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The Last Boil

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The Last Boil

Zach Conte

It is September the 5th in the year of our Lord 1350. My name is Mauro DiPietro, the son of Allegra and Stefano from Albamo, a small town in the middle of the southern Italian peninsula. A town that no longer exists. I am writing this journal to tell what I have seen and experienced in a world that is upside down, dangerous, chaotic, and unpredictable. I am writing this journal to set down what has happened to me, my family, my friends, and many people who I barely know and who no longer walk on this earth. May the Lord protect me long enough to tell this story before he calls me to Him.

I was trudging my way away from the great city of Naples, which has been cut in half by a hellish plague, the same that destroyed my small village town some months later. I was away from home on a building project of a new church for a neighboring town. My father, a mason, taught my brother Franco and me well in his trade. We were all proud members of our guild located in the largest building, outshining even the leather tanners and smiths! Alas, such prideful boasting is hollow and shameful in view of what befell our accursed little village. A large thick wall protected and surrounded us, built by my ancestors, but that was no defense to that curse of the Devil that took away everyone and everything I loved and held dear. As I returned to Albamo, I had wondered why I had heard nothing of home for months. Rumors were that some catastrophe had occurred, so I sought to see it with my own eyes.

The surrounding fields were overgrown. There was an eerie lack of human activity. As I approached the main gate all I saw were rats that scurried around and birds that feasted on carrion flew around! Then it hit me, the stench of death flowing out from the dead bodies that filled the streets of the village. As I walked deeper in, the stench grew stronger. Bodies were filled to the top of wooden carts just left there to rot as rats devoured what was left of their flesh. When I reached my own home I called out for my family with no reply. After I opened the door my deepest fears turned into reality. My mother, father, and sister were all lying on the floor, bodies bloated and desecrated from the terrible disease. Thoughts of suicide ran through my head as I stared at my family's lifeless bodies hoping for a response but finding none. I had to get out of there fast.

A thought entered my troubled head on where I must go. The first place and my natural instinct was to head north where there would be fresh air. After a long treacherous journey passing through towns of disease-infested death the scourge lessened and the towns assumed a strange normality of excessive gaiety combined with religiosity. The townsfolk feared what might befall them, and hoped to avoid doom in their own way. Some sought to find God again and attended Mass daily, imploring the Almighty to spare them. Others forgot their religion, figuring the priests were helpless, and took up a life of debauchery.

I finally reached Termina, a small village north of Genova, near the Alps and the French border. This seemed the perfect place to re-start my life. To my liking, the church was prominent here and no one seemed sick. I almost changed my mind after I first visited the

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church at north end of town. It was carved into part of the overhanging mountain. As I trudged up the steps and entered the apse making my way to the altar, I saw something that to my horror seemed to portend nothing good. Piled one on top of another was thousands of bones from the skeletons of monks from previous generations from years ago! A strange sense of decoration, I thought, but in any case, I was in no hurry to add mine to theirs.

Over the next few nights I spent a good amount of time at the local tavern to get to know my new fellow townspeople. I met a stout young fellow who happened to also have family in my hometown who were also taken by the disease. My new friend's greatest attribute was that he was able to get me a masonry job due to his connections in the town. I was excited to work again and hoped this new job would clear my mind. Work went well for the most part fueled by projects for repairs to the church. The demand for my masonry was strong and since working was more a hobby than a job, it made life easier for me.

Then one fortunate night I met a girl. She was perfect with long black hair that fell off her shoulders and rested on her back. Her eyes enchanted me but what really put me in a spell was her smile that would get the best of any man. My love's name was Maria and even though I had known her for one night I thought she was to be the one. Things went smoothly with Maria as we spent the majority of our free time together night and day. Her sense of humor and joy almost made me forget the extreme horror that I had endured the past year, which used to put me into deep depression.

The countryside was where we often went to be alone. It was peaceful out there; the serenity of the bucolic landscape made it seem like paradise. I was confident that Maria loved me too and the thought of marriage entered my head at times. But, without a family or parents, I didn't know how I would be able to pay for the wedding and even if Maria's parents would allow me to marry their daughter. It was very challenging to obtain a bride without anything to offer her family in return.

I had finally found my utopia where there was no sign of the ravishing disease and I had found the woman of my dreams. God graced me with forgiveness after the terrible events in my life that I had to previously endure. I rented a simple, but pleasant, room and the people have welcomed me as one of their own in the town. I have even heard rumors that I am now known as the best mason in Termina.

One morning I went into the bakery to pick up some goods. Rats scurried around the bakery, but this was not an uncommon thing. Rats love to devour any sort of scrap that was left over from cooking and will eat in seconds anything that hit the floor. I noticed the baker's son lying down in the back of the shop. His face was bloated with cold sweat running down his brow due to a fever. Nothing I said made much sense to the boy as he was in a state of delusion. The baker said this happened a few days ago after he had sent his son to the neighboring town to pick up some supplies to bake with. I wished his son a speedy recovery and went on my way.

Later that week I received news that the baker's son had died. Boils were found all over his legs and his body was swollen. I immediately went to visit the bakery to offer my condolences to the baker, but he was nowhere to be found and the shop was closed. Next, I went

to the tailor's shop next door. He told me that the baker too had come down with an illness. I started worrying that the plague had reached my safe haven of Termina. The first thought that popped into my head was the safety of my beloved Maria. I went to her house and found her sleeping. Worried that she too was sick I awoke her, startling her from her sleep. She assured me that she was all right and that she would be fine.

Maria and I went to the only place where we knew we could find peace. We went on a walk in the lush countryside passing by small chapels that pilgrims from France would stop and pray at during their travels. Our favorite were the small paths that lead up into the mountains which went as high as your eye could see, looking like a small line in the sky full of clouds. We would always say that one day we would leave this small town and run away into the mountains to live with nothing but each other. In the back of my head I imagined the sight of barbarians running down the rolling hills on the same path they came to ransack Italy. They too had used the same road as a form of direction that we fantasized about to lead us into paradise.

About a week had passed and I had no strange encounters except for one morning. I awoke to the sound of people running through the streets toward the square causing a big commotion. Not knowing what was going on I quickly dressed myself and followed them into the center of town where a large crowd was already awaiting me by the time I arrived. What caught my ears was the cracking sound of whips. I was expecting punishment for a man that had stolen something or broken the law, but when I pushed my way through the crowd I was amazed at what I was seeing. In the streets was a group of people cracking the whip on their own backs. They were chanting that this pain should be enough for God to spare them of the disease. I asked around and soon found out that the baker also had died of the same illness as his son. The flagellants in the street were scared that the plague was coming to Termina but I thought this was not possible. I shook them off as superstitious nonsense.

I knew that this had turned serious when a member of the church came down with a sickness a few days later. Maybe the flagellants had a reason to perform in the streets. The disease was spreading and killing quickly. Only a few days later the number of sick grew exponentially. Some blamed it on the rats, some blamed it on the food, and some blamed it on God who had cursed them. Whatever the reason for the plague, it was not going to be stopped easily. Not only were the poor dying but the holy men too. Without God and the church to turn to for protection I did not know what to do. The rich were not to be spared either by this evil disease, as the wealthy died as easily as their servants. My worst nightmare was turning into reality again. The black plague had followed me to Termina.

Luckily Maria had been safe as she lived on the outskirts of town near the pastures where people rarely went. She was the only person I had left and all that was important to me. I went to her house and we discussed what we were going to do. Families were splitting up due to the disease and no one was to be trusted. I don't know how she did it but Maria, being the most positive person I know, convinced me that she was going to be fine and not to worry about her. She said that she had all she needed at home and there was no need to go into town where she might catch the disease.

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A week passed by and things had gotten progressively worse in the town. Almost everyone I knew was either sick or had passed away. Streets were closed and strangers were not allowed into town. The church was shut down and it was basically everyone for themselves.

It had been a month since the plague hit Termina and somehow I had managed to survive. I went to Maria's house and noticed that she was a little swollen but did not want to say anything to her because I was scared she would take it as an insult to her beauty. As we took our routine walk into the countryside it took us away from reality and death. It was a beautiful day with the sun shining down on us and a soft breeze that blew her lush flowing hair in front of her face. I will never forget the sight of Maria's dress being toyed with by the wind as if it were a leafy branch on a tree. As we divulged into conversation she started to not make sense and seemed distracted. She then asked for my jacket claiming that she was cold on this gorgeous sunny day. I thought nothing of it because there was a brisk wind now and this probably had given her the chills. How could I get mad at such a lovely woman? Her beauty was that of an angel and I decided it was time. I knelt down on one knee to ask for her hand in marriage but as I held her wrist and turned it over, I noticed a small boil forming on her arm.