Stowaway

Roger Zelazny

He disembarked in New York harbor in the dead of night. A light rain was falling, but it didn’t disturb him especially. Not after all those weeks in the stifling cargo hold of the vessel. It had been rainy in Algeria, also.

He’d slipped from the rail and fallen into the water. Since he could not reboard the vessel, he swam to the wharf and climbed a piling.

He shook himself and moved toward a warehouse. He wasn’t feeling well.

After perhaps ten minutes, he found entrance. Five more, and he’d located a meal.

They had broken into a storage bin and torn open a sack. He pushed his way through the throng. He was very hungry.

They pushed back, and he slashed at them, and their blood fell upon the floor. He ate.

He spent the next three days in the warehouse, and was wakened by a cry at approximately 5:30 P. M. as the watchman fell upon one of his companions with a club and was slashed in the course of the foray. When it was all over, the watchman washed his hand, daubed it with iodine, covered the wound with a Band-Aid, and continued his rounds.

He left the warehouse, the same way he had entered, and made his way up a narrow street filled with brick buildings, all of their windows dark.

The alley up which he turned was filled with bottles, broken and unbroken, and various items of rubbish which had been thrown from the upstairs apartments.

At one point, a dog barked at him, but the only other sounds within the chill morning were an occasional squeal of tires and the distant wail of a siren.

Moving farther and farther into the city, he turned a corner and looked upon a broad avenue, just as the black egg was touched in the east by morning, cracks of rose and vermilion widening within it. He rested on a stair leading down to a basement and watched the city come to life. The light at the intersection held two cars, then released them and the beams of their headlamps raked him as they went by. An airplane growled above the brightening smog, and he heard the curses of a drunk who had awakened in the alley. Four more cars passed. Then a small man in a gray sweater and beard began unlocking a newsstand on the corner. Beneath him came the rumble, clatter, screech of a subway car, and after a moment people began to emerge from the kiosk across the street. He could hear their voices as they passed. One of them stopped before a clothing store, unlocked it and entered. A light went on within. The subway train departed, and the smell of it rose through the grating in the sidewalk and drifted toward him. Two more stores were opened. The sun became a red dome, an orange bubble clinging to the horizon. Telephone lines slashed it. The streetlights went out. There came the smack of a bundle of papers as they struck the concrete beside the newsstand. Day had begun.

He descended the stairs and entered a deserted basement. After a time, he found a dark and quiet place and he slept once more, for he was feeling worse.

When the watchman left the warehouse, he had breakfast at a nearby diner, orange juice, toast, scrambled eggs, two cups of coffee. Then he went home and kissed his wife, who was on her way out the door, Wednesday being the day she cleaned house for the Simpsons. He drank a glass of water, undressed and went directly to bed, for day had begun.

Of course it moved like lightning. Think about the drippy season for a moment, and you’ll see why.

Take twelve million people, confine them in five boroughs, require that they move around every day in order to earn their livelihood, shake hands, eating and drinking together, sitting in rooms full of desks or toilets, laughing, sneezing, coughing in each other’s faces and, “Kiss you? I shouldn’t be doing this!” to each other, and let one man with a cold decide against staying home that day and you’ve got a drippy season.

All right, take it from there...

When he crawled out of the basement, on Saturday, there was no traffic for a long time, and then a black car passed. The store was closed, and the newsstand. He heard a bell ringing, over and over. He drank from a mud puddle, but it did not slake his thirst.

He lay on his side, panting, and after a time he closed his eyes. He gasped and lay still.

It comes in three varieties: bubonic, systemic, pneumonic. Depending on this, it may take two days or a couple of weeks. There is an anti-serum, but try getting enough to vaccinate twelve million people in a hurry.

The newspaper in the unopened bundle beside the stand warned of sick rats and rats found dead out in the open.

Later that year, the two million inhabitants of the five boroughs experienced another drippy season.

Notes

It had been rainy in Algeria suggests Camus’s novel The Plague. Caused by the bacteria Yersinia pestis, plague primarily infects rats, but the bite of an infected flea can give it to humans. Bubonic refers to plague’s grossly swollen lymph nodes (buboes); systemic means that the bacteria is in the bloodstream; pneumonic means that the lungs are affected, and the disease can be transmitted by coughing.