

Fire and Brimstone by Harris Good

A.D. 62

A couple dashes into a doorway, narrowly dodging a falling beam. Tiles shatter around them, exploding like ceramic grenades. A fallen brick hits the man's shoulder, he winces in pain but says to the woman, "Come on, *amica mea*, I'm fine!" Struggling on, they manage to reach a basement. "Finally. Safe at last. Let me heal your shoulder." the woman says. They lay, shivering and panting, as the world outside is devastated by a terrible earthquake, like nothing Pompeii has ever seen before. When the earthquake finally stops and they look outside, they will see chaos.

Seventeen Years Later ...

It was a normal day in Pompeii's Forum, just like any other: market sellers shouting, kids laughing, poets reading their works. A young boy, Julius, was playing with his friends near the fountain, giggling and laughing. Julius was short, with dark hair and a big smile. He was the son of one of many of Pompeii's slaves, working all day to raise a meagre salary, just enough to provide for them both. This was made even harder by the loss of Julius' father, meaning Julius' mother had to work twice as hard. Julius was having a great time, laughing and shouting, when the fountain stopped. Staring curiously, Julius and his friends were shocked. One nervously crept up to it. Lanterns swung, though there was no wind. The Forum seemed deserted; everyone was silent, not knowing what force had caused this phenomenon. A ghost? A god? Or worse? Unbeknownst to the people of Pompeii, the nearby Mount Vesuvius was stirring, for the first time since A.D. 62, seventeen years ago ...

The people of Pompeii were not the kind of people who would panic in a situation like this; they continued with their daily lives. Within seconds, the Forum was loud and bustling once again. "What was that?" Julius asked his friends, scared.

"I don't know, but I'm not hanging around." said one of Julius' friends, Nero. "I'm going straight home." He ran off, faster than a chariot.

"The gods must be angry! We must give them a sacrifice!" declared Tiberius, the son of the *Pontifex Maximus*. Rolling his eyes, he hurried home to his mother, who he found standing outside, looking nervous. She looked like a bigger, female version of Julius, with the same dark hair. But nowadays, the big smile hardly ever made an appearance. "Get inside, quick, my love!" she called, ushering him into their block of *insulae*. Once inside, she told him to sit at the table. "I've been putting this moment off for years, but the time has come."

"The time has come for what?" Julius demanded.

"The time for me to tell you what happened to your father. It all started seventeen years ago. Pompeii was in the worst earthquake in its worst earthquake ever. Me and your father survived the initial chaos, but he was caught under some debris sliding onto him. Ever since, I have been looking for signs of another earthquake. I don't want to lose anyone else I love." Julius was speechless, mouth open, staring forwards. "I didn't want to tell you until I needed to. I just wanted-" Julius' mother was cut off by the ground rumbling, pushing them back and forth. "Quickly, run!" she commanded. "Head north, along the coast!" They ran, and were nearly out of the block of *insulae* when a beam hit Julius' mother on the shoulder, pinning her to the ground. Julius stopped, and tried to lift it, but it was too heavy and he was too weak. "Leave me!" Julius's mother cried. "Save yourself!" Julius didn't listen, as he loved his mother too much to desert her. Instead, he held her hand, reassuring her that everything would be alright.

Eventually, the earth's rumbling stopped, and Julius was able to get help for his mother. It seemed like the disaster had stopped. But it had only just begun.

Sitting quietly, Julius and his mother ate their dinner of porridge; it was all they could afford. Tension filled the atmosphere as they ate in silence. Suddenly, there was a commotion outside. Julius and his mother ran out to see a group of farmers, clearly startled, shouting about the end of the world. Julius, now scared, looked at his mother. "I'm scared. Are we all going to die?" he mumbled quietly.

Stroking his hair, she replied, "Not as long as we stick together. Now come on inside." A few minutes later, she tucked Julius in, singing him a lullaby. "Lalla, Lalla, Lalla, aut dormi, aut lacta." Julius slowly drifted off to sleep...

Jolting awake, Julius panted heavily. He had just had a horrible nightmare: tiles falling, debris smashing, ground rumbling. Slowly, he began to calm down, knowing that it was just a dream. Walking downstairs, he greeted his mother, and they had breakfast together. Julius' mother suggested that they go to the theatre, to get over the horrors of yesterday. Laughing and having a great time, Julius was truly happy for the first time since the fountain stopped. But the happiness was short-lived as, around midday, there was a massive...

'BOOM!'

It came from the mountain to the north, the one the adults called 'Mount Vesuvius'. With a ringing in his ears from the explosion, he wandered blindly towards his mother, who was grabbing desperately at him. He saw her lips moving but could not discern the words from the deafening crowd's shrieks and cries. Seeing that shouting was ineffective, Julius' mother grabbed his hand and led them out of the theatre, amidst the crowd. Once she could make herself heard, she told him urgently, "We need to get to Herculaneum - I know a friend who has a boat who can get us out of here, to Rome." With that, they ran as fast as they could to Herculaneum, reaching it an hour or so later. It was completely deserted - a ghost town. Running to the docks, they cried out for Julius' mother's friend - but there was no reply. They reached the harbour, and saw the first people since they left Pompeii. "Help! Please, help!" Julius and his mother called, and the other people offered them a seat and some food. "Thank you so much." said Julius' mother. "We came from Pompeii, fleeing Mount Vesuvius." One of them introduces himself. "Hello. My name is Octavian. We have also fled Vesuvius, and are about to give a sacrifice to the gods." He turned his back, stoking a fire, made out of wooden wreckage. "He must be the *Pontifex Maximus*." Julius' mother noted. "He is, I know his son." Julius replied. Octavian offered them a bed, for the long, cold night ahead. Julius held his mother's hand as, once again, he drifted off to sleep...

'RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE!' Julius awoke to chaos. "What is it?" he mumbled sleepily. "I heard a rumble noise. Is it another earthquake?"

"No, my son, but it certainly isn't good. We're going to shelter in the boathouse." Rushing over, Julius couldn't help thinking that everything had gone wrong, and cursing the gods. The boathouse was hot and loud. He could hear the distant rumble, but it seemed to be... getting closer? By now, Julius had no idea what was going on. After a couple of minutes, the rumble seemed to be reaching its highest volume, closer than ever. It was deafening. Julius suddenly knew what else was approaching, just as quick. His death. Just before whatever horror that was speeding towards them hit, he hugged his mother, looked up at his mother, and said his final words: "I love you."