

e I drew this much attention. I have re-
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JESÚS COLÓN

A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches

Little Things Are Big

It was very late at night on the eve of Memorial Day. She came into the subway at the 34th Street Pennsylvania Station. I am still trying to remember how she managed to push herself in with a baby on her right arm, a valise in her left hand, and two children, a boy and girl about three and five years old, trailing after her. She was a nice looking white lady in her early twenties.

At Nevins Street, Brooklyn, we saw her preparing to get off at the next station—Atlantic Avenue—which happened to be the place where I too had to get off. Just as it was a problem for her to get on, it was going to be a problem for her to get off the subway with two small children to be taken care of, a baby on her right arm, and a medium-sized valise in her left hand. And there I was, also preparing to get off at Atlantic Avenue, with no bundles to take care of—not even the customary book under my arm without which I feel that I am not completely dressed.

As the train was entering the Atlantic Avenue station, some white man stood up from his seat and helped her out, placing the children on the long, deserted platform. There were only two adult persons on the long platform some time after midnight on the eve of that Memorial Day.

I could perceive the steep, long concrete stairs going down to the Long Island Railroad or into the street. Should I offer my help as the American white man did at the subway door placing the two children outside the subway car? Should I take care of the girl and the boy, take them by their hands until they reached the end of the steep long concrete stairs of the Atlantic Avenue station?

Courtesy is a characteristic of the Puerto Rican. And here I was—a Puerto Rican—hours past midnight, a valise, two white children and a white lady with a baby on her arm palpably needing somebody to help her at least until she descended the long concrete stairs.

But how could I, a Negro and a Puerto Rican, approach this white lady—who very likely might have preconceived prejudices against Negroes and everybody with foreign accents—in a deserted subway station very late at night?

What would she say? What would be the first reaction of this white American woman, perhaps coming from a small town, with a valise, two children, and a baby on her right arm? Would she say: Yes, of course, you may help me. Or would she think that I was just trying to get too familiar? Or would she think worse than that perhaps? What would I do if she let out a scream as I went toward her to offer my help?

Was I misjudging her? So many slanders are written every day in the daily press against the Negroes and Puerto Ricans. I hesitated for a long, long minute. The ancestral manners that the most illiterate Puerto Rican passes on from father to son were struggling inside me. Here was I, way past midnight, face to face with a situation that could very well explode into an outburst of prejudices and chauvinistic conditioning of the “divide and rule” policy of present-day society.

It was a long minute. I passed on by her as if I saw nothing. As if I was insensitive to her need. Like a rude animal walking on two legs, I just moved on half running by the long subway platform, leaving the children and the valise and her with the baby on her arm. I took the steps of the long concrete stairs in twos until I reached the street above and the cold air slapped my warm face.

This is what racism and prejudice and chauvinism and official artificial divisions can do to people and to a nation!

Perhaps the lady was not prejudiced after all. Or not prejudiced enough to scream at the coming of a Negro toward her in a solitary subway station a few hours past midnight.

If you were not that prejudiced, I failed you, dear lady. I know that there is a chance in a million that you will read these lines. I am willing to take that millionth chance. If you were not that prejudiced, I failed you, lady. I failed you, children. I failed myself to myself.

I buried my courtesy early on Memorial Day morning. But here is a promise that I make to myself here and now; if I am ever faced with an occasion like that again, I am going to offer my help regardless of how the offer is going to be received.

Then I will have my courtesy with me again.

Greetings from Washington

John and his wife Mary went to Washington on his vacation to see the cherry blossoms, and to see Washington. John and I are good friends though we think very differently. John thinks it is too bad that "a man like you" should have such "crazy ideas!" John has one very good quality. He has a sense of humor. John also likes to tease.

So while in Washington he sent me a postcard, with a picture of the Lincoln Memorial on it. In the writing space of the card he wrote: "Greetings from Washington! City of democracy, equality, and freedom! Having a wonderful time—John and Mary." I would not doubt that perhaps John and Mary were having a wonderful time. They are white. And they had vacation money systematically put aside every week of the year for just such an occasion.

So anything can happen in Washington, D.C., capital of the United States of America. If you are white and have a little money to spend. You might even be happy if you are the kind of a person who doesn't look too closely and ask too many questions; if you are more or less insensitive to what happens to others and how the other half lives. You might even be happy in Washington, D.C.

When I said that anything can happen in Washington, I am not referring to what is taking place inside the Pentagon or in the White House, important as those things are for all of us. I am referring to everyday happenings in the lives of ordinary citizens, especially those not of the white race who go out to the United States capital.

In Washington I have seen a man break the glass in which he has served an orange refreshment to a Negro, in front of him right after the Negro had finished drinking from the glass. I have seen in Washington. . . . But what is the use? There are so many instances of race discrimination in Washington against colored diplomats, artists, scientists, and ordinary laymen that just to enumerate them will take hundreds of pages, from Marian Anderson to the end of the alphabet.

One time I went to Washington. I don't remember on what delegation or committee. It would take us at least two days to finish our business in the capital. So I took every precaution to see that I had a place to sleep at least for a night. A friend gave me a letter to a Negro family in Washington. They would have space for me to sleep for one night. The delegation went to the various offices we had to go to. After a good day's legwork from building to building we went into one of the government cafeterias—one

of the few places where Negroes and whites can eat together unmolested in downtown Washington—and had our supper. We agreed on a place in which we were to meet the next morning and everybody left for the house in which a nice soft bed was waiting for him. Or so I thought.

I went to the Negro family's address to whom our mutual friend in New York had given me a very nice letter of introduction. I knocked on the door and waited. After a while, I knocked again. Then again and more persistently and strongly. A neighbor in the next apartment opened the door. "Are you looking for Mr. and Mrs. —" "Yes." "They went to New York for a few days to visit their folks in Jamaica, Long Island."

"What shall I do now?" I thought to myself. It was already around eight thirty or nine in the evening. I had a little over twenty dollars in my wallet. I went to the railroad station and returned my little overnight valise to one of the boxes in which, for twenty-five cents, you could lock anything from a briefcase to a suitcase. I wanted to be free to walk and move around without any extra weight bothering me. Then I started to look for a place to sleep.

I visited half a dozen hotels, large and medium size. They all said the same thing: No colored people allowed. When I went to three or four rather dilapidated and suspicious-looking rooming houses offering any price they asked for a cot somewhere in which to pass the night, I met with the same answer: "No colored allowed."

Suddenly I remembered that a Jewish friend had given me the telephone of a girl friend of his who worked for the government in Washington. I had it written on the margin of my *New York Times* that I had in the valise and that I had no time to read during the day. I went back to the railroad station to get the valise and the address.

By now it was eleven o'clock at night. I called the number and gave my friend's name in New York as an introduction. Then I explained my situation. Everything. She told me to come but not to take the elevator. She explained that she lived in an apartment building for whites only. If anybody knew that she was inviting a Negro to sleep at her place, she would be sure to lose her apartment. So she gave me her apartment number and detailed instructions on how to avoid being seen coming in by anybody. I will remember that night all my life. I went into that apartment building as if I were actually going to commit a crime. Avoiding everybody, walking on tiptoes as silently and stealthily as possible! And to think that I was going to do what millions of people were doing in over half the world at that very hour: Going to sleep! But in Washington, the "capital of the world's great-

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est democracy,” I had to act like a thief just to get a place where I could go to bed and fall asleep!

The young lady shared the apartment with another office worker friend of hers. I slept on a sofa in the parlor. It was agreed that I would get up very early so that I could leave as unseen as I came in the night before. This I did. All this happened a few years ago. If you placed the two young ladies—they must be older now—right in front of me today, I confess that I would not recognize them. All I know is that both of them were waiting for my knock, dressed in their housecoats, when I came into their apartment. Wherever you are ladies, from these pages of reminiscences, thank you again. [. . .]

I remember the time that Ava Miranda and some of her friends went from Brooklyn to visit her uncle in Washington. Some of the girls were white and some were Negroes. The uncle, a Puerto Rican veteran of the First World War, had lived in Washington for many years. He was supposed to be a “small” big shot in Washington: a Puerto Rican who felt himself to be 200 percent American, who on Armistice Day was the first to be in line with his 1917 uniform, ribbons, and medals, ready to parade down Pennsylvania Avenue and show the world the equality, freedom, and liberty you could find in Washington, capital of the U.S.A. He was the kind who believed in everything that the books said—and then more. He was a Puerto Rican who had gradually and unconsciously converted himself into a flag waving, pledge taking, bigger and better 200 percent American.

As soon as the girls left the New York train, uncle took them to the first restaurant in sight. The restaurant owner insisted he would serve the white girls but not the Negro girls. Uncle was very much incensed. He felt it was his obligation to prove to the young ladies that there was equality and democracy in Washington. “I am a veteran of the First World War. Remember THAT!” he used to shout when somebody dared to doubt that he would be able to do anything about it. When they were not served at the restaurant, uncle went to the Police Department. He went to the higher authorities. There he was courteously laughed at. He made dozens of telephone calls and kept writing dozens of letters long after the young ladies returned to New York. Yes, sir, he wanted to prove to the girls that there was such a thing as equality and democracy in Washington. I heard uncle died without even being able to win an apology from the restaurant owners.

As we wrote at the beginning, there are thousands of cases to prove that even with all the late attempts to reform the reactionary racists, the

government servants, and the general owning class in Washington, it will be years before a particle of racial equality and democratic treatment for any non-white coming to Washington from any part of the world would be put into practice.

Take the case of the Puerto Rican schoolteachers invited to Washington at the end of the school year in Puerto Rico. When the Puerto Rican teachers got to Washington, they were divided according to their color. The whites were housed in downtown hotels, the Negroes or those appearing to be Negroes were sent to dormitories in Howard University or in the neighborhood of that famous Negro institution of learning.

Or take the case of Rosa and Maria, her daughter. When a Puerto Rican family in Harlem told me how Rosa, an old friend of mine, visited Maria, her only daughter, working in Washington, every other weekend, I was not amazed as much as the Harlem Puerto Rican family I was visiting. I told them that those "happenings" were common in Washington, the "great democratic capital of the United States," to use John's phrase on his Lincoln Memorial greeting card.

This is the story as the family told it to me. Maria answered a federal application for a Spanish-English stenographer in Washington. We all knew that Maria was a very bright kid. A very good office worker and secretary. Maria was living with a white family in Washington. All her friends were white Americans. She was actually "passing" as white. Rosa, her mother, would not pass for anything but a Negro. Rosa's husband, Maria's father, who died when Maria was still a child, was white. This is a very familiar man-woman — or vice versa — marriage relationship in Puerto Rico.

So when Rosa went to "visit" her daughter every other weekend, Maria waited for her at the Washington train station. They walked on the streets and avenues near the train station. Maria usually had some homemade sandwiches. They ate them at some public park. Maria would not risk the possibility of going into one of the government cafeterias and finding one of her acquaintances. After the sandwiches, they walked and talked some more until the six o'clock train was about to leave for New York. Maria gave a formal train kiss to her mother and they said goodbye until two Saturdays hence.

I suppose that some Saturday, Rosa and Maria felt adventurous enough to get away from the railroad station surroundings and walk as far as the Lincoln Memorial. I imagine them there admiring the great statue of Abraham Lincoln, sitting in his imposing marble armchair high up here upon its marble pedestal in the very central point of interest in the imposing structure. I imagine Rosa and Maria being held spellbound by that modest

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ORGANIZADO POR EL

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a beneficio de los damnificados de

PUERTO RICO

EN EL BALL ROOM DEL HOTEL PENNSYLVANIA
CALLE 33 Y SEPTIMA AVENIDA

Sabado 15 de Octubre de 1932
A LAS 9 P. M.

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" en la Taquilla . . . \$1.50

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Flyer for a Columbus Day dance, New York City, 1932. Note the words "Para raza blanca" in small print at the lower right. (Jesús Colón Papers, El Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, City University of New York)

and humble figure of Lincoln and by all the humane things he stood for. And as Rosa and Maria were preparing to leave the Lincoln Memorial they would pause a minute to listen to a child holding his father's hand and reading haltingly from the south wall of the Memorial:

FOUR SCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO
OUR FATHERS BROUGHT FORTH ON THIS CONTINENT
A NEW NATION, CONCEIVED IN LIBERTY
AND DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT
ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.

I could imagine, after listening to that phrase for the ages, mother and daughter walking back in silence to the railroad station. And the daughter saying, as the train eased its way out, "I'll see you in two weeks." And the mother answering meditatively, "Yes."
Greetings from Washington!