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## COCK SOUP

*by Annie Paul*

Coral looked at the two soup packets again and thought about how she could frame her lecture on gender stereotypes in the Caribbean. The packet of Maggi Cock Soup had been languishing in the kitchen cupboard for months when she glimpsed it one day through eyes newly sharpened by insights from her Gender and Society course. What was it Coral's lecturer kept repeating? Something about feminism offering a new 'lens' through which to study society.

With the lenses donated by feminism now firmly affixed to her eyes, she stared at the cock soup packet, seeing all sorts of things she hadn't noticed before. This was exciting. Her area was really Media Studies, but Dr. Stewart, who normally taught the Gender and Society course, was traveling and Coral, with a brand new doctorate, had been asked to fill in for her. A number of thoughts started running through her mind. What was cock soup anyway? Was it made exclusively with the meat of roosters? Did rooster meat taste distinctly different from chicken meat? She drove down to Liguanea to see if there were other kinds of commercial chicken soups available and returned with a handful of packets of different brands of cock and chicken noodle soup.

The Maggi cock soup packet had a virile cartoon rooster on it, with a massive comb and a rakish glint in its eye, looking every inch an avian rude boy. The chicken noodle packet, on the other hand, showed a photograph of what looked like a plump roast chicken lying passively on its back on a bed of noodles, legs in the air, stewing in its own juices. Without a doubt, thought Coral, it portrayed the predicament of the female of the species: legs trussed together, skin nicely browned, with alluringly plump thighs and breasts. There's plenty of material for my paper here, thought Coral to herself, especially after phoning Nestle and being told that cock soup was an innovation created especially for the Jamaican market. It was the same chicken meat that went into both soups but cock soup had more pepper in it and on the whole was a far spicier concoction than mere chicken soup.

Still it was strange that none of her Jamaican cookbooks had a recipe for cock soup. One of them had a note next to its recipe for chicken soup that said, "Nowadays, many Jamaicans use a packaged chicken soup called cock soup as a base for various soups. To me, it tastes artificial and seems to replace all the natural goodness of real chicken. Jamaica has delicious chickens that make great homemade soup . . ." Yet Zora Neale Hurston had certainly encountered cock soup in the 1930s when she attended a curry goat feast in St. Mary—a "feast so masculine that chicken soup would not be allowed. It must be soup from roosters."

Coral wondered who had concocted the idea of cock soup. Maybe that person had been thinking of Mannish water, the fiery soup made of goat meat (containing every part of

the goat, minus skin and horn, and reputed to have aphrodisiac qualities); it didn't really matter, it just went to show that even in the marketing and packaging of products, gender was an important consideration.

The phone rang. "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" crowed a lusty male voice. It was Jordan, whom Coral had known since she was five and who was one of her closest friends. "Hi Jordan, go and harass some other hapless female," she said. "Good evening, ma'am, Bernard Shaw calling from CNN in Atlanta. We understand you're conducting path-breaking research into reproductive fertility in the greater Antilles. Could you give us some pointers on the appropriate mating behavior for young Jamaican males? I mean what, in your considerable experience as a gender scientist, is a good opening gambit for a man? Huh? Can you tell us Ms. Genderoni?"

"Oh, buzz off, you genderless gadfly . . ."

"Shall I compare thee to a fresh vegetable? Or a midsummer mango? Oh come on, Coral, can't you see how ridiculous you're being? In Jamaica it's women who rule the roost. That makes *them* the roosters. Ha ha ha. Listen darling, why don't you give the books a break and come to the New Wave instead? Philip's show opens tonight and we should at least show our faces."

Coral sighed and agreed to go. She wasn't at all in the mood to look at indifferent art tonight but Philip was another childhood friend and was bound to feel hurt if they didn't show up. It's getting late and it's time to knock off anyway, she told herself. She could continue working on the lecture tomorrow.

At the gallery, which had once been a stable attached to a great house, it didn't take long for Coral to finish looking at the art. The paintings were a little predictable, she thought in disappointment, taking in the portraits of angst-ridden penises. Philip was an old friend but she was beginning to feel impatient at the perpetual air of ennui which had begun to permeate his paintings. Here he was now heading towards her. What was she going to say?

"Remarkable, quite remarkable!" Coral ventured, heartily gesturing at the wall. "I especially like that one of the mmmmm, you know, the one with a red bow on." If Coral sounded nervous it was because she had unpleasant memories of the last time she'd been to an opening of Philip's work. Intending only to express a warm interest in his paintings, she'd asked Philip a number of questions about his art and was taken aback when he turned on her and barked, "Why are you asking all these questions? What are you, a reporter?"

Today Philip seemed more relaxed though he couldn't resist curling his lip and sneering at her remark. "Really? Want to put your money where your mouth is?" What was it with people like him, Coral wondered. He had been great fun when they were all children, but as they grew older, he had seemed to turn bitter, his small mouth wearing a permanent screw, sarcasm twisting almost every word he uttered. Coral had little patience with people like that. She always wondered what could have happened to turn him into such a hater when he came from a relatively privileged household. His parents were so-called good people. Dad was a university lecturer, mom a schoolteacher. Ah well, that wasn't to say anything, she thought; families were often the most dangerous environments.

"Another rum punch?" interrupted the waiter. "Thanks," she replied, glancing up. Easier to imagine someone like that, one of the invisible men pouring drinks and refilling glasses, ending up twisted and bitter from the harshness of his life than Philip Dabydeen

whose parents sent him to school and college and kept him fed and clothed even today as an adult.

She couldn't just ignore Philip's invitation to buy a painting. "I'd love to, but my accountant has declared a moratorium on buying art," Coral countered, moving away and drifting toward another group nearby. She thought she recognized the woman in the group, or at least her face seemed intriguingly familiar. The woman was talking animatedly to her two companions and Coral inclined her head while she listened.

"But don't you see he was playing the race card? You have to challenge them every time they play the race card!" declared the young woman passionately. "Well, yeah," drawled her companion, his American-accented words reaching far out into the night, "But howdja challenge the most powerful man in the country?" It turned out that the American was the Associated Press correspondent in Jamaica and had just interviewed the Prime Minister of the country.

This looked promising thought Coral, eyeing the AP correspondent. She had always wanted to talk to one of these foreign journalists but the woman now appealed to her for support. "This race thing is so dangerous," she cried, the lamplight gleaming on her white skin. "Oh by the way, I'm Georgina Fuller," she said, extending her hand.

"Coral Williams, nice to meet you."

"It shouldn't be encouraged. People ought not to mobilize on the basis of the color of their skin. The important thing is whether he's the best candidate. Not whether he has the darkest skin. Boy, I tell you, the Buttoos in this country will drive you crazy if you don't look out. Out of many, one, that's what we have to keep reminding them."

Here we go again, thought Coral, her heart sinking. She really wasn't interested in another rant on race. She would much rather have been talking to the AP man, finding out where his head was. But Georgina Fuller was not about to step down from her soapbox. The Prime Minister had recently said that if he stepped off the campaign platform and mingled with the people he would be indistinguishable from them, for unlike his opponent he was a black man in a black country. The Opposition leader was Middle Eastern in origin and stood out like a sore thumb in this predominantly black country. *Foreigner. Not black. Not born ya.* That was the unspoken sentiment implicit in the Prime Minister's innocuous sounding statement which set off howls of outrage from the white, brown and beige segments of the population who never bypassed an opportunity to invoke the nation's unduly optimistic motto, "Out of many, one people."

"I think we're heading towards a dictatorship myself," Georgina confided leaning towards Coral in a conspiratorial manner and speaking in a lowered voice. "We have to make sure that the international media keeps these outrages in the news out there so that the Buttoos here know that the world is watching." Then she snuggled up to the AP correspondent, saying, "And we have to make sure our foreign correspondents are well-looked after, so they can guard Jamaican democracy and keep it safe, don't we pet?"

Boy, white people. Why was it they always assumed that you agreed with their point of view, Coral wondered, holding her tongue and refusing to be drawn into the woman's tirade. A small headache was pounding at her temples and Coral started to wonder how soon she could escape from this tiresome gathering and get back home. She was beginning to feel like an egg in a rock stone dance; or a cockroach in a fowl fight. At any rate, packets of soup had far more interesting things to say, it seemed to her.