

The Possibilities of Hatred Fragment¹

by María Luisa Puga



Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León

THREE

Jeremiah was sitting in Uhuru Park, far from the cafe, although he could hear the music just fine. Of course the group that was playing (it must have been from Zaire) and the people dancing couldn't be seen from there. Perhaps later, when it was dark and more crowded, he could try to get in and begin his round of the tables left empty by the dancing couples, taking a drink of beer here and a sip of Pepsi-Cola there. Whatever he found, and with the constant risk that someone would come and beat the hell out of him. But Jeremiah had been a boxer. Actually, only for a very short time because he had realized that the blows could affect his ability to study. It had been better to leave it. But the training had left its marks: he was a muscular, agile boy. And tall.

He took advantage of the last rays of the sun as he watched the people cross the park. There were several boys like him; some he recognized, others not. They must be new in the city and that wandering around out there of theirs, empty-handed, not deciding to go into the cafe, meant that they didn't have any money either. You could tell even though they were still clean, still attentive. You could tell. The ones that did have money went right in, not quickly, but directly into the cafe. As though attracted by a magnet. There were others who came into the park hovering, pursuing the tourists. Totally calmly, they asked them for money. Jeremiah heard tell that that's what students did in Europe, that it was normal. He didn't dare. The whites intimidated him. He kept away from them. It was better that way. Also, he guessed that his father, now in the hospital, would not like him to go around asking for money like that. He had said, "Go get a job in Nairobi until you start your classes. We have to pay the 200 shillings for the hospital." That was a week ago

and nothing. He couldn't find work. For two days now he hadn't had any money. He hadn't eaten. Many like him stole. It was risky and you had to know how. Be prepared for anything. But Jeremiah didn't even consider the possibility, perhaps because he already felt weak, or maybe because he didn't think he could lie to his father.

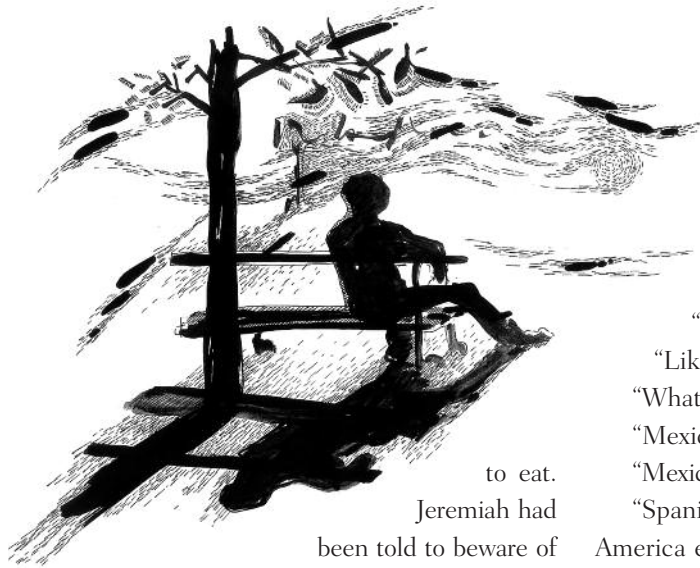
And with his eyes half closed, he watched the people go by without taking too much notice. People like yesterday. He let them go by without envying them, without hating them. Some single white men, messy looking; others in noisy groups looking for a woman. They wanted Africans but they didn't quite know how to look. Timid, clumsy, usually young. He had seen them make a mistake and they made him laugh. They offered money, they didn't offer. The girls were always making fun of them. But they didn't understand a single African language. And Jeremiah enjoyed watching the groups of Africans who had already been living in the city for some time (or perhaps they were from the city. From rich families, maybe, and they just came to have a good time). The girls pretended to be alone; they sat at a table looking bored, and the white man would come up. It never failed. They would dance once or twice. Without being able to hear—above all, trying to make sure that the girl didn't notice that he was watching her because right there she could cause trouble, say that he had insulted her or anything else— from far off, without being able to hear, it was easy to tell the moment when she asked the white man for money because he got nervous. Jeremiah supposed she explained to him that she wanted it before going with him. And Jeremiah could always discover her group, the group that was waiting for her around there without looking at her again a single time, but attentive, sort of approaching her. Suddenly, in a flash, she would disappear into the group, and with



a single step be as though she were buried. She disappeared. And the white man at first looked all around as though nothing had happened. There were times when the girl was right there next to him, right there, dancing in the embrace of one of her friends, and he didn't recognize her. Jeremiah couldn't hold back his laughter. Then the white man, desperate, would go in among the couples looking for her and she, hiding, would dance more spiritedly, laugh harder and hold her guy closer. Jeremiah enjoyed these things. He didn't feel any pity for the whites. He would like to have done things like that, but for that you needed a group, a girlfriend. And for that you needed money. And though Jeremiah felt that people looked at him with liking, he didn't go near anybody. He preferred to keep himself apart.

He set to deciding whether to light another cigarette or wait. Yesterday, someone had given him the pack. Menthols. Not a new pack, but almost full. Desperate, not so much from not eating as from not smoking, he had asked a guy for a cigarette. A white guy. He hadn't noticed. "You got a cigarette?" he asked without looking much at the face. "Yeah, here. Keep the pack. I don't like menthols."

He also wanted to decide whether to go to the bar where there was a waitress who wanted to sleep with him. She told him the first night. "If you want, I'll sleep with you." That night Jeremiah had still had money to pay for the meal. It was his first night in the city. "But I don't have any more money," he had told the girl. "It doesn't matter." And he had slept with her. She wasn't very clean. She had a little dark room in some far-away neighborhood, almost outside the city, where the streets were rivers of mud. She lived alone there. She came from Kericho, she had told him. She had been in Nairobi for two years and was saving money to go back home (at home, they didn't know where she was). Her wages from the bar were barely enough



to eat.
Jeremiah had been told to beware of diseases, that they were expensive to cure. She didn't know if she had one or not. Maybe she did. They didn't make love. They slept together and she said, "When you're hungry, come by the bar and I'll give you something. They won't get mad." He would go tonight.

"You got another cigarette?"

Jeremiah raised his eyes and looked at the dark-haired white boy. Mechanically, he held out the pack and then his own cigarette to light him up. The boy breathed in deeply and gave him back the cigarette, looking at him full in the face. "Thanks." He sat down next to him and smoked in silence. Jeremiah waited, but when he saw that the other didn't speak, he sank again into a kind of tranquil lethargy, looking at the people, content just because he was going to eat, because he wanted to see the waitress after all. He would make love. What of it?

"You know how much you have to pay to get into that discotheque," the white boy asked suddenly.

"Ten," said Jeremiah, rather intrigued. The guy wasn't English. He didn't look like a tourist like all the rest. There was something different about him. He looked at him a moment. He must have been more or less his own age, but he wasn't as tall. He had nothing in his hands.

"Are you on vacation or do you live here?"

"On vacation," said the other guy. "And you?"

"Me too. I'm from Nyeri."

"Oh."

"Do you know where Nyeri is?"

"No."

Jeremiah laughed.

"Are you a student?"

"Yes. You?"

"Me too, but I came to Nairobi to look for work to pay my father's hospital bill, but I can't find any."

"Is there a lot of unemployment here?"

"Yes."

"Like in my country."

"What country is that?"

"Mexico."

"Mexico...what language do they speak there?"

"Spanish. They speak Spanish in all of Latin America except Brazil. There, they speak Portuguese."

"Oh, yes. Mexico is close to the United States, isn't it?"

"Very close," smiled the boy. "Do you like Americans?"

Jeremiah shrugged. It was the same to him.

"I hate them."

"Why did you come to Kenya?"

"I have some friends here. I came to visit them, but I also wanted to see something of Africa. I would like to travel a little bit through Kenya. Do you know it well?"

"Some, by my home, by Mount Kenya."

Jeremiah had never talked so much to a white before.

He looked at him curiously, and then suddenly said, "Hey, would you loan me some money? I haven't eaten for two days."

"How much?"

"Well," he smiled, "the truth is that I need it to pay for my father's hospitalization. So I can go back to my town and get work on some farm and save to pay you back. It's 200 shillings."

The boy looked at him in silence and then looked toward the park. People passed by, the music came and went with the wind. He had arrived from Mexico two days before. ■■■

NOTES

¹ María Luisa Puga, *Las posibilidades del odio*, Lecturas Mexicanas Collection (Mexico City: Conaculta, 1985), pp. 61-66.