

The Covid Camera by Denise Gaines Marsden

For Lily

The young woman sat on a wall, looking out to sea, the waves crashed gently over the beach, their swishing sound soothing on her ears, and she closed her eyes as she soaked in the bright afternoon sunlight.

It was her birthday, a special day, and normally she'd be spending it with family and friends back in Yorkshire, but she was trapped here in Wales, miles away from home, the world transformed in some fiendish way, while she waited to continue her course on Photography, once everything reopened. No-one knew when that would be.

She'd had a few cards, not as many as usual, but then she knew it had been hard to get out to buy essentials, and birthday cards weren't high up on anyone's list. However she'd had many phone calls, and had spoken to her parents on Zoom.

It wasn't the same.

She missed the hugs.

Of course she was now officially an adult, and maybe it should feel special, but right at the back of her mind there was only a strange new sense of uncertainty.

A family came past, giving her a wide berth, settling down on the beach below with rugs and baskets, obviously about to have a picnic, and she grinned as she watched them posing for pictures, holding up their phones for "selfies".

It reminded her that she couldn't wait to get back to studying her passion, and as a tinge of excitement rippled through her, she wished she could tell these strangers that there was so much more to it all than just "selfies". People didn't know what they were missing.

Well, no good just sitting here, she should go do something, and she jumped down from the wall, looking round to make sure she was socially distanced from any others nearby.

It was now so automatic, a normal part of life.

It wasn't long before she had to stop to let a council refuse van go past so she could cross the road, but as she turned the next corner her foot hit something and she almost stumbled, as she looked down to see what had almost tripped her up.

Staring, she saw it was a camera, an old-fashioned, S.L.R. camera. She'd seen one in the university's collection, one of the many fascinating items they'd been shown, just before lockdown, when everything had stopped. Quickly she looked round to see who might have dropped it, but she was alone. No sign of life at all, even the van was gone. She wondered how you could lose something so wonderful – an actual piece of history!

It couldn't have fallen from the van, *someone* must have dropped it.

The air was suddenly still, not even the sound of birdsong, but as she bent to pick it up the new awareness flooded through her, and she stopped herself before she could touch it, running through her options. Then she remembered, feeling in her back-pack for the gloves she carried everywhere, along with the obligatory face mask. And as she picked up the camera the excitement hit her. It could have belonged to anyone, the only way to find out who, was to develop the film for clues!

She quickly examined it – *yes*, there was a film still inside. Even though she knew the camera wasn't hers to keep, she grinned – it was like a special birthday present, that she wasn't supposed to have!

And then the day suddenly got even better, as she discovered that the film still had a few pictures left untaken.

It wouldn't matter if she used them up, she thought that the owner wouldn't mind, when the camera was returned, together with the original prints.

Smiling, she turned back, looking for her first subject. The streets were almost empty, only the odd person, complete with face mask.

And then she understood. This was her world now, at least for the foreseeable future.

Things were different.

Whatever she took would be a slice of past time.

Of course that was nothing new, in a way, but it felt like the beginning of everything, the empty streets, the people standing six feet apart to talk, the children's empty playgrounds, all the closed buildings with their lines and warnings painted on every surface – just in case they would re-open soon. It was another era – almost another planet.

The family were still taking their “selfies”, and she smiled to herself. Like all her mates back home she had her own smart phone, so she was of course well acquainted with the process, the way you could stretch the resultant picture, shrink it, or “send” it on to someone else.

But even with her love of film she hadn't understood, until now, that the change from a camera to a phone had meant that as less effort had become the norm, the value of the image had been turned into a casual acceptance of the space around one, it could still be manipulated, as though none of it was actually real.

She raised the camera to her eye, careful to keep it from touching her face. She would clean it as soon as she could, but she couldn't wait. Looking through the lens as if seeing the world for the very first time, she knew that when she pressed the shutter button she would be saving what might become a treasured piece of history. And that when it emerged printed on paper, the permanence of the image would be real again.

Maybe generations into the future these first photographs would stand for more than just a record of how it looked in 2020 during lockdown.

Perhaps it might help to remember, and be grateful for, all those hard-earned but forgotten values, the caring, the sharing, now being re-learned, and which would hopefully continue to be precious.

Knowing that having “stuff” wasn’t essential for happiness, after all.

She giggled, who knew you could learn so much from photography!