

## Machetazos

Today Benita Miller de Robinson will carry water with one arm. She will cook cassava root and sweet potato and yams in an iron pot over illegally made charcoal. She will clean the house and brush all the dirt out the front door with a homemade broom. She will empty her second-to-youngest son out of the dish-washing tub so she can wash the dishes. She will beat her clothes and those of her husband Pasho and ten surviving children between rocks by the riverside. While she is doing all these chores, she is also taking care of the children, because if a girl tears a new rip in her clothes, or one of the boys hits a girl from another household, or if the roots are not cooked or the clothes not washed, her husband Pasho might beat her when he comes back from his *conuco*.

Pasho Robinson left early with his machete and his brother-in-law's mule for the *conuco*, or plot of land on the hillside that he cultivates most days. The *conucos* were originally parcels given by masters to sharecropping slaves to tend. The same name sticks to the bits of land now that Benita and Pasho are nominally free. Pasho has a plot of land in the communal rice marsh between the ocean and the mountains, and a *conuco* up in the hills. There he grows *yuca* or cassava root, yams, sweet potatoes, another tuber called *yautía*, plantains, bananas, figs, pomegranates, grapefruits, papayas, chestnuts, cherries, breadfruit, tamarind, and other fruits that

may have no English names, *mamey*, *guanábana*, *chinola*, *parcha*, *limoncillos*, all for his family's *viveres* or provisions. For cash he grows coffee, cacao and coconuts. The palm fronds supply him with *yagua* for thatching his roof. He cannot afford a zinc roof that would make such a lovely clamor in the torrential rains. The wealthiest families cannot hear each other speak inside when the rain gets heavy enough, because of the thunderous drumming on their metal roofs. He doesn't cut cane on the plantations west of Samaná; that's work for Haitian migrants.

Benita thinks that Pasho has gone to the *conuco*, but she can't be sure. He might have gone to be with a woman. That would only make him more of a man. The married driver of the *guagua* or pick-up truck that shuttles loads of people back and forth between the towns boasts of the bastards he has in all the towns along the way. Sometimes when the *guagua* is late, the people waiting know that the driver is in the arms of his favorite mistress at the beach at the end of the line. They go back to their houses for an hour or two, because they recognize that he is a prodigious lover.

It is another thing for a wife to be unfaithful. Pasho came home one day and struck Benita eight *machetazos* or blows with his machete blade because he thought she had been with another man. When she left the Samaná hospital, she could not move her left arm. Of course she went home to her husband. She had five little children. What else could she do? And after all, said the gossips, it was Benita's fault for holding herself aloof from the man for so many months and making him think she had a lover.

In her kitchen garden, Benita grows chili peppers and sweet peppers, summer squash, melons, hibiscus flowers, *yerba buena* (mint) and *yerba luisa*, oregano and sweet basil, apples-of-gold, avocados, mangos, sour oranges and sweet oranges. She had chickens once, a hog and a

turkey, but the animals are long gone, converted into the flesh of ten growing children by the action of jaws and digestion. She grows fava-like beans called *guandules*, but onions and garlic, lanterns and machetes, cooking pots and wash-tubs, kerosene and soap, needles, cloth and thread, along with the red beans and rice that are the staples in good times, must all be bought in the town of Samaná, or purchased at a mark-up from peddlers who pass by Villa Clara.

Black beans are so expensive that they are only used to make *moro*, so-called because the few black beans scattered among the mounds of white rice look like sparsely dispersed Moors among the Spaniards. Today there is just a pot of mixed tubers on to boil. Before the light fades, Benita must also do her mending. She has always been known as a good seamstress. Her needle moves nimbly. She has got very good at tying knots one-handed, like a surgeon.

I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Health Education in the village of Villa Clara outside Samaná in 1985 and 1986. I was medically evacuated toward the end of 1986 with two fractured bones and a pneumothorax and medically discharged because of asthma. I used my separation allowance to return on my own for a few weeks in early 1987 to tie up my project and say goodbye to everyone.