable. Bricking saves enough lives to be justifiable, she told herself, bringing her pouch up to her lips. It had too, otherwise she was just a murderer trying to comfort her own loss.

Ann coughed, hard, and dropped her pouch back against her chest. She cleared her throat and smiled at James who looked at her wide-eyed. She hacked again and

didn't stop while James ran off, screaming for Boss. Ann grasped her pouch, and breathed deeply. When the coughing subsided, she looked at the pouch for a moment, noticing a tear along the seam.

Desperately, Ann pulled it off her neck, coughing again. Opening it, she prayed that the flowers were there, at least in some form. She had never opened it to check. But it was empty; her precious posies were gone. Atop the cart, she looked up to see Boss staring at her and barely heard him say tell the workers to Brick her, along with James, who she had coughed all over.