

Leonardo HenríquezExcerpt from *MISANTHROPIC DAYS*

a novel

Marvelous animals, aren't they? And how they hate us.

Jackals and Arabs

Franz Kafka

Isla Queimada remained in its oppressed territory, surrounded by thick, warm and good-for-nothing sea. Even though the prison had been shut down some time ago, few things had changed. An imperturbable island, regardless of all the extravagant events no one speaks about. Contradictory possibilities proliferated even as the newly released prisoners were appearing everywhere. One of them approached me slowly and demanded a cigarette. As I did not understand his language, I waited. He made no effort to make himself understood. He never put his index and middle finger to his mouth, as one usually does in these cases. He did not point to my chest pocket either. Unwittingly I told him, in practical English, that I did not understand his language. He looked at me for a while as I shook my head. Long enough for me to get to know him better. He was somewhat taller than the rest of his race, consumed, emaciated by lack of food and the penitentiary. His face was indescribable, but in his tartar, extreme, eyes there was a hint of humanity. Through his tight t-shirt one could make out his pale ribs. On the chest of his dirty shirt I could read the words *Splendor*. His pants were bluish and his shoes were black, equally worn out and labeled on the tip. The left shoe had the number 6 and the right one the number 1. Since he was standing at attention with both feet together, I could read the number 16 without difficulty from my vantage point. Without lifting my eyes from his marked shoes I took out the cigarette case and put one in my mouth. The man was disconcerted. He could not understand how I could be so stingy. He had demanded, not once, but twice, a miserable cigarette.

I inhaled and exhaled smoke and watched him impassively while his face changed. He knitted his brow, turned towards the other men and shouted in his lingo. I could only conclude they were short phrases. The thirty or so ex-convicts also turned to look at me with astonishment and some disdain when they heard him. Sixteen, as he came to be known to me from then on, had told them I was a selfish, lying, hoarding, severe, arrogant foreigner. All of those aphorisms in short phrases I did not catch. In my habitual way, when my cigarette was only half burned, I held it between my thumb and middle finger and catapulted it to the ground, stepping on it, turning the heel of my shoe and observing the flattened butt with disdain and some guilt. In those days of displacements and anxiety I was dominated by vice. The men circled me and I never guessed why they were so upset at me. They scolded me. I felt panic. Moments of hunger and uncertainty incite smoking. I automatically put another cigarette to my lips. The men took no note of my put-down. It was a stupid reaction, but since they were so close now, I offered them the whole case, as if I could undo their incomprehensible anger with one altruistic gesture. I did not even know if they cared about my dried-out tobacco. With a silly grin, cowardly in fact, I made the cigarettes jump a

bit with a tap on the side of the case, trying to get the filters out in one gallant and urban move, but so clumsily that they fell to the ground into a puddle of salty mud. When I thought that at any moment I would succumb to some thirty blows, the men concluded I was just a passing idiot. They left as they came. Sixteen stayed a while longer. He pointed to the cigarette I was about to toss on the floor. He made himself understood so I guessed his wishes and gave him what was left of the last cigarette on the whole island.

Sixteen took me to the only eatery on Isla Queimada. Since no one had set foot in the place in a long time – the last customers were the government officials that came to dismantle the prison for astonishing crimes- the only fare was a complex assortment of local fruits and beasts. Fortunately for me that day they had *Litchi chinensis*, a small fruit that hung in great bunches in a pewter dish. The skin was red and covered with small wrinkles, reminding me of a tassel. The pulp was white, consistent and a bit tough, with a pit inside. It is usually consumed raw, but here in Queimada it was served with the only fish that lived in this sea: the frogfish. Only this fish could withstand the high temperatures of these waters. It was also eaten with meat from a species of wild pig that wished it were a boar, and a small deer that looked like a big rat. It was customary and necessary, from ancient times in Queimada, to know what one put into one's mouth. Therefore, the waitress from the eatery took me out to the back yard and showed me the fare. They were resting, each one in a separate pigsty. On one side, seven pachyderms and on the other three byzantine deer with white spots. The waitress looked at me impatiently, waiting for me to choose my prey. Since I did not react, Sixteen came up to me and showed me the animals, one by one. I slowly understood that he was introducing me to today's menu. I thanked God that Sixteen and I were beginning to communicate. I concluded that its roasted sweet meat could be an unsuspected feast so I signaled one of the dears vehemently. But the waitress shook her head. She said it was a female, and they were reserved. I did not understand what she said but I concluded I would not have dear that day. Disappointed, I turned to a quiet and soft boar. Sixteen, who now understood me perfectly, leaned forward and pointed to another dear that had stood near the fence and was licking my hand. I thanked the man with the marked shoes and pointed, victorious, to my chosen one. While I ate, in ecstasy yet alone for Sixteen remained outside smelling his tobacco-laced fingers, I noticed that from the yellowing walls of the eatery hung posters that made reference in several languages to better times on the Island. Only one was exceptionally written in inadmissible Spanish:

A minuscule volcanic island in the Pacific Ocean, Queimada Island is the fourth largest. Queimada Island stands no more 33 kilometers from the east coast of Kaitung. Queimada can be reached in 10-12 minutes by air. There is also regular raft traffic. Isla Queimada was originally a settlement of Ami aborigines. The island was known to those people as Sanasai. Known previously as "the fire that burnt the island" Queimada is known for its prisons. In the past the prison cells have held many political prisoners and hardened criminals, instead of a reform for deceitful disobediences. Today the island is a place of fascination, with white beaches, magnificent coral reefs, rich flora and fauna and steep slopes above the sea. The scarce water life of the Island Queimada is notorious for its steep variety. The Zhai hot resort, situated in the southeast part of the island, is a place of leisure where to soak in the sulfur water into the wetness of its bodies in the beauty that is dormant.

Under the unhinged text there was a discolored panoramic photo of the coast: a small hill with rocky slopes reached the beach like an isthmus on its side, and formed an entry where

the waves had worn out a deep gorge. At first sight against the light, there was no doubt the mount looked like a woman sleeping on her back; the rocky hair bathed by the foaming ocean, the high head, the cervix carved by the tides and the lean body reaching into the land. At the end of the skirt, on the highest point of the island, at an elevation that protected it from cataclysms, the prison building was still standing. Sixteen came into the dining room ahead of my uncontrollable curiosity, put his palms together as in prayer and touched his cheek, arching his head and closing his slanted eyes. Then he put his hands together as if he was being taken to his cell.

To reach the natural sculpture we had to cross effervescent sulphur water wells, encased in a coral cemetery. While we climbed the slippery wall, Sixteen thought of me only in a manly fashion. In the rational human incapacity of foreseeing the circumstantial reasoning of others. In my reasoning and his. In a foreigner facing the possibilities of an unknown reality, of the absence of details that makes real stories passionate entities. His reasoning was amazing. In spite of having been a schoolteacher, he had made an unjustifiable mistake: he told on his best friend out of rivalry; he incriminated him for mating with the woman of the province's foreman. But the officer, a vain man, considered it highly unlikely that his honor could be stained. Later he accused him of reading forbidden literature, but his best friend was an apprehensive man and nobody believed him. Instead, and since justice Had been much altered, Sixteen was indicted for ties with traitors and enemies of the republic. He was taken to the prisoner's island in a raft overcrowded with haughty students. He shared his prison cell with an emperor's tomb raider and an honorable, but hotheaded, intellectual. Exactly Sixteen years. Lifting the veil, revealing the origin of the numbers on his shoes, in order to keep up with the trail of his misadventures. But how was I to know? For me he was just a curious man, with all the time in the world, serving for me as an unexpected guide and interpreter. No way of knowing that on dry land, union and harmony reigned because Queimada gave shelter to the dissociated, the perjured and the political renegades. After the great tsunami wave and the consequent closing of the prison, the condemned were paroled, some for having helped to reestablish the devastated island, others because they had never stood trial, dauntlessly falling in the web of repression by osmosis of conflict, or by strict misfortune.

As we reached the jail's open portal, Sixteen stopped for a moment. It was the first time that he had set foot in what had been his home for so many years, since the devastation. I wasn't wrong when I noticed something similar to nostalgia on his face. It was not a usual prison. The islanders visited it without prejudice, got along with the prisoners, civilized men and women, some educated. And they went to the weekly cultural events made up of poetry reading, operas and theater. The prison was overcrowded with books, musical instruments such as violins, and instruments to practice the omniscience of science; those who were doctors on dry land took care of the sick that walked up the hill seeking relief. However, on the day of the cataclysm, as the waves devastated the lower part of the island, islanders tired in vain to reach the heights where the prison stood. The convicts gestures where useless. They held out their arms and promised courage while the bodies crashed against the rocks and disappeared into the whirlpools of the tempest. None of the free survived, only the prisoners and their keepers.

We crossed the patio and went directly to his old cell. Sixteen headed straight for the wall, pointing to a text written in arcane alphabet, carefully traced in lead pencil on the worn

surface. He read it aloud, and his words sounded learned, atavistic, even scientific: *if man's history could be seen as a drama on scene, surely the part of the first impulsive man would go to him. He was the last of his kind, lived a paranoid, libertine, life. Born as a sensible man, he later came to believe that virtue was given to be abused and morality to be squandered. He resolved to rid himself of any affection if he suspected submission, and enjoyed showing mercy to his common friends by having many exorbitant projects, functioning even when despair entered his realm. In the meantime, he never tired to control any lascivious passion in a feast of obscenities. When a levelheaded ally tried to advise him to reconsider his virtue, he reprimanded him in public as a warning to silence the rest of the fraternity. He affirmed that his omnipotent right to loathe them was like the sun's to the earth and would last as long as the sun gave light to the world. This affirmation obviously became well known and he was remembered by his insults to the sun: "Rejoice, rejoice in darkness, while we await the end of the world!"* Sixteen turned to look at me. He smiled as he remarked that in the literature of his language there is no signifier for a similar man. I smiled back, as a gesture of courtesy, as well as of gratefulness after listening to the hieroglyphic modulation of elegant and impenetrable words I never understood, and guessed they were homilies, maxims, philosophical parables, who knows what. Improbable that they were regarding anything else, since I did observe that in each possible space of wall was the same pattern of the manuscript. Only sixteen, actually. The last epistle to be seen, the longest one, contained a metaphor for the transient: *"smoke and clouds and indolence passing before my eyes"*.

Translated from the Spanish by Gabriela Gambóia