

A Trip to the Amusement Park

New York, NY

June 4, 1900

Dear Aunt Bette and Uncle Jackson,

The Porto Ricans have arrived in New York! Yes to window-shopping on Fifth Avenue, yes to strolling through Central Park, yes to dining at Delmonico's, yes to visiting the Degas ballerinas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Yes, yes to The Theater! And the cherry on top for your holiday—the ethnological exhibition of the Porto Rican Village! My dears, it is sure to be as popular as the Village Nègre at the 1889 World's Fair. I have many fond memories of our trip to Paris.

Affectionately, your nephew,

Phillip

Milwaukee, WI

June 11, 1900

Dear Phillip,

We read all about the Porto Ricans in the Milwaukee papers! How those people were so grateful to be rescued from the barbarous Spaniards. Giddy like children. Welcome parades in every town! Pretty señoritas tossing roses to the Calvary, feeding our brave soldiers mango slices from their brown fingers! Newborn babies named Jorge Washington Santiago! Thomas Jefferson Rodriguez! Abraham Lincoln Gonzalez! Your Uncle Jackson said to tell you that he liked a race that appreciated the privilege of being ruled by the free people of the world. Phillip, I remember

how shocking it was to see the naked dancers at the Village Nègre. Your uncle and I are older now and I think it might hurry us to an early death to see such shameless exhibition. Please, dear nephew, could you reassure us that the natives will cover themselves? Even if only with fig leaves? I'm sure you read that scandalous report of people running around naked just because of a little hurricane! As if a hurricane could keep a decent person from being fully clothed! We read that the governor of Porto Rico wrote to President McKinley that the Porto Ricans were only a few stages above Savages. Imagine, not a one speaking a word of English!

Affectionately yours,

Aunt Bette

That lovely summer's day before Phillip and his relatives set out, Aunt Bette fussed over her toilette, securing her new bonnet with hatpins. When her husband's waistcoat didn't complement her gown, the good lady insisted that he change it. Aunt Bette was renowned as one of the better-dressed matrons to grace Milwaukee society and she was the first to credit her ensemble to her purchases at New York establishments such as Macy's and Lord & Taylor. Phillip, dressed in the latest young man about town fashion, topped his curly red hair with a straw boater. He liked to imagine himself in a Renoir painting. They enjoyed the activity on the boardwalk. Families carried picnic baskets; young lovers hired rowboats; a group of young stags broke into song. The water was so calm, so blue. Phillip told his relatives of how he was reminded of Georges Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*.

A barker enticed passersby on the boardwalk.

“Don't miss the fun, folks! Cruise up the Sound! This way to America's Pleasure Ground! Starin's Glen Island Amusement Park has everything you never knew you wanted!

Enjoy the ferry ride on Long Island Sound, the bluest water in the whole of our great United States! Forty cents to visit five cultures of the world, each on its own island! Forty cents to hear the queerest music you ever heard! Forty cents for not one, but *two* concert bands! Forty cents to cool off on a bathing beach! Forty cents to see a real Chinese pagoda! And you don't have to go to China! All for *forty* cents! We gotta real German castle all the way from Germany! We gotta real beer garden! With gen-u-ine German beer! We gotta real zoo! Forty cents for wild animals! Forty cents to see real live Sioux Indians! Indians in teepees! Forty cents to visit a real Porto Rican village with real live barefoot Send-Your-Ritas! Forty cents to watch real live natives make real gen-u-ine straw hats! *Everybody* needs a straw hat on a sunny day! Don't miss the fun folks! All for forty cents!"

"All that for forty cents? You can't get that in Milwaukee," Uncle Jackson said.

Aunt Bette peered out at the water from under a parasol trimmed with French ribbon. "Our very own Lake Michigan is bluer."

Uncle Jackson fiddled with his collar. "You can't get barefoot Send-Your-Ritas in Milwaukee, not for forty cents."

Phillip cleared his throat, ready to share what he'd learned about Porto Rican señoritas from the New York Times, but his relatives were in a hurry to board the ferry.

They settled Aunt Bette in the shade next to a young matron with cherub babe. Uncle Jackson and Phillip repaired to the sun deck to smoke. Two gentlemen nearby discussed an Eskimo village exhibit with real live Eskimos, including Eskimo dogs and huts made out of real ice. Uncle and nephew shared a look of satisfaction for they too had seen the Eskimo exhibition.

With Starin's Glen Island Amusement Park in the near distance, they collected Aunt Bette who cradled a wee babe; she gave it back to its mother.

"Aunt Bette, you might see a baby savage. Perhaps we can ask if you could hold one," Phillip said.

"Do you think so? But how can we be understood? The natives speak Porto Rican," Aunt Bette said.

"I believe they speak Spanish," Phillip said.

"I thought they spoke Porto Rican," Uncle Jackson said.

"I think Spanish, uncle." Phillip offered his arm to his aunt.

Aunt Bette took her nephew's arm. "Spanish, Porto Rican, we don't speak either."

"We'll make grunting noises and jump up and down." Uncle Jackson lifted his monocle to his eye, peering over the rail.

The ferry stopped at the various islands for the passengers to disembark at their exhibition of choice. From the deck, Phillip and his relatives admired the Chinese Pagoda and the German castle and the teepees of the Sioux Indians. When they stepped off the ferry at the Porto Rican Village, a trained monkey danced to the music of an organ grinder. Phillip tossed a coin and the monkey picked it up and brought it to the organ grinder. Uncle Jackson, headmaster of a private boys' school in Milwaukee, joked about how he should hire the organ grinder to train his pupils. They bought the exhibition brochure and drank lemonade and pulled at fairy floss, wiping their sticky fingers on white linen handkerchiefs. Phillip offered his half-eaten cone of spun sugar to Aunt Bette.

Phillip read aloud from the brochure:

“The ethnological exhibition from the island of Porto Rico has been brought to Starin’s Glen Island Amusement Park for the edification and pleasure of the American people and for all others who wish to attain enlightenment as to the world’s most exotic species—the Native. In addition to the universal education of the general public, Starin’s Glen Island Amusement Park is honored to be of service to the Honorable Lieutenant Dr. Bailey K. Ashford, a veteran of the Spanish American War. The ethnological exhibition provides a Porto Rican village for the continuation of his scientific research on uncinariasis or, as it is more commonly known, hookworm disease. Dr. Ashford, an army physician during the Porto Rico Campaign, discovered hookworm amongst the Porto Ricans peons. During his army stint, he made it his mission to inoculate the barefoot natives employing whatever means necessary, thereupon, saving the lives of hundreds, perhaps, even thousands, of peasants. The following is recommended reading: *Hookworm, The Scrounge of Native Diseases: Causes and Eradication on the Path to Civilization.*”

“You read very well, Phillip.” Aunt Bette picked the last piece of fairy floss from the paper cone.

“Thank you, Aunt Bette.” Phillip cleared his throat. “Shall I continue?”

“I insist.” Pink cotton sugar melted on Aunt Bette’s tongue.

Phillip continued:

“Dr. Ashford, although for the present stationed in New York, confessed to being consumed by hookworm. In an interview, Dr. Ashford offered his gratitude to US Congressman John H. Starin, owner of Starin’s Glen Island Amusement Park.”

In an interview with the New York Times, Dr. Ashford said the following, “The owner of the island is a good old sport. He's spent his whole life up to his present ripe old age in exhibiting pretty girls and tickling the American palate with new and outlandish sensations. One year he showed a community of Hottentots as unclothed as New York laws would tolerate, with their round straw huts and African drums!”

“Hottentots in New York!” Uncle Jackson pulled at his necktie.

“It is just sheer dumb luck that this Porto Rican village is here on Glen Island,” Dr. Ashford said in the interview.

Phillip and his relatives stopped at the entrance to the exhibit. Phillip read the description:

“This ethnological exhibition is a replica of a typical primitive Porto Rican village in Cabo Rojo, Porto Rico. The United States of America acquired Porto Rico after the Spanish American War as part of the natural and just spoils of war due the conqueror since time immemorial. Our new possession is located between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. It is an archipelago that includes the main island of Porto Rico and a number of smaller ones. The great explorer Christopher Columbus proclaimed Porto Rico the most beautiful in the Caribbean, but Porto Rico’s great beauty didn’t protect it from the ruthless Spanish Empire who ruled for over four hundred years. When the United States of America liberated Porto Rico from its harsh Spanish masters, in the spirit of our Founding Fathers, it took on the mantle of protection for our new possession, accepting the heavy burden of government and education of a

backward people. The natives of Porto Rico are called *jíbaros* (pronounced Gee-bar-rows, according to Uncle Jackson.) *Jíbaros* dwell in shacks perched on hilly cliffs or along the coasts, in huts of straw and coconut palm called *bohíos*. *Jíbaros* are a happy people and very musical in song and dance. They are also known to be very fecund. It is not unheard of for a native woman to bear twenty or more children.”

Aunt Bette took the brochure from her nephew and fanned herself.

“Aunt, I wasn’t finished reading.” Phillip held out his hand for the brochure.

Aunt Bette returned it.

Phillip read:

“On August 8, 1899, less than a year after the US took possession of Porto Rico, the worst hurricane in recorded history, Hurricane San Ciriaco, struck Porto Rico and swept thousands of Porto Ricans from their homes, leaving in its wake almost 4,000 natives dead and millions of dollars in damages. The inhabitants of this Porto Rican village are natives rescued from the town of Cabo Rojo.”

“When Governor Roosevelt appealed to the charity of the American people in the newspapers, our Women’s Committee took up a collection,” Aunt Bette said. “We included a letter that some of the money be used for clothing.”

“Dear Aunt.” Phillip smiled at her. “The ladies are so ready to help the needy. Don’t you agree, Uncle Jackson?”

“I always say there is no one more charitable than the American lady,” Uncle Jackson said.

They followed the signs to the Porto Rican Village Exhibit where a crowd gathered along the wood fence. Behind the wood fence, palm trees had been planted in front of the bohíos. Hammocks hung between the tree trunks; they joked about the man asleep in a hammock on a summer afternoon, a straw hat covering his face. Puerto Ricans sat on the ground or on tree stumps, some rolled tobacco into cigarettes. One man whittled a piece of wood with something that looked like a spoon. (Uncle Jackson said that it was smart not to give the native a knife.) Naked children played in the dirt. Women stirred something in pots or sat on the ground nursing their babies, a mantilla or piece of cloth thrown over their breasts. (Well! I never! Aunt Bette fanned the brochure to her flushed face.) Several men and women wove leaves into hats.

“Too bad they can’t weave straw into gold like Rumpelstiltskin,” Uncle Jackson said.

The people around him laughed.

In an aside to Phillip, Uncle Jackson said, “Where are the naked girls? I was hoping it would be like that negro village.”

“That was quite the sensation, wasn’t it? The line to see them went on for blocks,” Phillip said.

“Ooh la la.” Uncle Jackson winked.

A lady in a straw bonnet trimmed with flowers handed a banana through the wooden slats of the fence to a child. The crowd cheered as the child peeled and ate the banana.

Uncle Jackson pointed to a sign: DO NOT FEED THE NATIVES.

A second sign read: FIRST FEEDING of the Porto Ricans: 9 am. Bread and coffee with milk and sugar. SECOND FEEDING: Noon. Rice and plantain. Black coffee with sugar. THIRD

FEEDING: 5 p.m.: Rice. Beans. Bacalao (salted dry cod). Black coffee with sugar for all. Coffee is a staple for Porto Ricans including children.

“Coffee for children! The idea!” Aunt Bette said to the lady next to her.

Uncle Jackson took his watch out of his waistcoat pocket. “If I hadn’t had to change my waistcoat, we could have caught the second feeding.”

Phillip pointed to a third sign. INDEPENDENCE DAY FESTIVITIES: The Porto Ricans will celebrate Independence Day with a whole pig that they will roast in the native tradition. Starin’s Glen Allen Amusement Park has chosen not to provide the traditional rum libation.

“I should hope so!” Aunt Bette shook her head.

“Aunt and uncle, I was just reading in the New York Times how it is unlikely that the Porto Ricans will become American citizens—” Phillip had studied the Porto Rico Problem in anticipation of expounding to his relatives.

“I say, that shouldn’t be allowed.” Uncle Jackson pointed to several Puerto Rican women smoking cigars.

Aunt Bette shook her finger at the women. “For shame! Why doesn’t someone make them stop? That money for tobacco could be put to better use like clothing for the children!”

“The Porto Ricans don’t seem to work very hard for what they have,” Uncle Jackson said. “Why the Negro janitor in my school works a lot harder for his vittles.”

A tall gentleman among the spectators recited in a sonorous voice the first stanza of Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem.

*Take up the White Man's*

*burden—*

*Send forth the best ye breed—*

*Go bind your sons to exile*

*To serve your captives' need;*

*To wait in heavy harness*

*On fluttered folk and wild—*

*Your new-caught, sullen*

*peoples,*

*Half-devil and half-child.*

The crowd broke into applause.

“That was splendidly appropriate,” Aunt Bette said.

“Actually, Kipling was talking about the Philippines.” Phillip was eager to prove that he also was familiar with Kipling's poem.

Uncle Jackson reached over the fence to touch the dark hair of a young woman; she slapped his hand. The crowd laughed.

“The little monkey!” Uncle Jackson shook his fingers.

“Serves you right.” Aunt Bette tapped her husband’s wrist with the brochure. “Check your hand, that girl might have hookworm.”

“Aunt Bette, I don’t think that’s how you get hookworm,” her nephew said.

Uncle Jackson examined his hand. “I don’t see any hookworms.”

Hands on her hips, Carmen glared at the white man, another one who thought he could paw her! Carmen hated the people on the other side. Men reached through the wood slats to touch and fondle her. It happened daily to the women and, sometimes, to the children. Only the day before, a man had pinched her behind. His companions had cheered. If her father had seen, he would have banged his cuatro guitar on the man’s head. And it wasn’t only the men who didn’t leave her alone. Women often reached over the fence to tug her waist-long hair or to pull at her dress. Carmen didn’t understand why the visitors threw bananas and apples at them. When an apple had hit one of the children in the eye, the people on the other side laughed at the little girl’s cries. Carmen had yelled at them and the Attendant had rushed over to yell at Carmen. Her father and their compatriots defended her to the Attendant, complaining about the mistreatment of the child, demanding that he cease yelling at her. People gathered to witness the spectacle, excited by the passionate exchange of words. Ay bendito, la vergüenza.

But that shame was nothing como la vergüenza Carmen felt when she menstruated, always, a crowd appeared as if the metallic whiff of blood had summoned them. The spectators watched as she entered the outhouse with a clean rag and came out trying to hide the bloody one in her hand. Carmen filled a pail with water that she drew from the well where the Puerto Ricans got their water instead of the streams and rivers back home. When she scrubbed the soiled rag

with a stone, she fought the temptation to pour the bloody water on the people staring at her.

When she complained to her mother, Mamá said she was sorry, but there was nothing she could do about it. Mamá also said that Carmen was lucky to have rags. Remember in Puerto Rico after the hurricane? We had nothing then, not even rags.

Carmen thought that she would rather go back to the days when she was hungry, when she didn't have clothes, when apples didn't give little girls black eyes. Carmen's family had lost everything in the hurricane, including their house that her father had built with his brothers. The family was living in a horse shed when an American came to Cabo Rojo with a Puerto Rican interpreter and made promises that seemed like manna from heaven—offering food and shoes and clothes and, even, money. Next thing they knew, they were stowed in the bowels of a ship bound for New York.

The Attendant came over and pointed to their guitars. The men and one of the women gathered instruments; guitars, maracas, cowbells, güiros, sticks. Mamá handed Carmen a grass skirt. That first time, the Puerto Ricans had stared at the grass skirts in fascination; all the women could sew and they'd examined the curious item intrigued by its construction. Carmen entered the hut to put on her skirt. During the musical number, the crowd threw coins at them; the children ran around the dancers picking up the money. (Later at closing time, Carmen's father would divide the money among the families and give the Attendant his cut.) After the performance, the Puerto Ricans ignored the spectators. The women returned to work, cooking or caring for the children or weaving hats. The men also weaved hats or whittled away at pieces of wood. One of the black Puerto Ricans was a santero; wooden saints were born from his gifted fingers. He refused to allow the Attendant to sell them to the visitors; los santos were for his people. Mamá draped a mantilla over the nursing baby; she called Carmen over to el fogón and

told her to stir the pot of beans. Daily, the Attendant brought their portions of foodstuffs. Each family cooked their own meals; this activity was very popular with the visitors. When they had first arrived, the Puerto Ricans had asked the Attendant for more food, refusing to sing and dance until the Attendant did.

Carmen squatted down at the makeshift stove of stones and kindling. She stirred the pot of beans. Carmen remembered how she would make a plate of habichuelas with arroz blanco and serve it to Gabriel. The spoon stilled in her hand. Gabriel. She closed her eyes allowing herself to be back with Gabriel, tasting his lips, seeking his tongue. His fingers reached for the hem of her dress; her fingers pulled at the waistband of his pants.

The force of the water knocked Carmen to the ground. Mamá turned her back to protect the baby. Everybody shouting. The spectators cheered as the Attendant sprayed the Puerto Ricans. Papá ran up to the Attendant, struggling to take away the hose. Carmen's father managed to yank it from the Attendant's hands, spraying some of the spectators. Everybody screaming.

When the Attendant clapped his hands for the Puerto Ricans to dance, they ignored him.

The crowd turned on the Attendant.

“Make them dance!”

“Make them play that jungle music!”

“We want our money back!”

Dr. Ashford came to see the Puerto Ricans. He spoke Spanish well for a yankee. They had been told that Ashford was married to a lady from one of Puerto Rico's most prominent white families.

"The Attendant said that you won't sing. You won't dance," Dr. Ashford said. "Isn't that what why you're here?"

"We won't sing and dance until we're treated like human beings," Carmen's father said. "We won't be hosed down like animals."

Dr. Ashford held out his hands in a placating gesture. "You were due for your weekly bath. The Attendant was only doing his job."

Carmen's father turned to his compatriots. "Qué falta de respeto."

To Ashford, he said: "We might be poor but we're also human beings."

The spectators watched as Dr. Ashford conferred with the Attendant before speaking to Carmen's father.

"The Attendant won't do it again." The doctor wiped his brow with a linen handkerchief.

"What about our baths? We've been here a week. It's hot." Carmen's father wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

"I'll see what I can do." Dr. Ashford left to drink a cold lemonade, promising to return to collect blood after their performance.

Papá and the other musicians picked up their instruments. Carmen stepped into the grass skirt. Before the hurricane, she had danced with Gabriel to a full orchestra en la plaza in her best

dress, ribbons threaded through her hair. He had spun her round and caught her to him, smiling down at her. They were like any young couple in love who had their whole lives ahead of them. Carmen's father strummed his guitar. Carmen and the other dancers closer to the fence where the spectators could see them best. The musicians played; the dancers, danced. The familiar song took Carmen back to Puerto Rico before Hurricane San Ciriaco, back to la plaza, back in Gabriel's arms. Her bare foot caught on a branch; she tripped and fell down in the dirt. She looked up at the young redheaded man in the straw hat who had reached over the fence, his hand out to help her. Carmen scooted away from him, getting up by herself. She joined the other dancers; she danced.