

Sopa De Pedra

The walls of the institution were white and bare and the lead paint on the cast-iron bed was chipped and cracked and painted over again, thick and ugly. Outside the small window the blurry sky and the swaying Eucalyptus tree reminded her of a time before, a time of sheets drying in the sun and wind and of her mother's young face. The wind had caught her up in its grasp and she left home at seventeen, somehow avoided the army, and moved to Italy. She studied art, and lived with a kindly old gentleman, until she met the man's son and he told her what his father did to him as a boy. Later, she and that boy ran off together. They sold homemade silver jewelry in the marketplaces around Europe. Together they saw Florence, Rome, Venice, Paris, Barcelona, Sevilla, the Côte d'Or, the Côte d'Azur, the islands of Greece – and on and on. They went everywhere and loved it all. In the end, they decided that they liked Barcelona the best and they moved there. She was so happy then. Her happiness was overflowing and contagious and everyone liked her. There were endless parties and endless good times, and the wine and cheese flowed freely. And then one day she came home to an empty apartment. The boy had left. She was empty then. Permanently defeated somehow. Finally, she stood up again and she sold the rest of what she had and decided to start over. She bought an old jeep, and explored the coast of Spain. Along the way, she stopped at Santiago de Compostela and on the cliffs was a puppy, a bright blue eyed Siberian husky. It was alone and cold and shaking. Stacy picked him up and named him Frijolito. Stacy took Frijolito in her arms and climbed into her jeep and drove down the coast and into Portugal.

That fall it was cold and rainy in the North of Portugal and everything was starting to die. Stacy pushed on the shutters and heard them bang off the side of the old building. The air was damp and raw and the stones on the street were wet. Stacy wiped off the condensation that clung to the inside of the window. She looked out over the rounded stonewall and into the old farmyard and saw the solitary rooster. Beyond the farm was the Cavado River and on the other side of the river was the village of Esposende, and past Esposende was the blue-grey void where the sky meets the sea.

Stacy heard the honk from Carolina's car horn and started to rush out. She paused at the door. She didn't know what to do about the broken lock, but she thought about the small village and how everyone seemed so nice, so she left the door cracked open and rushed down the white tiled staircase.

Stacy hopped into Carolina's car. Carolina's boyfriend, Ivan, was driving. Carolina and Ivan were Stacy's new friends, and they were all going to the large *Centro Commercial* mall together.

Ivan took a right turn and headed over the new bridge.

"Why do you have to go this way?" Stacy was upset.

"I need to stop and see a friend in Esposende."

"Porto's the other way."

"Relax, it'll only take a second."

"You *know* I hate this roundabout." Stacy pulled at the ends of her dark and curly hair.

Ivan laughed a little bit, "I forgot."

Ivan liked to drive fast. He took sharp turns and cut cars off.

"What are you trying to do? Get us killed!"

“Ivan likes to pretend he’s a Formula One driver.” Carolina laughed. Big sunglasses were covering her eyes.

“Ahh, what the *Hell* do you know?” Ivan was upset. “I could have been a Formula One driver, if I didn’t grow up in this racist *fodido pais*.” Stacy looked at Ivan’s eyes in the mirror. Ivan flashed his black eyes back at her, “My father’s from Angola and my mother is a blonde Portuguese woman, and when people find this out – they don’t like me.”

Ivan blew some smoke out the window, “I can’t even get a job.” Ivan took a drag, “and at the University it was the same. I was one credit away from graduating, but then I quit.”

“Why?” Stacy asked.

“Because I had a professor who said some stupid shit to me.”

Stacy understood this more than Ivan knew. She had never finished school either. She was enrolled in an art school in Florence and then one day her teacher came in with a t-shirt that said, “Free Palestine!” It didn’t matter that she had run away from home at seventeen. It didn’t matter that she had never joined the army.

Stacy examined the ends of her hair. “I’d like to meet your dad some day.”

“My dad’s an asshole. And you can’t meet him because he’s in jail. The only thing my dad ever gave me was the love for Blondies. Like Carolina over here.” Ivan reached out and petted Carolina’s bleached blonde hair.

“Stop it,” Carolina smiled and pushed his hand away.

“Have you ever been to Angola?” Stacy asked.

“Yeah.”

“What’s it like?”

“It’s a nice place – if you’re a thief.” Ivan replied flatly.

No one said anything.

On the way home from the *Centro Commercial* Stacy noticed that Ivan was driving slower. They turned off the new toll road. They drove past the church that framed the park and past the cafe that caught the nice afternoon sunlight. They turned right at the old fountain, and then left down the nameless cobblestone street. Ivan stopped in front of Stacy’s place. She hopped out and said goodbye.

The sun had come out and the light was so perfect and warm that Stacy had to go to the beach one last time. She picked up Frijolito and put him on the back seat of the jeep. She took out his leash and slipped the end of it through the handle and over Frijolito’s head. She made sure it was snug enough so it wouldn’t slip off, then she clipped the other end onto the side of the jeep.

“My little Frijolito, *mi amor!*” She said to him as she gave him a kiss on the nose.

Stacy started to drive towards the beach. The top was down and the sides were off. That was how she liked it. She liked feeling the breeze in her hair and all around her. Frijolito was sitting up in the backseat, with his alert ears. The sun was sinking low in the sky. She drove fast through the winding cobblestone streets and over the new bridge. She approached the circle, and saw another car in the roundabout. She was sure it was going to turn off, but it didn’t. Stacy had to slam on the brakes and swerve quickly to avoid a collision.

“Watch where you are going!” Stacy yelled at the driver. The driver of the other car motioned for her to slow down.

“What does this guy want to be my friend now?” Stacy said aloud as she forced the jeep into second gear. The car lurched forwards, and then backwards.

“Be careful,” the other driver yelled.

“Come on, man! I know how to drive.”

Stacy heard a thud against the side of the jeep.

“What was that?” Stacy looked in her rearview mirror. The backseat was empty.

“Frijolito!”

Stacy jerked the car over to the side of the road. Her heart was in her mouth and she felt weak. On the street was her *amor*. The leash was pulled tightly around his neck like a noose and his eyes were bulging and his beautiful white fur was dark and dirty.

“Frijolito! What have I done?” Stacy cried.

Cars kept streaming by.

She held Frijolito until his body was no longer warm and then she carefully placed him in the jeep and drove to where the river meets the sea. She opened her small bible and said some prayers for him. Stacy stroked Frijolito’s face and tried to close his cloudy eyes, but couldn’t. She sat and watched the seagulls chasing the last of the glowing light, and when the blues and purples had melted into black, Stacy gently lowered Frijolito down into the lapping waves, and watched as his body sank into the dark water.

“Goodbye, Frijolito. Goodbye, *mi corazón*.”

Stacy sat there for a long time and listened to the sound the foghorn. It kept blowing and blowing and blowing, and she knew that Frijolito was calling to her.

Carolina tried to console Stacy. She put her arm around her, and hugged her and cried with her. Later, she took Stacy to her parent’s restaurant. It was the little one on the corner, the one with the warm fireplace and the good vegetable soup.

“In Portugal we have a children’s tale called, *Sopa de Pedra* or Stone Soup,” Carolina was trying to distract Stacy. “It’s about an outsider who comes to a village. He tells the villagers that he’s going to make a new kind of soup. He calls it *Sopa de Pedra*. He puts a stone in a pot of boiling water. He takes a sip. He says it’s good, but that it needs some vegetables and some seasoning. The villagers, who are curious about this secret soup, bring him all the ingredients he needs, carrots, cabbage, seasoning, everything. He puts them in the pot and cooks it up and pretty soon it’s all done. He shares his soup with the villagers, and everyone’s happy.”

Stacy looked at Carolina in disbelief. “And they liked the soup?”

“Yes,” Carolina answered slowly.

“How can they like a soup that’s made out of stones?”

“It’s just a story.” And then, “Don’t worry, things are going to get better,” Carolina tried. “At least you have your health.”

“I need to go,” Stacy stood up. “Here’s some money for your *sopa de pedra*.” Stacy dropped a few Euros on the table.

“I was only trying to help.”

“Carolina, there are many things that I can tell you, but I won’t.” Stacy looked down at Carolina. “But sometimes the things you say and the way you say them,” she paused for a second, “are so fucking dumb!”

Carolina was silent.

“I’m only trying to help,” Stacy mimicked Carolina. “Well, you’re not helping. You’re like a vampire, sucking me dry.” Stacy turned and walked out.

Stacy took the long way home. She didn’t want to pass by Ivan and Carolina’s apartment. Stacy turned the corner and was in the small tree lined park. She sat down on

a cold stone bench and tried to look at the stars in the night sky, but it was no use. A silver plane streaked across the sky. She shivered and got up and walked home.

She pushed open her broken door and walked into her damp kitchen. She sat down on the edge of wooden chair and nervously picked at her hair. She'd take a dark and curly lock and separate it from the others, twist it and pull it, and then she'd do it again and again, until her hair was scattered and torn apart.

When she opened her eyes she saw that it was still dark. It was dark and cold and it was raining and suddenly she hated this country that she had once loved so much. It was then that she picked up the phone and called the Police.

There was a knock on the door and a young and overly serious policeman entered her apartment. After some brief formalities he asked her what happened. She tried to concentrate, but she couldn't get over the fact that this policeman looked like a boy in a uniform. She became hysterical. He tried to calm her down by asking simple questions. She showed him the bag and he used the tip of his pen to open the top of it. He peered inside. He was very composed until he asked her how much money was stolen.

"I don't know exactly, but it was at least eight thousand Euros," Stacy said.

"Eight thousand Euros!" The policeman was shocked. "Eight thousand Euros," he repeated out loud, as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"I don't know exactly, it could have been more. It could have been nine or ten thousand Euros." He stopped writing.

"What were you doing with that much cash?"

Stacy started to explain how she sold silver and jewelry in the marketplaces, but then everything became jumbled and confused. She told him that she used to hide her money in the bottom dresser drawer, but then she moved it to her bag. She didn't know why, but that's what she did. Tears had started to run from her eyes, and she began to shake.

"Who knew you had this money?" the policeman calmly asked her.

She looked at the ends of her hair.

"Only Ivan and Carolina."

The boy policeman cleared his throat. "These people can't be trusted."

Stacy pulled on a piece of her hair and put it to her lips.

"In Portugal we have a saying, 'big problems in small villages'."

"Are you going to arrest them?"

"No, no, no," the policeman shook his head. "We need proof."

"Well, what the *Hell* do you want? You have all the proof that you need."

"Don't worry," the young policeman put his hand on her shoulder, "We'll catch him, but in the meantime I'm here to protect you."

He wrote something down on a piece of paper and handed it to her.

"This is my personal number. Call me day or night. Maybe, you just want to talk, or have a friend by your side."

Stacy felt an icy presence cooling her and she felt sick.

"I just want to help you." He smiled.

"Okay," was all Stacy could manage to say.

"Next time put your money in the bank." He waved his pen at her.

"Okay," she closed the door and tried to lock it, but she had trouble and gave up.

There was a knock on the door,

"And get this lock fixed," the policeman winked.

“Okay, okay,” Stacy slammed the door. The lock clicked, and she bolted it. The boy policeman’s oversized boots echoed down the stairs. She tried to listen to the sound of the foghorn, but it was too noisy.

“Did you call the police?” Carolina asked.

“Yes.”

“And what did they say?”

“They said that it was probably someone I knew,” Stacy felt a chill.

“Let me see the police report.” Ivan read it over, and then he laughed.

“What?”

“They sent that idiot Pedro Silva.”

“You know him?”

“Of course, he’s from Fáo. That guy was so desperate to get laid, that he married the village *puta*,” Ivan scoffed. “She needed a husband before it was too late. And now he’s her *puta*.”

Carolina nodded her head in agreement. “It’s true.”

“Oh my god,” Stacy said. “I knew something was wrong with him.”

“What else did he say?” Ivan asked.

“He said that he’d be watching me, and that he’d be there to protect me at night when I was most vulnerable.”

“You see what a pervert he is.” Ivan laughed and added, “back in school he got picked on, and that’s why he became a cop.” Ivan kept talking, but Stacy wasn’t listening anymore, she was watching a small black bug crawl across the cold floor. Its back two legs were broken and it was dragging itself across the white tiles. It crawled up the side of a tile and then it flipped over on its back and its little legs were flailing helplessly. Stacy hoped it would die.

The rain came down hard and then soft and light, but there was always a constant dripping on the leaves and it was soothing – the way rain always is. Stacy pulled on her hair.

An orderly with a boy’s face and a white coat knocked on the door. He was carrying a tray with a bowl on it.

“*Sopa de Pedra*,” said the orderly.

“Again.”

“Yes, its good for you.”

Stacy didn’t respond, she was staring at the bars on the window and they were cold and grey just like the North of Portugal.