THE CLASSIC NOVEL IN A NEW TRANSLATION BY LAURA MARRIS

THE PLAGUE

ALBERT CAMUS

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

ALSO BY ALBERT CAMUS

The Stranger

The Myth of Sisyphus

Caligula and Three Other Plays

The Rebel

The Fall

Exile and the Kingdom

The First Man

Create Dangerously

Committed Writings

Personal Writings

Speaking Out

The Plague

ALBERT CAMUS

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
BY LAURA MARRIS

Alfred A. Knopf
NEW YORK
2021

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

Translation copyright © 2021 by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and distributed in Canada by Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto. Originally published in France as *La Peste* by Librairie Gallimard. Copyright © 1947 by Editions Gallimard, copyright renewed 1974 by Madame Albert Camus.

www.aaknopf.com

Knopf, Borzoi Books, and the colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Camus, Albert, 1913–1960, author. | Marris, Laura, [date] translator.
Title: The plague / Albert Camus ; translated from the French by Laura Marris.
Other titles: Peste. English
Description: First American edition. | New York : Knopf, 2021.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021008063 | ISBN 9780593318669 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593318676 (ebook)
Classification: LCC PQ2605.A3734 P413 2021 | DDC 843/.914—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021008063

Ebook ISBN 9780593318676

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover photograph based on a photograph by rbsa_88 / Getty Images
Cover design by Sunra Thompson

ep_prh_5.8.0_138525746_c0_r0

Contents

Cover
Also by Albert Camus
Title Page
Copyright
Epigraph

Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V

Translator's Note
A Note About the Author

It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not.

—DANIEL DEFOE

I

The curious events that make up this chronicle occurred in 194_, in Oran. By all accounts, they had no place there, being a bit out of the ordinary. At first glance, Oran is, in fact, an ordinary town and nothing more than a French prefecture on the Algerian coast.

The city itself is undeniably ugly. Through the outward calm, it can take some time to notice what sets this commercial city apart from so many others along every latitude. How to picture, for example, a city without pigeons, without trees and gardens, where you encounter neither the beating of wings nor the rustling of leaves, in short, a neutral space? The changing seasons are only visible in the sky. Spring announces itself by the quality of the air or by the baskets of flowers the peddlers bring from the surrounding areas; this spring is hawked at market. In summer, the sun scorches the too-dry houses and covers the walls with gray ash; then you can only survive in the shade of closed shutters. In fall, it's the opposite, a deluge of mud. The fine days come only in winter.

One useful way to get to know a city is to find out how people work there, how they love there, and how they die there. In our little city, perhaps because of the climate, all these things are done together, with the same frenetic and absent attitude. In other words, people here get bored and concentrate on developing their habits. Our fellow citizens work hard, but always to make themselves richer. Above all, they are interested in trade and their first concern, in some form or other, is to do business. Naturally, they also have a taste for

simple pleasures: they love women, the movies, and swimming in the sea. But very sensibly, they save these pleasures for Saturday night and Sunday, trying, on other days, to make a lot of money. In the evening, when they leave their offices, they meet up in the cafés at the same hour, they stroll on the same boulevards, or they sit out on the balconies. The desires of the youngest are violent and short, while the vices of the eldest don't surpass bocce ball leagues, charity banquets, and clubs where people risk high stakes on their luck at cards.

You might say this isn't specific to our city and that in general all of our contemporaries are like that. Of course, nothing is more natural these days than to see people work morning till night before choosing to waste, at cards, in cafés, or in small talk, what time they have left to live. But there are some cities and countries where, from time to time, people get a hint of something more. Usually, it doesn't change their lives. There is only the hint, but at least it's a start. Oran, on the other hand, is apparently a city without hints, which is to say, a completely modern city. As a result, there's no need to specify the way we love around here. Men and women either devour each other quickly in the so-called act of love, or they engage in a long, two-person habit. Between these extremes, there is often no middle ground. That's also not very original. In Oran as in many places, without time and reflection, people have no choice but to love each other without knowing it.

What's most original about our city is how difficult it can be to die there. Difficulty, though, isn't exactly right, and it would be better to talk about discomfort. It's never pleasant to be sick, but there are cities and countries that support you in your sickness, where, in some fashion, you can let yourself go. A sick person needs softness, he likes to lean on something, that's only natural. But in Oran, the excesses of the climate, the rate of doing business, the facile ornament, the quickness of dusk and the characteristic pleasures—these all demand good health. A patient finds himself quite alone.

Think of the person who is dying, caught in the trap of a hundred walls sizzling in the heat, while at the same minute, a whole population is on the telephone or in cafés, talking about bank drafts, bills of lading, or discounts. You understand what might be uncomfortable about death, even modern death, when it arises in such a dry place.

These few indications are perhaps enough to give some idea of our city. Even so, it's better not to exaggerate. What should really be stressed is the banal side of the city and of life. But as soon as there are habits, the days become easy. As long as our city favors its habits, you might say everything is for the best. Of course, from this angle, life isn't very interesting. At least we don't have any disorder here at home. And our frank, kind, active population has always provoked a modest admiration from travelers. This city without charm, without greenery, without a soul, seems restful in the end, at last it puts you to sleep. It's only fair to add that the city is grafted onto an exceptional landscape, in the middle of a naked plateau, surrounded by luminous hills, on a perfectly drawn harbor. It's just regrettable that the city was built with its back turned to this bay, and as a result, it is impossible to glimpse the sea, and you always have to go looking for it.

At this point, it's easy to admit that our fellow citizens could never have dreamed of the incidents that took place in the spring of that year, incidents that were, as we would come to understand, the first signs of a series of grim events whose chronicle we have set out to write. These facts will seem quite natural to some, while others may find them implausible. But after all, a chronicler can't be bothered by these contradictions. His task is simply to say, "This happened," once he knows that this did, in fact, happen, that it mattered to the lives of a whole population, and that there are, as a result, thousands of witnesses who will assess, in their hearts, the truth of what he says.

As for the narrator, whom you'll meet in due course, he would never have tried to put himself forward for this kind of undertaking if chance had not given him the opportunity to collect a certain number of accounts and if the force of things hadn't gotten him mixed up in all he presumes to relate. That's what authorized him to take on the historian's task. Of course, even if he's an amateur, a historian always has sources. The narrator of this story therefore has his own: first of all what he witnessed, then what others witnessed, since, through his role, he ended up collecting the secrets of everyone involved in this chronicle, and last, the texts which finally fell into his hands. He plans to draw on them when the time seems right and to use them as he likes. He also plans to…But perhaps it's time to drop the commentary and precautions of language and get down to the narrative itself. Explaining the first days requires a few details.

⋆

On the morning of April 16, Doctor Bernard Rieux left his office and stumbled upon a dead rat in the middle of the landing. In the moment, he pushed the creature aside without much thought and continued down the stairs. But once he reached the street, it occurred to him that the rat didn't belong there, and he retraced his steps to alert the concierge. Faced with old M. Michel's reaction, he could see what was startling about his discovery. The presence of this dead rat had seemed merely bizarre to him, but to the concierge it was a scandal. The latter's position was adamant: there weren't rats in the house. No matter how the doctor tried to assure him that there was, in fact, a rat on the second-floor landing, and probably a dead one, M. Michel's conviction remained intact. There were no rats in the house, someone must have brought it in from outside. In short, it must be a prank.

That same evening, Bernard Rieux was standing in the hallway of the building, searching for his keys before going upstairs, when,

from the dark end of the corridor, a large rat emerged with shaky steps and wet fur. The creature stopped, seemed to try to catch its balance, started toward the doctor, stopped again, spun around with a little cry and finally fell, blood spurting from its parted jaws. The doctor stared at it for a moment, then went up to his apartment.

It wasn't the rat he was thinking of. That spurt of blood reminded him of his own worry. His wife, who had been sick for a year, was supposed to leave the next day for a mountain retreat. He found her stretched out in their bedroom, as he had advised. This way she would be prepared for the exhaustion of the trip. She was smiling.

"I feel very well," she said.

The doctor looked at the face turned towards him in the light of the bedside lamp. Despite thirty years and the marks of her illness, this face always seemed youthful to Rieux, perhaps because of the smile, which swept away everything else.

"Sleep if you can," he said. "The aide will come at eleven, and I'll take you to the noon train."

The forehead he kissed was slightly damp. The smile followed him to the door.

The next day, April 17, at eight a.m., the concierge stopped the doctor in passing and accused pranksters of leaving three dead rats in the middle of the corridor. They must have caught them with big traps, since the rats were bleeding a lot. The concierge had kept watch on the doorstep for a while, holding the rats by their feet, waiting to see if the guilty parties were willing to betray themselves with some kind of sneer. But nothing came of it.

"Ah! Those fools," M. Michel finally said. "I'll get them in the end."

Intrigued, Rieux decided to begin his rounds in the outer neighborhoods where his poorest patients lived. The garbage collectors came much later here, and his car rolled along the narrow, dusty streets of this neighborhood, bumping the boxes of scraps left on the edge of the sidewalk. Down the length of one of these streets,

the doctor counted a dozen rats thrown on top of vegetable peelings and dirty rags.

He discovered his first sick patient in bed, in a street-facing room, which served as both a bedroom and a dining room. He was an old Spaniard with a hard, furrowed face. In front of him, on the coverlet, he had two pots full of chickpeas. At the moment the doctor entered, the sick man, half sitting up in his bed, slumped backwards to catch his breath, the gravelly breath of an old asthmatic. His wife brought him a basin.

“Eh, Doctor,” he said, as Rieux gave him an injection, “they’re coming out, did you see?”

“Yes,” said his wife, “the neighbor gathered up three of them.”

The old man rubbed his hands.

“They’re coming out, you can see them in all the garbage cans, they’re hungry!”

It didn’t take Rieux long to realize that the whole neighborhood was talking about rats. With his visits finished, he returned home.

“There’s a telegram for you, upstairs,” said M. Michel.

The doctor asked him if he’d seen any more rats.

“Ah! No,” said the concierge. “I’ve been keeping watch, you see. Those little brats wouldn’t dare.”

The telegram informed Rieux that his mother would arrive the next day. She was coming to look after her son’s house while the sick woman was absent. When the doctor entered his apartment, the aide was already there. Rieux found his wife standing, dressed in a traveling suit, her cheeks colored with rouge. He smiled at her:

“You look nice,” he said, “very nice.”

A moment later, at the station, he helped her settle into the sleeping car. She looked around the compartment.

“We can’t afford this, can we?”

“It’s the only way,” Rieux said.

“What’s all this about the rats?”

“I don’t know. It’s bizarre, but it’ll pass.”

Then he very quickly told her that he wanted to ask for her forgiveness, he should have watched over her, and he had neglected her often. She shook her head, as if to silence him. But he added:

"Everything will be better when you return. We'll start over."

"Yes," she said, her eyes shining, "we'll start over."

A moment later, she turned her back to him, looking out through the windowpane. On the platform, people hurried and bumped into each other. The locomotive's hiss just barely reached them. He called his wife by her first name, and when she looked back, her face was covered with tears.

"No," he said softly.

Under the tears, the smile returned, a little tight. She took a deep breath:

"Go on, everything will be fine."

He pressed her against him, and on the platform now, from the other side of the window, all he could see was her smile.

"Please," he said, "take care of yourself."

But she couldn't hear him.

Near the exit, on the station platform, Rieux ran into M. Othon, the magistrate, who was holding his little boy by the hand. The doctor asked if he was going on a trip. M. Othon, who was tall and dressed in black, half resembled what was once called a dandy, and half an undertaker. He responded in a friendly but brief way:

"I'm waiting for Mme Othon, who went to pay her respects to my family."

The locomotive whistled.

"The rats…" said the magistrate.

Rieux made a move toward the train, then turned back to the exit.

"Yes," he said, "it's nothing."

All he remembered from that moment was the sight of a passing railwayman who carried a crate of dead rats under his arm.

That same afternoon, at the start of his consulting hours, Rieux had a visit from a young man he'd been told was a journalist, who had already come by that morning. His name was Raymond Rambert. Short, with thick shoulders, a firm expression, and clear, intelligent eyes, Rambert wore his clothes with a sporty cut and seemed at ease in the world. He got straight to the point. He was writing an investigative piece for a large Paris paper about the lives of the Arabs in the city, and he wanted information about their sanitary conditions. Rieux told him that these conditions were poor. But he wanted to know, before going any further, if the journalist could tell the truth.

"Of course," the man said.

"I mean: Can you totally condemn the situation?"

"Totally, no—I must admit. But I imagine that total condemnation would be baseless."

Softly, Rieux said that in fact, such condemnation would be baseless, but in asking the question, he was simply trying to learn whether or not Rambert's report could be frank, without holding back.

"I won't accept anything less than complete, unvarnished accounts. Which is why I won't lend my information to yours."

"You sound like Saint-Just," said the journalist, smiling.

Without raising his voice, Rieux said that he wouldn't know anything about that, but his language was that of a man with a fondness for his fellow humans, weary of the world he was living in, and determined, for his part, to refuse injustice and concessions. With his neck hunched into his shoulders, Rambert watched the doctor.

"I think I understand," he finally said, standing up.

The doctor walked him to the door.

"Thanks for taking it like this."

Rambert seemed impatient.

"Yes," he said, "I understand. Sorry to bother you."

The doctor shook his hand and told him that there was a curious story to be written about how many dead rats people were finding in the city just then.

"Ah!" Rambert exclaimed. "Now that interests me."

At five, as he went out again for his rounds, the doctor shared the stairs with a youthful man, heavily built, with a wide, chiseled face that was barred with thick eyebrows. He'd met him a few times at the home of the Spanish dancers who lived on the top floor of his building. Jean Tarrou smoked his cigarette deliberately as he watched the last convulsions of a rat dying on the step at his feet. He raised the calm, somewhat fixed gaze of his gray eyes to the doctor and greeted him, adding that the appearance of these rats was a curious thing.

"Yes," said Rieux, "but in the end, it's tiresome."

"In a way, Doctor, only in a way. We've never seen anything like it, that's the truth. But I find it fascinating, yes, positively fascinating."

Tarrou passed a hand through his hair to smooth it back, looked at the rat again, then smiled at Rieux:

"But in the end, Doctor, this is really the concierge's business."

Indeed, the doctor found the concierge in front of the building, leaning on the wall by the entrance, with a tired look on his usually excitable face.

"Yes, I know," old Michel said to Rieux when he told him about this latest discovery. "We're finding them in twos and threes now. But it's the same in every house."

He seemed beaten and worried. He rubbed his neck mechanically. Rieux asked him how he was feeling. The concierge couldn't quite say he was unwell. Only that he was a bit under the weather. In his opinion, it was a question of morale. Those rats had dealt him a blow and things would really look up once they'd gone.

But the next morning, April 18, the doctor was returning with his mother from the station when he found M. Michel with an even more furrowed look: from cellar to attic, a dozen rats carpeted the stairs.

The neighbors' garbage cans were full of them. The doctor's mother wasn't surprised to hear the news.

"These things happen."

She was a small woman with silver hair and soft, dark eyes.

"I'm happy to see you again, Bernard," she said. "The rats can't do anything to change that."

He had to agree: when she was around, everything seemed easy.

Nonetheless, Rieux called up municipal pest control, since he knew the director. Had he heard about these rats who were coming out in droves to die in the open air? Mercier, the director, had heard about them, and even in his own department, which was housed not far from the docks, they had found some fifty of them. Nonetheless, he was wondering if it was serious. Rieux wasn't sure, but he thought pest control should do something.

"Yes," said Mercier, "with a permit. If you think it's worth it, I can try to get a permit."

"It's always worth it," said Rieux.

His housekeeper had just told him that they had found several hundred dead rats in the big factory where her husband worked.

It was around this time that our fellow citizens started to worry. After the 18th, the factories and warehouses started spitting out hundreds of rat corpses. In a few cases, they had to finish off the creatures who were taking too long to die. But from the outskirts to the city center, wherever Doctor Rieux happened to pass, everywhere our fellow citizens gathered, the rats were waiting in piles, in the garbage cans, or in long lines in the gutters. The evening papers took up the story from that day on, and demanded what, if anything, the municipal government would do, and what emergency measures it would take to protect its constituents from this disgusting invasion. The municipal government had not put anything forward and had nothing at all in mind, but it began by assembling as a council to discuss the matter. Pest control was given a permit to

collect the dead rats every morning at dawn. Once the collection was done, two service vehicles were allocated to bring the creatures to the incinerator and burn them.

But in the days that followed, the situation worsened. The number of rodents they gathered was increasing, and each morning their haul grew more abundant. After the fourth day, the rats started to come out of the woodwork to die in groups. From crannies, from basements, from larders, from sewer drains, they climbed in long, staggering lines to falter in the light, spinning around and dying close to humans. At night, in corridors or alleyways, you could clearly make out their little death cries. At morning, in the suburbs, people even found them in the creek, a little flower of blood on their pointed snouts, some swollen and putrid, others stiff with their whiskers still straight. In the city itself, they appeared in little piles, on landings or in hallways. They also died alone in administrative halls, on school playgrounds, sometimes on café terraces. Our fellow citizens were astonished to discover them in the busiest parts of the city. From the main square, to the boulevards, to the walkway overlooking the harbor, the streets were all contaminated. Cleared of dead beasts at dawn, the city would find more of them scattered throughout the day, in increasing numbers. On the sidewalks, more than one person out for a nighttime stroll felt, underfoot, the squishy mass of a still-fresh corpse. It was as if the very earth beneath our houses was purging its cargo of humors, as if it was allowing its boils and pus to come to the surface after what had, until then, been an internal struggle. If only you could picture the shock in our little city, usually so peaceful, overcome in a matter of days, like a healthy man whose thick blood suddenly revolts!

Things went so far that the Ransdoc Agency (for information, documentation, all the facts on any subject) announced, in its free radio news broadcast, that six thousand two hundred and thirty-one rats had been collected and burned on the 25th alone. This figure, which clarified for citizens the daily spectacle unfolding before their

eyes, created an uproar. Until that point, people were merely complaining about a rather repugnant accident. Then they started to understand that this phenomenon, whose scale couldn't be perceived or traced to its origin, had something threatening about it. Only the old, asthmatic Spaniard kept rubbing his hands and saying "They're out in force, they're out in force," with senile joy.

However, on April 28, Ransdoc announced a haul of about eight thousand rats, and in the city, anxiety reached its peak. People demanded radical measures, blamed the authorities, and some talked about retreating to their houses at the seaside. But the next day, the agency announced that the phenomenon had sharply ceased, and that pest control had only collected a negligible quantity of dead rats. The city exhaled.

But it was on that same day, at noon, as Doctor Rieux was parking his car in front of his building, that he caught sight of the concierge coming slowly down from the end of the street, moving painfully, his head bowed and his arms and legs spread, in the posture of a marionette. The old man was holding the arm of a priest the doctor recognized. It was Father Paneloux, a learned and militant Jesuit he'd run into a few times who was much respected in our city, even among those who were indifferent to matters of religion. He waited for them. Old M. Michel had burning eyes and his breath whistled. He wasn't feeling well and had wanted to get some air. But the sharp pains in his neck, armpits, and groin had forced him to turn back and ask for help from Father Paneloux.

"It's the lumps," he said. "I really had to make an effort."

With his arm sticking through the car window, the doctor moved his finger along the base of Michel's neck as the man bent toward him; a sort of woody knot had formed there.

"Get to bed, take your temperature, I'll come see you this afternoon."

Once the concierge had gone, Rieux asked Father Paneloux what he thought of this whole business about the rats.

“Oh!” the father said, “it must be an epidemic,” and his eyes were smiling behind his round glasses.

After lunch, Rieux was rereading the telegram from the sanatorium that said his wife had arrived, when the telephone rang. It was one of his former patients who worked for the city. He had long suffered from a narrowing aorta, and, since he was poor, Rieux had cared for him for free.

“Yes,” he said, “you remember me. But it’s about someone else. Come quickly, something’s happened next door.”

He was breathless. Rieux thought of the concierge and decided he would see him afterwards. A few minutes later, he stepped through the door of a squat building on the rue Faidherbe, near the city limits. In the middle of the cold, stinking stairway, he encountered Joseph Grand, the city clerk, who was coming down to meet him. He was a man of about fifty, with a long, drooping yellow mustache, narrow shoulders, and thin limbs.

“Things are improving,” he said as he greeted Rieux, “but at first I thought he was done for.”

He blew his nose. On the third and final story, on the left-hand door, Rieux saw words in red chalk:

“Come in, I’ve hanged myself.”

They went in. The rope hung suspended over a toppled chair, with the table pushed into a corner. But it hung empty.

“I got him down in time,” said Grand who always seemed to be choosing his words, though his language was very simple. “I happened to be going out, and I heard a noise. When I saw the writing, what can I say, I thought it was a joke. But he groaned in a way that was funny, and sinister, so to speak.”

He scratched his head:

“To my mind, it must be a painful undertaking. Naturally, I went in.”

They pushed open a door and found themselves on the threshold of a bright but poorly furnished room. A little round man

was lying in the brass bed. He was breathing hard and looked at them with gummy eyes. The doctor stopped. In between breaths, he thought he heard the little cries of rats. But nothing moved in the corners. Rieux approached the bed. The man hadn't fallen sharply or from enough of a height, and his vertebrae had held. Of course, he was a bit asphyxiated. He needed an x-ray. The doctor gave him a shot of camphor oil, and said that everything would sort itself out in a few days.

"Thank you, Doctor," said the man in a muffled voice.

Rieux asked Grand if he'd informed the police and the clerk started to look sheepish.

"No," he said, "oh, no! I thought the most urgent thing…"

"Of course," Rieux interrupted. "I'll take care of it."

But at that moment, the sick man became agitated, sitting up in bed and protesting he was fine. It wasn't worth the trouble.

"Calm yourself," said Rieux. "There won't be any problem, believe me, and I have to make a statement."

"Oh!" the other cried.

And he pushed himself backward, sobbing in little gulps. Grand, who had been fiddling with his mustache for a minute, approached him.

"Come now, Monsieur Cottard," he said. "Try to understand. They could hold the doctor responsible. If, for example, you got it into your head to try again…"

But Cottard, through his tears, said that he wouldn't try again, that it was only a moment of madness, and he wished only to be left in peace. Rieux wrote out a prescription.

"Understood," he said. "Let's leave it be, I'll come back in two or three days. But don't do anything stupid."

On the landing, he told Grand that he was required to make a statement, but he would ask the police superintendent to wait a couple of days before starting his inquiry.