The farming of bones

a novel

Edwidge Danticat.

the farming of bones

• a novel •

edwidge danticat

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in the United States of America by Soho Press, Inc. 1998
Reprinted by arrangement with Soho Press, Inc.
Published in Penguin Books 1999

15 17 19 20 18 16 14

PUBLISHER'S NOTE
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGUED
THE HARDCOVER EDITION AS FOLLOWS:
Danticat, Edwidge, 1969–
The farming of bones: a novel/Edwidge Danticat.
p. cm.
ISBN 1-56947-126-6 (hc.)
ISBN 0 14 02.8049 9 (pbk.)
I. Title.
PS3554.A5815F37 1998 98–3655
813'.54—dc21

Printed in the United States of America
Set in Sabon

Jephthah called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No," they said, "All right, say 'Shibboleth.'" If he said, "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-thousand were killed at the time.

Judges 12:4–6

Praise for *The Farming of Bones*

One of the Best Books of the Year
—Publishers Weekly

ALA Booklist Editor's Choice

"Danticat . . . is a brilliant storyteller. Her language is simple, gorgeous, and enticing. Her perfect pacing and seamless narrative . . . make each character's destiny seem inexorable."
—Time Out New York

"[With] hallucinatory vigor and a sense of mission . . . Danticat capably evokes the shock with which a small personal world is disrupted by military mayhem. . . . *The Farming of Bones* offers ample confirmation of Edwidge Danticat's considerable talents." *—The New York Times Book Review*

"A passionate story . . . Richly textured, deeply personal details particularize each of Danticat's characters and give poignancy to their lives. Often, her tales take on the quality of a legend."
—The Seattle Times

"A beautiful and tragic book . . . Danticat startles and enraptures readers once again with *The Farming of Bones*, a novel so mature in its exposition, so captivating in its spirit that it perpetually astonishes the reader in every remarkable chapter."
—The Orlando Sentinel

"Danticat . . . infuses the dreamlike prose of her earlier works with a politicized resonance in her second novel. . . . An eye-opening and delicately written testimonial to the 'nameless and faceless' who died in a historically overlooked conflict."
—The Wall Street Journal

"Because the larger themes of trauma and collective memory are in the hands of a gifted fiction writer, the novel cannot be summarized by casual reference to genocidal fact. Indeed, some of the most interesting writers today—Toni Morrison in

Paradise, Caryl Phillips in *Cambridge*—are blending history and fiction, imparting information, in the manner of nineteenth-century novelists, without seeming to. . . . A beautifully conceived work, with monumental themes."
—*The Nation*

"Steely, nuanced . . . it's a testament to Danticat's skill that Amabelle's musical, sorrowing voice never falters."
—*The New Yorker*

"A surprisingly subtle and wise book."
—*Chicago Tribune*

"An admirable, even brilliant, work by an author of tremendous talent . . . a story that will haunt both the mind and the soul."
—*The Denver Post*

"Exquisite . . . Passionate and heartrending, *Bones* lingers in the consciousness like an unforgettable nightmare."
—*Entertainment Weekly*

"An erotic, devastating tale . . . Danticat . . . lets us feel the pain and hope of Amabelle's journey, using language that's poetic and understated all at once."
—*Madamoiselle*

"A beautiful book. Danticat's writing is superb, drifting easily from the visionary and ecstatic to the bare and simple notice of things as they are." —*The Sunday Oregonian*

"Stunning both as revelation of a forgotten atrocity and as demonstration of narrative craft."
—*The Cleveland Plain-Dealer*

"Danticat gives us fully realized characters who endure their lives with dignity, a sensuously atmospheric setting and a perfectly paced narrative written in prose that is lushly poetic and erotic, specifically detailed . . . and starkly realistic. While this novel is deeply sad, it is infused with Danticat's fierce need to bear witness." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred)

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE FARMING OF BONES

Edwidge Danticat was born in Haiti in 1969 and came to the United States when she was twelve years old. She graduated from Barnard College and received her M.F.A. from Brown University. Her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory,* was published when she was twenty-five. The following year she was nominated for the National Book Award for her story collection *Krik? Krak!* Edwidge Danticat is a recipient of a Lila Wallace–Reader's Digest Foundation grant and was named one of the twenty "Best Young American Novelists" by Granta in 1996. She lives in New York.

In confidence to you, Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers

Amabelle Désir

1

His name is Sebastien Onius.

He comes most nights to put an end to my nightmare, the one I have all the time, of my parents drowning. While my body is struggling against sleep, fighting itself to awaken, he whispers for me to "lie still while I take you back."

"Back where?" I ask without feeling my lips moving.

He says, "I will take you back into the cave across the river."

I lurch at him and stumble, trying to rise. He levels my balance with the tips of his long but curled fingers, each of them alive on its own as they crawl towards me. I grab his body, my head barely reaching the center of his chest. He is lavishly handsome by the dim light of my castor oil lamp, even though the cane stalks have ripped apart most of the skin on his shiny black face, leaving him with crisscrossed trails of furrowed scars. His arms are as wide as one of my bare thighs. They are steel, hardened by four years of sugarcane harvests.

"Look at you," he says, taking my face into one of his spacious bowl-shaped hands, where the palms have lost their lifelines to the machetes that cut the cane. "You are glowing like a Christmas lantern, even with this skin that is the color of driftwood ashes in the rain."

"Do not say those things to me," I mumble, the shadows of sleep fighting me still. "This type of talk makes me feel naked."

He runs his hand up and down my back. His rough callused palms nip and chafe my skin, while the string of yellow coffee beans on his bracelet rolls over and caresses the tender places along my spine.

"Take off your nightdress," he suggests, "and be naked for true. When you are uncovered, you will know that you are fully awake and I can simply look at you and be happy." Then he slips across to the other side of the room and watches every movement of flesh as I shed my clothes. He is in a corner, away from the lamp, a shadowed place where he sees me better than I see him. "It is good for you to learn and trust that I am near you even when you can't place the balls of your eyes on me," he says.

This makes me laugh and laugh loud, too loud for the middle of the night. Now I am fully disrobed and fully awake. I stumble quickly into his arms with my nightdress at my ankles. Thin as he says I am, I am afraid to fold in two and disappear. I'm afraid to be shy, distant, and cold. I am afraid I cease to exist when he's not there. I'm like one of those sea stones that sucks its colors inside and loses its translucence once it's taken out into the sun, out of the froth of the waves. When he's not there, I'm afraid I know no one and no one knows me.

"Your clothes cover more than your skin," he says. "You become this uniform they make for you. Now you are only you, just the flesh."

It's either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all. Or otherwise simply float inside these remembrances, grieving for who I was, and even more for what I've become. But all this when he's not there.

"Look at your perfect little face," he says, "your perfect little shape, your perfect little body, a woman child with deep black skin, all the shades of black in you, what we see and what we don't see, the good and the bad."

He touches me like one brush of a single feather, perhaps fearing, too, that I might vanish.

"Everything in your face is as it should be," he says, "your nose where it should be."

"Oh, wi, it would have been sad," I say, "if my nose had been placed at the bottom of my feet."

This time he is the one who laughs. Up close, his laughter crumples his face, his shoulders rise and fall in an uneven rhythm. I'm never sure whether he is only laughing or also crying at the same time, even though I have never seen him cry.

I fall back asleep, draped over him. In the morning, before the first lemongrass-scented ray of sunlight, he is gone. But I can still feel his presence there, in the small square of my room. I can smell his sweat, which is as thick as sugarcane juice when he's worked too much. I can still feel his lips, the eggplant-violet gums that taste of greasy goat milk boiled to candied sweetness with mustard-colored potatoes. I feel my cheeks rising to his dense-as-toenails fingernails, the hollow beneath my cheekbones, where the bracelet nicked me and left a perfectly crescent-moon-shaped drop of dried blood. I feel the wet lines in my back where his tongue gently traced the life-giving veins to the chine, the faint handprints on my waist where he held on too tight, perhaps during some moment when he felt me slipping. And I can still count his breaths and how sometimes they raced much faster than the beating of his heart.

When I was a child, I used to spend hours playing with my

shadow, something that my father warned could give me nightmares, nightmares like seeing voices twirl in a hurricane of rainbow colors and hearing the odd shapes of things rise up and speak to define themselves. Playing with my shadow made me, an only child, feel less alone. Whenever I had playmates, they were never quite real or present for me. I considered them only replacements for my shadow. There were many shadows, too, in the life I had beyond childhood. At times Sebastien Onius guarded me from the shadows. At other times he was one of them.

2

Births and deaths were my parents' work. I never thought I would help at a birth myself until the screams rang through the valley that morning, one voice like a thousand glasses breaking. I was sitting in the yard, on the grass, sewing the last button on a new indigo-colored shirt I was making for Sebastien when I heard. Dropping the sewing basket, I ran through the house, to the señora's bedroom.

Señora Valencia was lying on her bed, her skin raining sweat and the bottom part of her dress soaking in baby fluid.

Her waters had broken.

As I lifted her legs to remove the sheets, Don Ignacio, Señora Valencia's father—we called him Papi—charged into the room. Standing over her, he tugged at his butterfly-shaped mustache with one age-mottled hand and patted her damp forehead with the other.

"¡Ay, no!" the señora shouted through her clenched grinding teeth. "It's too soon. Not for two months yet."

Papi and I both took a few steps away when we saw the blood-speckled flow streaming from between his daughter's legs.

"I will go fetch the doctor," he said. His hidelike skin instantly paled to the color of warm eggshells.

As he rushed out the door, he shoved me back towards the señora's bed, as if to say with that abrupt gesture that the situation being what it was, he had no other choice but to trust his only child's life to my inept hands.

Thankfully, after Papi left, the señora was still for a moment. Her pain seemed to have subsided a bit. Drowning in the depths of the mattress, she took a few breaths of relief.

We sat for a while with her fingers clinging to mine, like when we were girls and we both slept in the same room. Even though she was supposed to sleep in her own canopy bed and I was to sleep on a smaller cot across from hers, she would invite me onto her bed after her father had gone to sleep and the two of us would jump up and down on the mattress, play with our shadows, and pretend we were four happy girls, forcing the housemaid—Juana—to come in and threaten to wake Papi who would give us a deeper desire for slumber with a spanking.

"Amabelle, is the baby's bed ready?" With her hand still grasping mine, Señora Valencia glanced at the cradle, squeezed between the louvered patio doors and her favorite armoire deeply carved with giant orchids and hummingbirds in flight.

"Everything is prepared, Señora," I said.

Even though I wasn't used to praying, I whispered a few words to La Virgen de la Carmen that the doctor would come before the señora was in agony again.

"I want my husband." The señora clamped her eyes shut, quietly forcing the tears down her face.

"We will send for him," I said. "Tell me how your body feels."

"The pain is less now, but when it comes on strong, it feels like someone shoves a knife into my back."

The baby could be leaning on her back, I thought, remembering one of my father's favorite expressions when he and my mother were gathering leaves to cram into rum and firewater bottles before rushing off to a birthing. Without remembering what those leaves were, I couldn't lessen the señora's pain. Yes, there was plenty of rum and firewater in the house, but I didn't want to leave her alone and go to the pantry to fetch them. Anything could happen in my absence, the worst of it being if a lady of her stature had to push that child out alone, like a field hand suddenly feeling her labor pains beneath a tent of cane.

"Amabelle, I am not going to die, am I?" She was shouting at the top of the soft murmuring voice she'd had since childhood, panting with renewed distress between her words.

We were alone in the house now. I had to calm her, to help her, as she had always counted on me to do, as her father had always counted on me to do.

"Before this, the most pain I ever felt was when a wasp bit the back of my hand and made it swell," she declared.

"This will pain you more, but not so much more," I said.

A soft breeze drifted in through the small gaps in the patio doors. She reached for the mosquito netting tied above her head, seized it, and twisted the cloth.

Gooseflesh sprouted all over her arms. She grabbed my wrist so tight that my fingers became numb. "If Doctor Javier doesn't come, you'll have to be the one to do this for me!" she yelled.

I yanked my hands from hers and massaged her arms and

taut shoulders to help prepare her body for the birth. "Brace yourself," I said. "Save your strength for the baby."

"Virgencita!" she shouted at the ceiling as I dragged her housedress above her head. "I'm going to think of nothing but you, Virgencita, until this pain becomes a child."

"Let the air enter and leave your mouth freely," I suggested. I remembered my mother saying that it was important that the women breathe normally if they wanted to feel less pain.

"I feel a kind of vertigo," she said, twitching like live flesh on fire. Thrashing on the bed, she gulped desperate mouthfuls of air, even though her face was swelling, the veins throbbing like a drumbeat along her temples.

"I will not have my baby like this," she said, trying to pin herself to a sunken spot in the middle of the bed. "I will not permit anyone to walk in and see me bare, naked."

"Please, Señora, give this all your attention."

"At least you'll cover my legs if they come?" She grabbed her belly with both hands to greet another surge of pain.

I felt the contents of my stomach rise and settle in the middle of my chest when the baby's head entered her canal. Still I felt some relief, even though I know she did not. I told myself, Now I can see a child will truly come of this agony; this is not entirely impossible.

In spite of my hopefulness, the baby stopped coming forward and lay at the near end of her birth canal, as though it had suddenly changed its mind and decided not to leave. Numbed by the pain, the señora did not move, either.

"Señora, it is time," I said.

"Time for what?" she asked, her small rounded teeth hammering her lower lip.

"It's time to push out your child. I see the head. The hair is dark and soft, in ringlets like yours."

She pushed with all her might, like an ant trying to move a tree. The head slipped down, filling my open hand.

"Señora, this child will be yours," I said to soothe her. "You will be its mother for the rest of your days. It will be yours like watercress belongs to water and river lilies belong to the river."

"Like I belonged to my mother," she chimed in, catching her breath.

"Now you will know for yourself why they say children are the prize of life."

"Be quick!" she commanded. "I want to see it. I want to hold it. I want to know if it is a girl or a boy."

Her forehead creased with anticipation. She tightened every muscle and propelled the child's shoulders forward. The infant's body fell into my arms, covering my house apron with blood.

"You have a son." I proudly raised the child from between her legs and held him up so she could see.

The umbilical cord stretched from inside her as I cradled the boy child against my chest. I wiped him clean with an embroidered towel that I'd cut and stitched myself soon after I'd learned of the conception. I rapped twice on his bottom but he did not cry. It was Señora Valencia who cried instead.

"I always thought it would be a girl," she said. "Every Sunday when I came out of Mass, all the little boys would crowd around my belly as though they were in love with her."

Like Señora Valencia, her son was coconut-cream colored, his cheeks and forehead the blush pink of water lilies.

"Is he handsome? Are all his fingers and toes there?" she asked. "I don't think I heard him cry."

"I thought I would leave it to you to strike him again."

I felt a sense of great accomplishment as I tore a white ribbon from one of the cradle pillows, wrapped it around the umbilical cord, then used one of the señora's husband's shaving blades to sever the boy from his mother. Señora Valencia was opening her arms to take him when a yell came. Not from him, but from her. A pained squawk from the back of her throat.

"It starts again!" she screamed.

"What do you feel, Señora?"

"The birth pains again."

"It is your baby's old nest, forcing its way out," I said, remembering one of my mother's favorite expressions. *The baby's old nest took its time coming out. It was like another child altogether.* "You have to push once more to be certain it all leaves you."

She pushed even harder than before. Another head of curly black hair slid down between her legs, swimming out with the afterbirth.

I hurried to put her son down in the cradle and went back to fetch the other child. I was feeling more experienced now. Reaching in the same way, I pulled out the head. The tiny shoulders emerged easily, then the scraggly legs.

The firstborn wailed as I drew another infant from between Señora Valencia's thighs. A little girl gasped for breath, a thin brown veil, like layers of spiderwebs, covering her face. The umbilical cord had curled itself in a bloody wreath around her neck, encircling every inch between her chin and shoulders.

Señora Valencia tore the caul from her daughter's face with her fingers. I used the blade to snip the umbilical cord from around her neck and soon the little girl cried, falling into a chorus with her brother.

"It's a curse, isn't it?" the señora said, taking her daughter into her arms. "A caul, and the umbilical cord too."

She gently blew her breath over her daughter's closed eyes, encouraging the child to open them. I took the little boy out of the cradle now and brought him over to the bed to be near his mother and sister. The two babies stopped crying when we rubbed the soles of their feet together.

Señora Valencia used the clean end of a bedsheet to wipe the blood off her daughter's skin. The girl appeared much smaller than her twin, less than half his already small size. Even in her mother's arms, she lay on her side with her tiny legs pulled up to her belly. Her skin was a deep bronze, between the colors of tan Brazil nut shells and black salsify.

Señora Valencia motioned for me to move even closer with her son.

"They differ in appearance." She wanted another opinion.

"Your son favors your cherimoya milk color," I said.

"And my daughter favors you," she said. "My daughter is a chameleon. She's taken your color from the mere sight of your face."

Her fingers still trembling, she made the sign of the holy cross from her forehead down to the sweaty cave between her swollen breasts. It was an especially hot morning. The air was heavy with the scent of lemongrass and flame trees losing their morning dew to the sun and with the smell of all the blood the señora had lost to her children. I refastened the

closed patio doors, completely shutting out the outside air.

"Will you light a candle to La Virgencita, Amabelle? I promised her I would do this after I gave birth."

I lit a white candle and set it on the layette chest beside the cradle that had been the señora's own as a child.

"Do you think the children will love me?" she asked.

"Don't you already love them?"

"I feel as if they've always been here."

"Do you know what you will name them?"

"I think I'll name my daughter Rosalinda Teresa to honor my mother. I'll leave it to my husband to name our son. Amabelle, I'm so happy today. You and me. Look at what we have done."

"It was you, Señora. You did this."

"How does my daughter look? How do you find my dusky rose? Does she please you? Do they please you? She's so small. Take her, please, and let me hold my son now."

We exchanged children. For a moment Rosalinda seemed to be floating between our hands, in danger of falling. I looked into her tiny face, still streaked with her mother's blood, and I cradled her more tightly in my arms.

"Amabelle do you think my daughter will always be the color she is now?" Señora Valencia asked. "My poor love, what if she's mistaken for one of your people?"

3

In the awakened dark, Sebastien says, if we are not touching, then we must be talking. We must talk to remind each other that we are not yet in the slumbering dark, which is an endless death, like a darkened cave.

I tell him that I would rather he touch me, stroke me in all the same places, in all the same ways. He is too tired, he says, so we must talk. Silence to him is like sleep, a close second to death.

He asks about my family, what my parents were like when they were alive.

"What was it you admired most about your mother?"

At times I like it when he is just a deep echo, one utterance after another filling every crevice of the room, a voice that sounds like it's never been an infant's whimper, a boy's whisper, a young man's mumble, a voice that speaks as if every word it has ever uttered has always been and will always be for me.

"Tell me what you liked most about your mother?" he asks again, when I spend too much time admiring the voice and not answering.

"I liked her tranquility," I say. "She was a woman who did everything slowly, in her own time, as my father liked to say. She was a woman of few words. When she did speak, her words

were direct and precise. 'The baby's old nest took its time coming out. It was like another child altogether.' She was a stern-faced woman with a half gourd for a forehead, that is to say, her forehead was big, high and wide, like mine, a sign of a good mind, some say. She didn't show a lot of affection to me. I think she believed this was not a good way to raise a girl, who might not have affection the rest of her life. She also didn't smile often."

"You don't smile often."

"She was a thin woman like me. I think I look like her, but I do smile more."

"Are you smiling now?" I can hear him smiling in the dark. The smile blends into his voice, slightly halting his speech now and then.

His fingers slice the air towards me. Before his hands land on either side of my waist, I'm already squealing and cackling like a sick hen, already feeling as if I'm being tickled.

"Tell me something more of your mother," he says, once the tickling and more squealing have stopped. "Tell me what her name was."

"Her name was Irelle Pradelle," I say, "and after she died, when I dreamt of her, she was always smiling. Except of course when she and my papa were drowning."

4

Doctor Javier dashed straight to Señora Valencia's bed as soon as he arrived. When he walked into the room, she quickly announced, "Amabelle and I have done it, Javier. We have given birth to the children, twins."

Doctor Javier was a remarkably tall man who seemed to be looking down at everyone around him. His squinting eyes appeared dangerous and fierce as he examined the children, clipping their umbilical cords closer to their bellies.

"How long was it, your labor?" he asked Señora Valencia.

"It began last night," she answered.

"Why didn't you send for me then?"

"Remember the way we'd counted? I thought it could not be time yet."

"We misjudged things perhaps."

"The children and me, we are lucky Amabelle knew how to birth babies," she said. "I could never have done it by myself."

"We are all grateful to Amabelle." Doctor Javier smiled at me as he brushed aside his wiry auburn hair, which extended in a widow's peak to the middle of his forehead. A small wooden carving of cane leaves was pinned to the collar of his

embroidered shirt. It was a charm, like the amulets the cane cutters here in Alegría wore around their necks to protect them from evil spells.

"Amabelle, boil some water, please," the doctor said. "The little ones will need a wash."

The house stood at the top of a hill with a view of the azure-green mountains in the back and a wide road in front. I went out the back door, where the pantry opened onto the grounds. Rushing to my room, I took off my blood-drenched

removed the mattresses from her bed, replacing them with the clean ones from her mother's old bed in the sewing room.

Doctor Javier helped me put the containers down on the layette chest. He poured some medicine in the water with which to bathe the children. Señora Valencia handed him her son.

"Amabelle, do you remember precisely what time the children were born?" Papi asked. He had a notebook on his lap in which to inscribe the details for the birth certificates.

"It was still morning." Señora Valencia looked up at an

fingertips caressing the skin of his sun-scorched white face. "My daughter was born in the capital of this country. Her mother was of pure Spanish blood. She can trace her family to the Conquistadores, the line of El Almirante, Cristobal Colón. And I, myself, was born near a seaport in Valencia, Spain."

We swaddled the babies in the white bands that I had hemmed during Señora Valencia's pregnancy when she thought she would only have a girl. She took her daughter in her arms while Papi stared down at his grandson, rocking him back and forth across his chest.

"You make a very impolite assertion," Papi scolded Doctor Javier in a low voice when he thought his daughter wasn't listening. "We don't want to hear anything more of the kind."

"Amabelle, could I trouble you for un cafecito?" Doctor Javier thought it best to escape from Papi's presence.

"Give him anything he wants," Papi said without looking up from his grandson's face.

Doctor Javier followed me to the pantry. As he passed through the doorway, a suspended bundle of dried parsley leaves brushed his scalp, leaving behind a few tiny stems in his hair. I reached up to flick them away but stopped myself in time. It would be too forward of me to touch him; he might misunderstand. Working for others, you must always be on your guard. Doctor Javier always addressed me kindly, but I could not presume that he would enjoy the feel of my hand wandering through his hair.

"Amabelle, were you a midwife all this time and you never told us?" he asked.

"I don't think myself a midwife, Doctor." Some of the coffee spilled as I poured it into a red orchid-patterned cup, set on its saucer, on a silver tray in front of him.

"How did you know how to birth those children?"

"My mother and father were herb healers in Haiti. When it was called for, they birthed a child," I said, wanting to be modest on behalf of my parents, who had always been modest themselves.

"Valencia tells me the little girl had a struggle," he said.

"She had a caul over her face and the umbilical cord was badly placed, yes."

"Badly placed, around her neck? It's as if the other one tried to strangle her."

"If you will permit me, Doctor, I would rather not condemn these little children by speaking such things."

"Many of us start out as twins in the belly and do away with the other," he persisted. "When I was a medical student, one time we found the two small legs of a baby separately lodged in the back of a grown male cadaver. No other manner to explain this, save that these legs had been lodged in the man since before he was born."

I thought perhaps he told me this to unnerve me. Many people who considered themselves clever found pleasure in frightening the household workers with marvelous tales of the outside world, a world they supposed we would never see for ourselves.

"On the other hand," he continued, "sometimes you have two children born at the same time; one is stillborn but the other one alive and healthy because the dead one gave the other a life transfusion in the womb and in essence sacrificed itself."

"I am thankful ours both survived," I said.

"Aside from medicine, my passions are language and lineage," he said. "That little Rosalinda teaches me something when I look at her."

Was he showing off more of his knowledge for my sake?

"Now that our old friend, the señora's husband, is an officer, I never know what to call him," he said. "His rank changes so often. If I remember, he was last a colonel. I have not seen him for some time."

"He returns from the barracks often enough," I said, trying to make my way out of the conversation. "When he's at home you're always elsewhere. You should ask Señora Valencia your questions, Doctor."

"I'm weary of military men," he said, not discouraged by my lack of interest. "They don't often like me, those men of the Guardia, even those like Pico who are old acquaintances. But let us put this thought aside for a moment. Amabelle, what I wish to tell you is this: I'm quite anxious about the little girl."

"Isn't she healthy?" I asked.

"If Valencia feeds her well, she could become robust in a few weeks. But she is so small. Can you make certain that she nurses her often? Please tell Juana too. She may also be looking after the children."

"And the boy?"

"He looks healthy. It's little Rosalinda who makes me anxious." He turned his empty cup upside down on the saucer, a signal that he didn't want any more coffee. "Let me also say this to you, Amabelle. You should leave here and become a midwife in Haiti."

I felt my eyebrows shoot up, my mouth forming a grimace that might be interpreted as a smile.

"I am not a midwife," I said. "And I haven't been across the border since I was a child of eight years."

"You can be trained," he said. "Valencia once told me that you can read and write. People like you are needed at the small clinic I sometimes visit across the river. We have only two Haitian doctors for a large area. I cannot go there all the time, and I know of only one or two midwives in that region of the border. You are greatly needed."

"You're kind to think so highly of me, Doctor."

"Would you like to go?"

"There is much to consider—"

"Consider all of it, then," he said as he left me.

I was still feeling pleased by the doctor's proposal when Juana walked into the pantry with the house linen folded in a basket.

"I received some coffee from my sisters today," Juana said. Juana's two younger sisters, Ana and María, were both nuns living in a convent orphanage in a mountain village close to the border.

Juana pulled a ripe yellow mango out of her pocket and handed it to me. "I know you would have picked that one if you passed it on the tree," she said.

I immediately sank my teeth into the mango, letting the thick, heavy juices fill my mouth.

"How is the señora?" she asked.

"Didn't you hear the screams?"

"What screams?"

"The señora in labor."

"Baby?"

"Babies!"

She dropped the linen basket on the floor, then bent down and picked up all the scattered sheets. Juana was a heavy woman whose every movement was exaggerated by the expanse of her flesh. Her pale hands were large but fragile looking, as though they would explode if you stuck a needle in them.

"How many babies?" she asked, her head bobbing with excitement.

"How many could it be? She's not a hen."

"Two?"

"One boy and one girl."

"Twin babies in this house," she said, crossing herself. "This is for certain the doing of Santas Felicitas and Perpetua. Where's the señora now?"

"In her room, with Doctor Javier."

"Oh! It was Santa Mónica's doing, bringing Doctor Javier on time."

"He came too late," I said, neglecting the modesty I had been taught in childhood by my parents. "I birthed the babies myself. It happened so quickly, you would call it a miracle."

"Miracles always happen in my absence," she said. "I have to tell Luis." She rushed out of the pantry, then came running back in. "First I must see the señora and the babies for myself."

I put my mango down. We walked to Señora Valencia's room. Juana burst into tears as soon as she saw the children: Rosalinda in her mother's arms and the little boy undergoing another close examination by Doctor Javier.

Señora Valencia held Rosalinda out towards Juana.

"Take her," she said. "Wouldn't you like to hold my daughter, Juana?"

"I'm afraid I will cry," Juana sobbed.

"You're already crying," Señora Valencia observed.

Peeking at the little boy, Juana approached the bed.

"I've named my daughter Rosalinda Teresa," Señora Valencia said.

"For your mami!" Juana sobbed louder now. "Oh, had your mother lived to see this day, she would have been so joyful."

"Then, why are you crying?" Señora Valencia said. "It's a happy day."

"Your mother would have been crying, too, more tears of joy than tears of sadness."

"I will go to the barracks to fetch Pico," Papi said. "I want to come back before dark."

"Don't go alone, Don Ignacio." Juana stepped in front of him with Rosalinda resting in her arms.

"No need to worry, I'll go with God," Papi said, a trace of impatience in his voice.

"Yes, please go with God. But also take Luis with you," Juana urged. "He's in the banana grove cutting a few bananas for me. I don't know how he missed hearing all of this."

"We'll try to return tonight," Papi said, kissing his daughter's hand.

"Señora, you rest," Juana said. "Amabelle and me, we'll look after everything."

"Don't spoil her too much," Doctor Javier cautioned.