

account of how Puerto Ricans of different racial backgrounds often internalize and reproduce in their behavior the prejudices and racist norms prevalent in U.S. society.

FROM FAMILY INSTALLMENTS

7: In Black Turf

The day before, I had made up my mind to cut Sunday Mass for the fourth straight week. In parochial school, the Christian Brothers¹ gave you no choice about religious matters. But I was out of their clutches now, and there was no punishment to worry about if I got to Mass late, or if I didn't get there at all. Giving up the Holy Ghost² and the rest of the religious business was a serious decision, the most serious I'd made to date. I was beginning to feel like a real grown-up. But because it was a critical decision, I couldn't bring myself to make it all at once; growing up, I knew, was a slow process, and I was in no hurry to become a full-grown man before my time. I decided to spend Sunday morning strolling with my buddy Panna in the wilds of Central Park.

At 9:45, fifteen minutes before the young people's Mass began, I came down and found Panna sitting on the steps of my stoop. His real name was Teodoro, but to his friends he was Panna because he called everyone he liked "Partner." He'd picked up the word from cowboy movies. He was small, undernourished, and about as black a Puerto Rican as I'd ever known. I don't think he had a drop of white blood in him. Half his ancestors must have been shipped to the Caribbean from Africa, and the other half, the Indian side of his family tree, must have been waiting for them on the island long before Ponce de León got there.³ He had an immense head topped with an abundance of thick, unwashed, kinky hair, and tiny, rotting teeth. People sometimes took him for an American black, but he was as Puerto Rican as I was. Maybe more so, because at least he didn't try to deny his origins by getting rid of his East Harlem accent.

My own accent was closer, though not really close, to the speech of American disc jockeys and TV-radio detergent pushers. This was a result of having spent eight submissive years under the influence of the hard-driving Christian Brothers, who subscribed as faithfully to the myth of the American melting pot as they did to their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Nobody had ever taken me for someone whose veins might contain Negro or Arab or Caribbean Indian blood. I was too light-skinned for that. On various occasions I had been mistaken for a Jew, an Italian, a

1. Or the Congregation of Christian Brothers (Latin: *Congregatio Fratrum Christianorum*), a worldwide religious community within the Catholic Church, devoted chiefly to the evangelization and education of youth.

2. Along with God and the Son, the third person

in the Christian Trinity (Godhead).

3. The Spanish conquistador Juan Ponce de León (1460–1521) might have explored Puerto Rico in 1506, but he began its colonization in 1508, after which the Spanish Crown appointed him governor of the island.

Greek, even a Hungarian; and each time I had come away feeling secretly proud of myself for having disguised my Spik accent, and with it my lineage. I could almost feel myself melting smoothly and evenly into the great Pot.

The north end of Central Park was right across from our block. We went there to scout around for girls who might be willing to join us in the bushes. This was a favorite fantasy of ours. It gave our excursions in the park a specific purpose, and it satisfied one part of a favorite daydream of mine: saving a nice-looking girl from rape. She could be a Puerto Rican dusky, or an American blonde, it didn't matter, as long as she was equipped with big, plump boobs and a nice round rump.

The time would be early evening, just as the sun was about to drop between the tall tenements of Central Park West; the place, a clump of bushes near the baseball diamonds. I would arrive on the scene just as the pervert, a big, muscular black man with a shaved head, was tearing off her pink polka-dot panties with one hand and unzipping his fly with the other. With a baseball bat or a sawed-off broomstick I just happened to be carrying, I would splinter the lecher's skull. By risking my life for the poor girl's chastity, I'd be putting her in my debt. To remind her of this would be crude; but she'd know it, and she would want to repay me in kind. At this juncture I would stoop to pick up her panties, and when I offered them to her, she would take my hand and lead me into the bushes for a satisfactory settlement. Afterward, holding hands, we would walk off toward Loui's Luncheonette on the corner of 108th and Fifth. After a thick malted (two straws, one glass), she'd leave me her name, address, and phone number, and an open invitation to come and see her whenever I had time.

What usually happened, whenever a girl saw Panna and me approaching her with a look of undisguised lust in our eyes, was that she would clutch her purse to her chest, turn abruptly, and scamper off for the nearest exit. Copping a girl's drawers in that park was even more difficult than stealing a squirrel's hoard of nuts, but we liked to pretend it was easy.

The only people in the park at ten on a Sunday morning were mounted cops on their big, brown, huge-assed horses, perverts like ourselves, and members of the Puerto Rican Baseball League. At the baseball diamonds we watched one inning that lasted over a half hour (the beer-bellied pitchers couldn't get the ball over the plate, which wouldn't have mattered much, since catcher and batters were too sleepy to see the ball; and the fielders, undernourished and weighted down with heavy, loose-fitting uniforms, couldn't catch up with flyballs and groundballs), and when we decided that Puerto Rican baseball had no future as a national pastime, we headed north toward the black people's section of Central Park.

Across the bicycle path, on a grassy area where Puerto Rican families picnicked on sunny weekends, we looked for empty beer and soda bottles. If we found enough empties, we could get them "changed" at Miguel's *bodega* on Madison and head for the movies or Loui's Luncheonette. All we found was a bag of dried chicken bones crawling with ants, and a used condom. Panna picked up the condom with a crooked stick and came at me, swishing it like a secondhand sword inches from my face. I tore off down the sloped picnic grounds and stumbled to a halt in front of a marshy stream that divided "our" section of the park from the black people's section.

Like a scrawny, scraggly blackbird, Panna stumbled after me and jabbed playfully at my chest with his stick and condom.

I stooped and picked up a wet, scummy stone. "Don't touch me with that thing, mother-fol!" I warned him, taking a full windup.

Thrown off guard by my unexpected counterattack, he halted. He was a few inches smaller than me and about half as strong. His head, with its thick tangle of kinky hair, was attached to his thin neck like a bowling ball to a skinny long finger; it swayed uneasily from side to side on its precarious stem. His round, coarse face, dotted here and there with pimples, looked about five years older than his actual age. He was fourteen, my age, but already half his teeth were hopelessly rotting. No amount of dental work could save them. One had been knocked out in a fight with his older brother. I don't think he'd ever seen a dentist. Maybe that was why girls took off when they saw us coming.

"All right," he said, thrusting his head forward and closing in on me with quick little hops, like a starling advancing on a worm. "Drop the rock or I'll plug you with my fuckin' scumbag."

Stabbed helpless with laughter, I lurched backward. He opened his mouth wide and grinned at me, the evil guy stalking his helpless victim. The sight of his putrid teeth, with the black, blank gap in the middle, disarmed me completely. I slipped on the slimy grass, dropped the rock, and tried to fall forward. But I splashed into the stream, flat on my ass.

Panna hurled himself to the ground in convulsions.

"See what the fuck you did?" I screamed, already worrying about what Mami would say when she saw what I'd done to my best pair of pants. Panna was too busy laughing to hear me.

"You black fuck!" I snapped. "You think it's funny?"

He suddenly became silent. He hurled the stick into the stream while I got to my feet. I was completely soaked from the waist down. Green slime dripped from my Sunday pants and clung to my recently polished shoes.

"Don't call me that shit, Santos." I stood up and slapped at my pants. "You asked for it, shit. Look what the hell you did."

"Just don't call me that," he said, biting his big lower lip. "I don't like nobody calling me a black fuck, understand?"

"Just watch it next time," I said, half sorry I had insulted him.

He bent his head a little and stared at my throat, as if readying himself for a savage fight. "You better say you're sorry, Santos."

I was sure I could take him if he wanted a fight, but the thought of fighting him was as repulsive to me as the condom he had just threatened to stick in my face. He was my "panna."

"All right, forget it, okay?" I had to raise my voice so he wouldn't think I was backing down.

He raised his dark eyes to my face. "So say you're sorry."

"All right, shit. I'm sorry. You satisfied?"

He jerked his shoulders and started to walk off alongside the shallow stream, kicking at the grass with his sneakers.

I followed him.

"Hey, man," I said, "you heard me say I'm sorry, right?"

"Yeah, I heard you." He was staring at the ground.

I walked in front of him and faced him. He stopped abruptly, tilted his large head, and scowled. His hands were clenched tight at his sides.

"I don't wanna fight witchu, Panna."

"So whatchu want, then?"

"Say you're sorry."

"For what?"

I slapped my pants. "You made me fall in the filthy water."

He stepped to the side and shrugged his shoulders. If we got into a fight, the only thing I'd have to guard against was his head. He could crack my jaw with one butt of that bowling ball.

He raised his voice: "I didn't touch you, Santos."

"You stuck that scumbag in my face."

He shook his head and smirked slow-motion. "I don't wanna argue, Santos."

"So say it and I'll call it evens."

He hesitated, squinting at the stream. An apology was a confession of weakness, but so was not asking for one when you felt insulted. So I kept him on the hook. Let him learn better than to humiliate his own friend.

"Okay, muh man," he said. It came out weak. "So I'm sorry you got wet. Next time watch your balance—otherwise, tough shit."

That was all. Take it or leave it. I pretended to be fully satisfied.

"Forget it, Panna. That stream was out to get me."

We continued walking, quietly, keeping the distance between us a little wider than usual. I was afraid he'd hold a lifetime grudge against me for the insult. What I couldn't understand was that he and his older brother, who was a little lighter than he was, were always calling each other names like "nigger" and "spook" whenever they got into an argument, and never thought anything about it. With them it was a game.

What the hell was he being so sensitive about all of a sudden? We spoke the same language, lived in the same block, and shared the same friends. Maybe he'd had another fight with his brother earlier that morning and was taking it out on me. I should have kicked his ass when he poked the condom in my face.

The stream dipped and disappeared under a rise of large, jagged rocks which formed a natural bridge to the "black" part of the park. People got killed there, I'd heard, women raped. It was a hilly area where the vegetation grew thicker than anywhere else in the park and was, for that reason, darker. People from our side of the park, from our neighborhood, stayed away from that section. It was strictly for blacks. I seldom ventured there, never on my own.

When we got to within a few feet of the stone bridge, Panna broke into a quick run and leaped onto a rock.

"Where you going?" I asked.

"Thataway, partnuh." He pointed to the other side of the stream.

I was pleased at his rapid change of mood. "Whatchu going there for?"

"Whatchu mean what I'm going there for? Ain't you coming?"

I stared at a dragonfly hovering over the little stream below the rocks.

"What for, man?"

He dropped his hands and shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe we can find some empties."

I grinned. "Or some broad."

He grinned back. "Or some scumbags."

The dragonfly was swooping and circling less than an inch over the water, searching for insects.

"Whatsa matter, Santos, you scared?"

"Whatchu mean, scared?" I leaped up on the rock next to him.

"So let's go."

I let him lead the way.

On the other side of the stream, we had to climb a steep hill on all fours; the ground was damp and loose, even though it hadn't rained in over a week. Every time I grabbed a small plant for support, it came up by the roots and I would slide back a foot or more. I was wearing my Sunday shoes, leather-soled and tight-fitting. Panna was wearing sneakers and had less trouble climbing. As long as he didn't tilt his huge head backward, he was all right.

When I got to the top, minutes after he did, he was staring at an old fortress a short way off to our left.

"Hey, Santos, you know"—he was shielding his eyes with one hand and pointing with the other—"old George Washington fought in there.⁴ He sounded like any one of the Brothers of Saint Misericordia's⁵ driving home a startling fact. ("And after old Judas Iscariot betrays Our Lord, boys, the sap goes and hangs himself! He didn't even get to spend those thirty denaras of silver.")⁶

"Bullshit, Panna."

"No, I ain't lying to you, Santos. I'm just saying what I know. He whipped them Redcoats right there in that focken fort."

"Who told you that?"

"Whatchu mean, who told me? You ignorant? I been here before, lots of times. I grew up in this park."

He picked up a small stone and pitched it hard at the fortress. "So don't tell me what I know and don't know. Everybody knows it, except you. Where you been at, stud?"

"You're jiving me, Panna. You lie."

"Okay, I'll betchu."

"Who, you? You ain't got no money."

"That's fine with me," he said. "I can pay you back tomorrow. But I ain't gonna lose. *You* is. I'll leave you broke you bet with me."

"Forget it, Panna. I don't wanna take your money."

He was always broke. His spending money came mostly from empty bottles and from tips he got delivering groceries on Saturdays. But he always managed to spend it all on candy and the movies by the end of the day, because if he didn't, he had told me, his big brother would go through his pockets at night and steal it. "He steal me blind when I'm sleeping, Santos."

He turned his head toward the fortress. "You *know* I'm right."

"Go ahead, Panna, prove it."

4. George Washington (1732–1799), first U.S. president (1789–97), commanded the Continental Army against the English Army (Redcoats) in the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783).
5. The narrator attends the Catholic parochial school Saint Misericordia, run by the Christian

Brothers.

6. According to the New Testament, Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus to the Roman authorities for 30 pieces of silver. *Denaras*: The *denarius* (plural *denarii*) was a small silver Roman coin first struck in 211 BC.

"Come on, I'll show you. Just follow Panna the leader." He trotted off toward the old fort.

I hesitated. "I ain't going in there, Panna. Smells fishy to me."

"What the hell you scared of?" he said. "You turning into a lame or something?"

So I followed him down some rocks and onto a narrow dirt path thick with weeds. Below I could hear the traffic going in both directions along 110th Street, and smell the gasoline fumes.

We squeezed through a small opening that had been knocked into the stone wall, like the holes in playground fences, only this one must have been smashed with a sledgehammer. Inside there was nothing but tall grass, more weeds, a few commonplace bushes, and a strong smell of human shit. Not far from where I stood, close to the wall, someone had relieved himself and left it at that, uncovered. Now flies, hundreds of them, buzzed around the mess like Ancient Romans at a banquet. In the center of the fortress, rising from a jungle of grass, a shredded, faded flag with only forty-eight stars flapped on a thin white pole, like a pigeon flyer's bandanna tied to the end of a bamboo stick.

"C'mon," Panna called. He was several feet ahead of me, up to his neck in grass.

"Fuck you," I said. "I'm staying right here. There ain't nothing in there but shit."

"There's an old, whatchamacallit, plaque, around here someplace."

I could just about make out his head now, a huge, black, kinky-haired ball rolling slowly along the grass, like an immense sunflower minus petals.

"That's where it says George Washington whipped the Redcoats right here in this spot."

"All you're gonna find in there is a big lump of shit," I called. "There ain't no plaque. You'll fall in a hole and break your leg. Come on, let's go back."

I was getting hungry. The Mass I'd missed should have been over long ago, and I was anxious to change into dry clothes.

I leaned against the stone wall and waited for him to emerge. "Panna," I yelled, "let's go, man. Forget the fuckin' plaque. George Washington never came near this place, you jerk."

A pebble bounced off my head. I looked up and saw one, two, then four black faces. Their owners were standing and sitting on the ledge of the wall, staring down at me. The sun was almost directly overhead now, and I had to squint and shield my eyes to see them clearly.

"Whatchu doin' in there, white boy?" the tallest of the four said. He was about six feet, and he was tapping the wall with the heels of his sneakers and cracking his knuckles. I moved back a few steps for a better look. They were all very black, blacker than Panna even; the noon sun gave their faces a smooth, rubbery look.

"I'm waiting for my friend," I said. My legs began to sag slightly below the knees. I couldn't have run more than a few yards before they caught me. But even a speed-runner didn't stand a chance in that trap.

"Where your friend at?" another one asked. He wasn't much taller than me, but he had the arm muscles of a professional athlete or a truck loader in the garment district. His pants were the color of orange soda; he was holding a stickball bat out in front of him like a fishing pole.

I pointed toward the tall grass. "He's in there." I realized my mistake immediately. Panna had probably spotted them before I did; that was why he hadn't answered when I called him.

When I squinted up again, only one of them was sitting on the wall. He was the smallest, an inch or two smaller than Panna. A blue beret, spattered with dust, was tilted dramatically to one side of his head.

"Don't move, motherfucker," he said.

I pressed my back to the wall and looked for a possible way out. The hole I'd come in through was impassable; they would be coming in any second. There was nothing but grass, the long white flagpole, and the pile of human shit with its frantic flies. If there was an exit, it would have to be across the field, on the other side. If Panna had found it, he must have escaped. That bastard, I thought. It was all his fault, and now he had copped out on me.

The three came in through the hole in the wall one at a time and surrounded me. I stared at the ground, waiting stiffly for the first blow and regretting that I didn't have a gun on me and that I had never taken Karate lessons.

The six-foot one stepped up to me and looked down for a few seconds. I listened to the roar of a crosstown bus far away.

"Where your buddy, stud?"

"I told you," I said. "He's in there somewhere."

"What he doin' there?"

"He's looking for a plaque."

The one with orange-colored pants stroked the grass with his stickball bat. "A what?"

"A plaque," I said. "My friend says there's this plaque in here that says George Washington fought the Redcoats here during the Ci-Ci-Civil War."

They looked at each other, shook their heads, smiled, and broke into laughter. One of them slapped the side of his head and came down on his knees, almost touching the ground. He had on a sleeveless white sweat shirt with CLINTON HIGH SCHOOL lettered across the chest.

"Man, you must be outa your fuckin' skull," he said when he straightened out. "Old Georgie never came near this fuckin' place."

"He puttin' us on," the tall one said.

"I ain't puttin' you on," I insisted. I didn't see what was so funny. "That's what my friend said."

The one in orange pants snapped his fingers. "Maybe he mean Booker T. Washington."⁷ He stepped up to me and tapped me on the shoulder with his stick. "You tell your friend to come on out here 'fore I go in there and get him out myself."

I hesitated.

"You better do like he say, son," the one from Clinton said. "He ain't playing witchu."

I cleared my throat. The strong sun was beginning to give me a headache. "Hey, Panna," I called. "C'mere, man."

No answer.

They all frowned. They thought I had lied to them about Panna and the plaque.

7. African American educator (1856–1915).

I called again. "Hey, Panna, man, come on out, you lame!"

Nothing. I was sure he was back on the block, or in his house stuffing himself with peanut butter sandwiches and very likely enjoying the thought that I was getting just what I deserved for having called him a black fuck.

The one with the stick started off in the direction of the flagpole. "Man," he said, "if I don't find your friend in there, I'm gonna crack your head with this stick, dig?" In a few seconds he disappeared. I could hear his stick stroking the grass.

"I didn't do nothing," I said to the tall one.

"Nobody say you did, Jack."

"How much brea-ud you got, son?" the one with the sleeveless sweatshirt asked me. He was flexing the muscle of his right arm and staring at it as if it were some abnormal growth that had suddenly emerged into full view. It resembled a large sweet potato. I didn't stand a chance.

"Scuse me?"

"I said how much brea-ud you got? You know, *mmnoneh, honeh*."

Before I left the house that morning, Mami had given me a quarter for the church collection. I had planned on treating Panna to a soda at Loui's Luncheonette, but now he could go screw himself.

"I ain't got nothin' on me," I said.

"Put your hands behind your head," the tall one commanded.

I inched away from him. "For what?"

He grabbed my shirt collar and pushed me hard against the stone wall. A shock of pain shot through my spine. My legs felt like two pieces of lumber.

"Put your hands behind your head," the Clinton student said. He was standing so close now that I could smell his bad breath.

I lifted my arms and clasped my hands behind my head, the way I'd seen it done on the block whenever the cops were frisking a suspect.

The big one stuck his hand in one of my pockets, then in the other, and came up with the quarter.

His mouth spread in a thick-lipped smile. "Dig," he told his friends. He pinched the shiny quarter between two long fingers and held it up for the others to see. The solemn silver face of George Washington flashed in the sun.

"Maybe he got a wallet on him," the one sitting on the wall called down.

The tall one slipped the quarter in his pocket and patted my head. "Turn around, cracker."

I turned quickly and raised both arms high over my head, the palms flat against the warm wall, while he slapped my back pockets. Where was Panna? I refused to believe he had run off. Not that it made any difference. He was too small to defend himself against one of them, let alone all four. Only the gang from the block could pull me out of this mess, and they were all far away, ignorant of the trap I had walked into. This was strange turf for me; I was used to dealing only with Spiks like myself. On the block my name stood for something among my friends; here it was less than shit. It was useless to tell these black guys that I had many friends who would descend on them in an all-out war if they didn't release me unharmed. That kind of threat might only get me a busted head.

"Sheet, he ain't got nothin' on him," the tall one told his friends after he had gone through my pockets. "Turn around."

I dropped my hands and turned slowly.

The Clinton student grabbed my right arm and jerked it upwards. A pain shot down my shoulder. "Nobody say to drop your hands."

I raised them again, stretching them to their limits, to show that I hadn't meant any harm.

"And keep them up, mother," the lookout man on the wall yelled down.

Suddenly the six-foot one stuck his long leg between my legs and rammed the heel of his hand against my shoulder. I stumbled, scraped my back on the wall, and collapsed with a squeal on something soft. A swarm of flies, thousands it seemed, exploded around me, and in seconds I was immersed in the odor of human shit. I sat there, too overcome with disgust and rage to move. And the flies swarmed and buzzed around me, as if they had discovered a newly laid mass of human excrement and had gone into delirium.

Not because I had been pushed around and robbed of a quarter, which had not been mine to begin with, nor even because I had been smeared in shit, which could be washed off, but because I had been humiliated without any possibility of fighting back, of standing up for myself—for that reason I began to cry. I didn't cry loudly or hysterically; only girls and women had the right to that kind of display. I cried softly, missing my breath once in a while and sucking in the thin, fibrous liquid that spilled like egg white from my nostrils. A slow accumulation of pain, brought on by the strong noon sun, began to tighten around my forehead. I dropped my head and waited for them to kick my face in.

But they just stood there, silently staring down at me.

From the grassy area, where Panna and his pursuer had disappeared, I could hear voices and a stick slashing grass. I waited, resigned to the stink of the shit I was sitting on and the sting and buzz of frenzied flies. The voices had the sound of calm conversation rather than conflict.

In a few moments, Panna and his captor emerged. I watched them through half-closed eyes. They were still talking. Panna was smiling.

When he saw me he stopped, clapped a hand to his mouth, and whispered: "Holy shit! Oh, lordie."

I rubbed two fists in my eyes.

"Who you got there?" the tall one asked the one who had found Panna.

"This here's Ramírez, my friend," he said, slapping Panna on the back. "We went to junior high. He all right. Foo! Whatchu-all been doin' to whitey here?"

"He pushed me in," I said.

The one with the Clinton sweatshirt kicked some dirt in front of me. "I make you eat that shit, too, if you don't shut your big mouth."

"He's my friend," Panna told him. "Right, Santos?"

The tall one sucked his teeth and looked him up and down. "So whatchu be hangin' out with him for? He ain't none o' your kind."

"We live in the same block," Panna explained.

His school friend held out the stickball bat to me. "Here, man, grab on to this."

I shook my head, suspecting a trick.

"Go on, Santos," Panna said. "Get up, man."

I grabbed the stick cautiously and pulled myself up quickly, in case he might decide to release his hold on it.

The seat of my pants felt wet. Repulsed by the stink, the others backed up a few steps.

"Man, you full of shit," the kid on the wall said. He was holding his nose.

The tall one stuck his hand in his pocket and brought out my quarter. "Here," he told me, "take your fuckin' George Washington back. I don't want your quarter."

I put out my hand suspiciously and let him slap the shiny quarter in the palm.

"Let me tell you somethin', white boy," he began. "This here's our turf, understand?"

I nodded, biting my lip.

"And it don't make no difference to me who your friend is, even if he black as an asshole. You stick to your side of the park."

I kept nodding.

"Otherwise I make you eat that shit. Just keep that in mind."

Then he turned to Panna. "And you, shorty with the big hea-ud, don't think cause you black all over and ugly as sin you can bring who you wants around here."

Panna nodded. "Okay, man, I keep him off of here."

A long silence followed. I stared at the flagpole and longed to be back on my small block, where there were no territorial divisions, no white and black bullshit.

"You better get on home, Ramírez," the school friend said to Panna.

I let Panna go on ahead and tried to remain calm during the few seconds it took to squeeze through the hole in the wall of the fort. And just as I was about to emerge on the other side, I heard a voice behind me: "Man, you full of sheeet," followed by a fit of laughter.

We walked slowly side by side until we reached the top of the hill, from where we could see part of the baseball diamonds, and beyond them the mansions of Fifth Avenue. I started down in a half-run, then broke into an awkward, stumbling rush down the steep hill until I was on the safe side of the little stream.

From somewhere behind me I could hear Panna calling. "Hey, Santos, man. Slow down. Whatchu scared of?"

I ignored him and picked up speed. Near the baseball diamonds, I heard the reassuring sounds of Spanish and slowed down. "Nothing," I said to myself. "I ain't scared of nothing." I stopped and looked back for Panna. He was nowhere in sight. I continued walking at a steady, brisk pace, leaving a strong stench behind me.