

Big Rock Soup

An Excerpt from a Short Story By Sandra Sealy

John-John Augustus Joseph had burnished skin like strong, freshly brewed tea. Faded Tommy Hilfiger jeans rode low on his sinewy hips as he ambled down Enterprise Road, limp back pack slung over his left shoulder. Each step made the leather pouch threaded on a slender thong around his neck, bump against his broad chest.

Short nails on the callused fingers of his right hand scratched lightly at black waves sitting close to his head. It was just hair to him – compliments his Vincey father – but the girls in the village seemed to think it was something special – especially Blanda. She was a case!

He recalled their latest encounter on the weekend before.

Hands akimbo on broad hips below a tiny waist, her full, dark eyes [with breasts to match] followed his every move, from saw horse to compressor to electric saw, in the neat workshop nestled in his garden. Her tongue circled glossed, pouty lips in anticipation as she watched John-John's biceps bunch under his shirt as he planed a plank of mahogany. The sight of his hands clenching and moving sent a frisson of pleasure to arch along her spine. Petite Blanda loved to make sport and love with the same abandon. Later as Blanda stretched under John-John on his rumpled double divan, she often said he reminded her of some American singer, when she gently tugged at the two tiny gold hoops dancing in his ears. She hummed in tune with a sensuous R&B melody thumping on the radio. "JJ, you real sexy....just like Usher, onliest ting, black," she giggled.

Propping himself on his elbows, John-John's forehead furrowed as he frowned at her.

"Wuh you talkin'? Study it, we *all* black togedda!"

Blanda's ears grew hot and she bristled as John-John rolled on his back and emitted a long chupse at her intended praise.

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Pelting a derisive glance his way, the young woman snatched up her sarong and flounced in the direction of the tiny bathroom at the back of the house. A long silence followed the door slamming.

I mean, she sporty, look gud and cuh handle sheself in de kitchen an' ting but not too rashole bright. I cyan' understand. It was nonsense like dat...dat is why Gran seh, 'Yuh should never got a woman unless she gots something wort'while between she ears.'

These days when John-John visited Blanda's bungalow about a mile from his house, Ernesta, her mother, as she swished around the kitchen would murmur, "Wif Cicely ovuh an' away, Earlene gone, is time enough dat anudda woman, a *wife*, should be hottin' pot fuh he." Blanda would simply dimple as she dished out a heaping plate of steaming kingfish and ground provisions on a large plate for him. Though Miss Brathwaite's "han' was sweet", somehow, the comments seemed to form aloe juice in his mouth.

Speaking of appetite, his stomach rumbled like an old motor boat under his forest green t-shirt. Some of his grandmother's *sopa de pedra* with split peas and dumplings and chicken and poor man's pork, would go down easily now. He eased the blue haversack over the other shoulder. But the village was a two hour bus ride and walk away and pay day was Friday. Well, it was Wednesday, right now and his protesting belly didn't know the difference. Not that he didn't have money but John-John liked to recline quietly with his evening meal at home. Blanda would often tease that he was 'strange and cheap'. *Just because I don' really check for Chefette, KFC nor nuffin so...* But the fast food didn't wuk up on his palate the way his grandmother's (or even pushy Miss Brathwaite's) did.

Things were really different this year. It was a little slow at Ramnarine's Furniture Emporium right now. But then again, everybody knew January was the longest month of the year. With Christmas holidays

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over, nobody was really looking for anything. That is why John-John's orders dripped like molasses. However, he knew it was only for a time. Good thing he was frugal. Besides, he knew people that would offer him a little job work here and there. Plus, his reputation for timeliness and fine craftsmanship kept the work flowing.

Money really wasn't a problem; John-John believed in paying himself first with a hefty deposit at the City of Bridgetown Credit Union. Then he thriftily set something aside for groceries, bus fare and bills each week. John-John even budgeted for an occasional round of beers with the boys at Sammy's Shop. However, after ensuring that Gran was 'put down proper' and fixing up the little greenheart house she left him, John-John was even more reluctant to make unnecessary expenditure. He saw from the newspapers that the economy these days, didn't look right.

Sopa de pedra. A waterfall sprung in his mouth at the very thought. He recalled Gran's cackling and the crinkling at the corners of her brown almond-shaped eyes that mirrored his. "Boy, long time ago before Cicely, you mudda, did born, I clap eyes 'pon you gran'fadda, Augustus, who you name fuh. He name mean "worthy of respect", you know dat?"

Nodding, he *did* know but never tired of hearing.

Head tilted in that way of hers, she took a deep breath and continued.

"Well, he went tuh sea to nuff places like Panama and Enguland and Cape Verde Islands. Gussy did like it bad and mek nuff friends. He seh dat some Almeirim fellas did he good, good buddies from Portugal, yuh know. Dah is near tuh Spain. Anyhow, dese fellas nuses tuh mek *sopa de pedra* - stone soup. Soun' funny, nuh? Gussy seh it taste real sweet doh. Well, he bring me back piece ah Portugal, faif! He seh, tuh show *me* how to mek it – Bimshire *Sopa De Pedra!*" At this point usually her eyes would squinch up and the mirth would make her generous curves tremble. It was his cue to laugh along with her and he

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always obliged; their joy peeling sweetly to the rafters.

But last year at her bedside at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, she called to John-John to share his favourite love story, he suspected, for the last time. Her now frail body for the first time had that old people's smell that he couldn't stand, but he didn't care. He held her close anyway. John-John felt something hard and rough in his hand as Gran, gasping for breath, spun her *sopa de pedra* tale in a whisper for the last time. When her spirit was released, it was his grandmother's Portuguese stone pressed in his hand.

Sopa de pedra.

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NB. Sandra's full story won a [National Independence Festival of Creative Arts \(NIFCA\)](#) award and was the only Barbadian finalist piece for [Potbake Productions' \(Trinidad\)](#) inaugural Caribbean Short Story Competition 2009/10. [Read her experience](#) about the contest and being included in the winners' anthology, "[Across The Caribbean: West Indian Short Stories](#)".