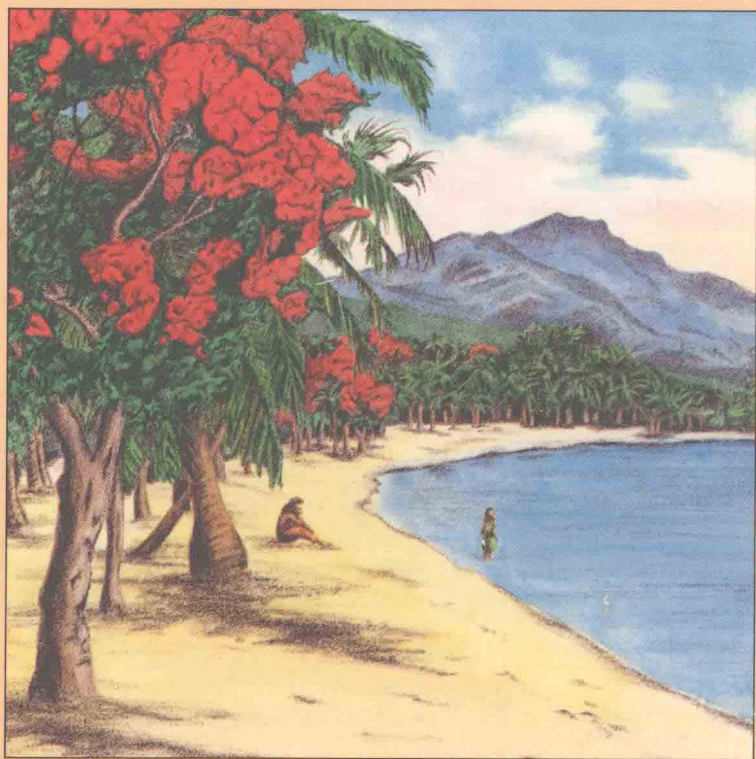


Cantando S I N G I N G S O F T L Y Bajito

A NOVEL BY
Carmen de Monteflores



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Berkeley, California
February, 1989

*To mami and abuelita:
here is a piece of the land we had lost,
and to Laurie,
who helps me discover where I belong.*

BOOK ONE



□ Bocario. The house at the mouth of the river. Half-hidden behind bougainvillea and canarios. Like a secret; like conversations on the veranda whispered over the sewing and lemonade. Shaded by coconut palms, bearing the silence of the river that flows from inland, from the rain forest. But also at the mercy of the immense, as if it were an island. Feeling the inescapable force of the ocean, the pounding of the surf, the insistence of wind. Trying to create home, gentility. But when the rains come the horizon feels like absence and the damp heat becomes a prison.

I come upon it as though I were a spy. Few ever come here. Only those who know the way can approach it: ox-drawn carts with provisions, a figure alone on a horse, someone on foot seeking shelter.

I hear the house voices in the soft language of my childhood.

"¡Luisa!" I hear abuelita Pilar, my *grandmother*, calling. "¿Dónde ehtá esa muchacha?" *Where's that girl?*

Abuelita comes out on the veranda. Her white figure moving quickly to the wood railing. She leans forward to look towards the garden, then away towards the river. Soon she goes back inside calling a servant.

"¡Rosa! ¿Sabeh dónde ehtá Luisa? Hace rato que no la veo." *Rosa! Do you know where Luisa is? I haven't seen her for a while.*

Through the tall windows at the side of the house I see Pilar straining to find Luisa, but the old trees at the edge of the river block her view. She can see only the water between the tree trunks: dark, muddy, rushing towards the ocean.

Abuelita Pilar stands at the window silently, her serious eyes scanning the landscape. The mid-afternoon sun makes the trees very still. Their huge shadows extend halfway between the river and the house. Nothing moves except the river. Behind her, she hears at a distance the steady sound of the ocean.

She cannot stand there long. It is too quiet. The other children went to the village with a servant to get some fruit and candy. They seemed restless and bored, so she sent them on an errand. Luisa didn't get to go. She wasn't supposed to go out. She said she would rather stay with Pilar anyway, but Pilar didn't believe her this time.

"Eh tehtaruda," Pilar says to herself. *She's stubborn.*

Pilar worries about Luisa, her next-to-oldest daughter. She's afraid when Luisa walks on the beach by herself looking for shells and crabs. Often Pilar has to send someone out to look for her.

She hopes Luisa isn't out there now. Juan has forbidden her to go out of the house until he comes back from his trip. It's upsetting that Juan is often angry at Luisa. He thinks Luisa is not like his other daughters.

I see Pilar leave the window as I walk past the garden and through the tall grass towards the river.

I imagine myself here because I need to understand why I left the island. And why I didn't return.

I am old enough to be a grandmother. My own children have gone. Where I live now I am still learning the names of new plants. I want to have a garden there some day.

When I sit in my yard, as I used to at home, I look up at the sky and watch the tops of trees move as if I had come upon something I was seeing for the first time. I imagine Bocarío, the house between the river and the ocean, where abuelita Pilar lived as a woman of thirty-one, already with six children. I imagine a clearing next to the coconut palms, the house between sun and shade, a garden with roses, and beyond, the thick grass pushing its way everywhere that its roots feel the soft loam of the river's edge.

I find myself walking through the dense growth with some difficulty, but soon I am in the shadow of the big trees. The breeze mixes together the smell of river and ocean.

I walk slowly towards the water. Solemnly. Feeling silence and a rush of images all at once.

Suddenly I hear Pilar's voice calling again.

"¡Luisa!"

Then I notice an object moving fast down the river. I realize there is someone on it. The person is not on a boat. Maybe it is a log.

There is a child in a hollow tree trunk.

Other voices approach from the house. Pilar and other children and adults. They sound alarmed.

"¿Qué le habrá pasa'o?" someone says. *What happen to her?*

"¡Allí ehtá! ¡Mírala, agarrándose al tronco!" *There she is! Look at her! She's hanging on to the log!* one of the children screams.

"¡Luisa!" someone calls.

"¡Buhca a Santiago!" *Get Santiago!* Pilar says to one of the servants.

The servant returns quickly with a tall black man. He strips to the waist and dives into the water.

The child in the tree trunk is moving rapidly towards the mouth of the river where the ocean makes big whirlpools near the rocks.

Pilar calls out, "¡Esa nena ehtá loca! ¿Cómo puede haber hecho eso?" *That girl's crazy! How could she have done this!*

The children reach out with their bodies and their voices to the figure in the water.

"¡Avanza! ¡Apúrate, Santiago!" *Go ahead! Hurry up, Santiago!* they urge.

If the tree trunk hits the mouth of the river they will both be in danger of being smashed against the rocks.

Pilar stands at the edge of the water surrounded by two servants and several girl children, who call at first then stand quietly around their mother. She is immobile, only the lace around her neck quivers, like a white wing that needs to take flight. She is slender and tall, with an easy grace, like a palm. Her eyes are thoughtful, even in fear.

As Santiago approaches the fast-moving figure at the mouth of the river, Pilar reaches for a small hand at her side and holds

tightly to it. Santiago grabs the child in the water. She resists at first, then she lets herself be carried towards the shore. Everyone watches silently while Santiago slowly steals the child from the current.

I can see the girl's eyes. They are like those of a wild creature that has been trapped. She keeps coughing and spitting water. When they reach the bank she can't stand up. Santiago picks her up and brings her to rest at Pilar's feet.

Pilar takes Luisa in her arms. She is a big girl, but her strong limbs yield to her mother's embrace. For a moment she seems like a child waking from a bad dream, needing soothing strokes on her forehead, kisses on her cheeks. But it's real, her hair is matted with mud and leaves and she has spit dripping out of her mouth. Pilar holds on to Luisa tightly and her white dress becomes streaked with the silt of the river and the drool from Luisa's mouth.

Santiago says, "*Tie' que vomital el agua.*" *She got to throw up the water.*

He makes Luisa bend forward and slaps her back a few times until she vomits the water. The spit leaves wet spots on the ground.

"*Vamoh a llevarla a la casa,*" Pilar says. *Let's take her to the house.*

Santiago picks up Luisa again and the whole group moves slowly towards the big house.

I stand next to the river looking up at the sky. There are a few bright clouds against deep blue. The voices fade.

The sun shines on the river. It is smooth and green now, as if nothing had happened. The light creates a kind of silence.

I walk along the bank of the river for a while. Towards the ocean. The tangled grass and the tree trunks carried to the shore by the current keep me from going further, so I walk around them until I reach the sand. I sit there for a while looking at the ocean waves. Feeling the wind. Then I lie down.

Pilar stood at the door of her room which opened to the veranda at the back of the house. She

looked at the grey ocean and sky. At the dark pines outlining the shore. They seemed farther away today, like a picture she had seen somewhere.

She stood still in her white dress with the stains of silt from the river. The breeze moved a strand of black hair which had come loose from the bun at the back of her head. She leaned on the wood jamb.

Juan was gone again. Had been away for three months already.

She couldn't hold on to time. It slipped away. Into waiting; into being needed by the children.

Luisa. Luisa. Why did this have to happen? She should have known better. Fourteen already and still didn't have enough sense to stay out of the river.

Pilar sighed, wishing she could be fourteen again. Then she remembered Señá Alba. Pilar hadn't seen her since Elena's funeral, four months ago. The thought got caught in a tangle of memories. She felt as if she were holding her breath against pain.

Pilar pushed away the sad images. She only wanted to remember the happy times, when she used to go for walks with Señá Alba at the beach. Señá Alba told her stories. And she looked at everything. Pilar didn't know anyone else who looked at things like Señá Alba did. Natural things. She didn't waste too much time looking at man-made things. Thought they were mostly ugly. She liked to look at the ocean, the coconut trees, the moon, even the sugar cane fields.

Pilar didn't understand at first, way back before she even knew Juan, what there was to look at in a sugar cane field. It all looked the same to her. Acres and acres of it. Growing tall and the men sweating, cursing and singing while cutting it. Nothing to look at.

Now flowers, that was something else. Not the ones that grew in the fields, but the ones with many colors behind the fence of the mill owner's house. Who would have thought there were so many different kinds of pink and red?

Her oldest sister, Patria, didn't care much for flowers. Even made fun of Pilar about it. But Patria let Pilar come with her sometimes

to look at the flowers near the patrón's house because Patria wanted to catch the eye of the stable boy. He was about Patria's age, brown like a coconut and with big muscles on his arms. Pilar got to look at the flowers while Patria looked at the boy.

Pilar promised herself then, when she was still very young, that if she ever could, she would have flowers like that. Even a few. She would save money. Didn't know how, but she would. Pilar made promises to herself. And she knew that when she promised something, she always kept her promise. She didn't even care if her sisters made fun of her about it.

Seña Alba didn't make fun of her. That's one of the first things Pilar noticed when she met her.

Patria got herself pregnant by the stable boy and was having a hard time of it. Everyone thought she was going to miscarry. And nobody was too sorry either.

"Tenemoh demasia' criaturah." *Too many children anyway*, Marta, Pilar's mother, said. "Y lo piol eh que no va habel quién se case con ella." *Worst part is nobody going to marry her*.

Patria was scared, and angry at the stable boy who wouldn't even talk to her after he found out she was pregnant. She started spotting and was sent to bed by her mother. Marta didn't want any more trouble. Had enough trouble herself having children.

Marta stood there with her brown hands on her hips. Her belly was round from many pregnancies and her breasts were low to her waist. She had suckled enough, she said. Each one had made her lose a tooth, so now she had to gum her chicharrón, the crisp *pork rind* that came from the pig cooked on a spit behind the village store. But, Marta said, it was God's will.

That was when Pilar was nine. She already knew that it was hard to figure out God's will even though everyone talked about it like it was simple and clear. Like the sun going up.

Pilar didn't tell anybody what she thought about it. And what she thought about a lot of other things. Not since that time when Marta hit her when she was six, the first time she could remember being slapped by her mother, because Pilar said it wasn't very good that God had sent a hurricane. That was the big one that had killed all the coffee plants, a lot of people and had wrecked people's homes.

Pilar cried herself to sleep holding her swollen face. After that night she didn't pray anymore, at least not to the God that made hurricanes. She thought there must be another God that made mangos and colors and that kept the people she loved from dying.

Standing at the door to the veranda, Pilar felt a sweet sadness coming into her. She remembered the first time she met Señá Alba. Had to thank Patria for that because if Patria hadn't been so sick she wouldn't have found Señá Alba.

Patria had been in bed for a few days spotting and crying. No one could help hearing her because it was a small house and Patria never hid her feelings. She was heard howling even a few houses down the muddy road. Neighbors would come in and ask about her. Bring a bunch of quenepas, or a mango.

Marta was worn out from looking after her other nine children and Pablo, Pilar's father, in a house with only three rooms. Made for mice, not people, she used to say.

One room was for Pablo, Marta and the smaller children. Another for the older girls: Patria, Asunción, Elena, Pilar and Azucena. Didn't make much sense to put the boys and the girls together, it always got them in trouble, Marta said. So the two older boys, Pepe and Quique, slept in the third room, which was also the living room, dining room and kitchen.

Everybody had been screaming at each other ever since Patria had to stay in bed, on one of several mats on the wooden floor.

It had been raining for days.

"Uno de loh pioleh. El agohto máh moja'o qu'e vihto en mi v'ia," Marta said. *One of the worst. Wettest August I seen in my life.*

Pilar thought they were always like this. But for Marta each one was the worst. Pilar thought maybe they piled up after you got older. Marta remembered the first time anything happened. And all the other times afterwards. And she was very good at remembering bad things like hurricanes, fires, deaths and difficult births.

"Nunca oi a naide grial tanto. Esa se va abotal y se va moril de desangral si sigue llorando así," Marta said about Patria's crying.