

“Coco” by Lauren Saloio

Little Lucinda woke up with strange lumps on her hands. They dotted her knuckles and spread to her wrists in a sparse design, like spiders on a web. The child was young, too young to know that they were just moles, but old enough to be frightened by the unknown.

She jumped from her bed and raced to her mother. Laura was a superstitious woman, and even more superstitious as a mother. Everything had a reason darker than science.

“Bom dia, minha filha. Time for breakfast,” Laura said.

“Bom dia, Mãe. Look—” Lucinda wove her hands towards her mother, but Laura had turned away.

“The milk man is here, filha, and the bread. Let me go grab it so we can eat.”

Laura returned moments later, and Lucinda was soon distracted by the warm bread she brought with her. Laura tore a piece of bread open and lathered with salted butter. Lucinda nearly drooled as she watched the butter melt into the soft insides of the bread. She opened a glass bottle of milk, taking a small gulp before biting into the fresh bread with a satisfying crunch. When she was done with that piece, she reached for another.

*Dreams turn sour,
Curdling at the mouths of
Of mischievous children like you.
O Coco can come
At any time of the night,
And no blankets are strong enough
To protect you.
Its eyes are two abysses
Void of light and good and life.
Its face is not like yours and mine,
With soft and smooth skin,*

No.

Its face is not a face at all.

It's not?

It's not.

What is it?

“Oh, Lucinda! What is that?” Laura grasped her daughter’s hands suddenly, turning them over to reveal the small bumps. “*Oy vey!* Come, come.”

Laura led her to the fridge, where she took out two eggs, one for each of Lucinda’s infested hands. “Carry these, *filha*, bring them to the *castelo*. Don’t drop them, or else it won’t work. You must go all the way to the top of the hill before the sun goes down and darkness takes over.” It was a strange demand, to carry eggs to the top of the hill where the *castelo* sat—another remedy for the once inexplicable, passed down from generations of fearful mothers before Laura.

The *castelo* was short for the *Castelo de Pena de Aguiar*, a medieval castle in their small village of Telões, Portugal, that you could hike to in a couple hours. The path was steep and not always safe, but safe enough that Lucinda was more scared of monsters than tumbling down the mountain.

“All by myself?”

“Yes. It’s okay.” Laura pushed a hair back from her daughter’s small face.

“How do you know it will work?”

“It will. But you must believe it, too.”

“*Mãe*, I’m scared. What if *o Coko* is there? Or *moura encantada* the shapeshifter? Or the *broxa* vampire!”

“*Aqui*, look. Take this—it will keep you safe.” Laura handed Lucinda her favorite rosarie, blessed by an esteemed priest from her pilgrimage at the *Santuário de Fátima*. “Now go, quickly.”

It's head is orange and lumpy,

A rotten pumpkin of a thing.
Eyes too small,
Too dark, too piercing,
For the large, looming head
That they sit on.
A dark hole of a smile,
So wide, too wide,
It reaches from one end of the pumpkin head
To the next.
A pumpkin for a head?
A pumpkin.
But it walks?
It walks.
How?

Lucinda left for the *castelo*.

About an hour into her journey, the clouds darkened and spread throughout the sky in an inky hue, suffocating any solace Lucinda had found in the fact that it was daytime. Her arms ached from holding an egg in each hand, the slight added weight becoming a nuisance when coupled with repetitive movement.

The path was windy and at every turn something in the corner of her eye moved swiftly and straightly and silently. It was an unnatural movement, one that made Lucinda uneasy. But when she turned back, there was nothing but the empty woods.

Thunder clapped and it began to rain shortly after. All Lucinda could hear was the overwhelming sound of rain spraying the trees and the ground. Lightning struck, illuminating the dark path ahead of her where a man with a big, orange head stood facing her.

He was so still.

It has a body, too.

Attached to its too big head

And too small eyes.

Its body is tall and thin,

Too thin.

Covered in cloaks of darkness to match its eyes.

A disguise for the monstrosity lurking underneath,

But a horror covered and hidden

Is a horror nonetheless.

Lucinda screamed, almost dropping the eggs. She wanted to believe he was just a man, but she knew what it really was. Her mother warned her about it every time she tried to evade her chores, every time she forgot to peel the potatoes or collect the dried laundry. Darkness smothered her again, the path just visible enough to see a few feet in front of her.

When lightning struck next, *o Coco* stood right in front of her, a mere few inches away.

She felt the hot, putrid-smelling breath coming from its wide smiling mouth, and she felt its stare from its dark, piercing eye holes. Its eyes had no end to their narrow depth, no light amidst the darkness. Lucinda was frozen by fear, vaguely realizing that it was moving, moving its hands towards her hands, squeezing them, a little tighter—

“No!” Lucinda escaped his grasp, and ran around it before he could break the eggs in her hands. She ran faster than she thought possible, fueled by the deep pit in her stomach and her racing heart. She refused to look over her shoulder. She knew what she would see, could feel its presence behind her.

Lucinda was too frightened to notice the branch that had fallen in her path. She tumbled over, landing with her arms outstretched in an attempt to keep from smashing the eggs. She fell hard in the dirt,

face and elbows first. Her head pounded and noise became muffled. She couldn't hear the rain anymore, just the soft hum of a song. The singing calmed her pain, and her eyes struggled to stay open. She tried to get up and run from the approaching figure, but the singing lulled her to sleep.

Lucinda woke to that same singing, the serene voice of a woman. She thought she was dreaming at first, until she opened her eyes and found herself laying at the top of the *castelo*, with the beautiful view of the sky, trees and faraway rooftops surrounding her. The storm had passed, and the bright sun reflected off of the puddles of water next to her. Above her, a woman with long shiny hair and bright eyes looked down at her, her lips upturned in a soft smile as she sang. Her hair was covered with water lily flowers, and her smile seemed to suggest a secret I had yet to uncover.

"Who are you?" Lucinda asked. The woman kept singing.

"Where's *o Coco*? He's going to get us!"

"Shhhh. He is gone," the woman hushed.

Lucinda wondered how the woman saved her from the monster, and flinched when she realized what act of violence the woman might have committed to make sure he was gone for good. She didn't like the idea of killing, but would be glad if the monster was dead.

She remembered her eggs and looked around frantically for them, immediately letting out a deep breath of relief when she saw them lying by her side. Somehow, she had made it. This woman must have killed *o Coco* and helped her the rest of the way.

"Thank you for saving me."

"*Moura encantada* saves no one."

Watch out,

Minha filha,

For it knows no bounds,

It makes no sounds,

It sins in the name

Of satan and all things evil.
It feeds off the sins of children like you,
Like I was once.
It will try to turn you,
Mold you,
Model you
In the image of itself.
If it fails,
It will come after you.

Lucinda woke up the next morning in her bed, exhausted and sore from the eventful trek to and from the *castelo*. She squinted at the rays of sun seeping under her bedroom door, her only way of knowing it was time to wake up. She shot up, looking around the room in a sudden panic before dropping her eyes down to her hands and remembering everything that had happened. She moved her hands toward the bottom of the floor, letting the light hit them just right. She gasped at the condition of her hands.

Smooth. Soft. Success.

She sighed, excited to tell her mother. In the corner of eye, she thought she saw something moving. She shook her head, banishing the thought. *O Coco is gone. You're safe now*, she thought.

Lucinda didn't yet feel the extra weight to her head, wouldn't realize until later that her face was no longer her face, her skin no longer her skin. No, she wouldn't realize that until she heard her mother's screams at breakfast.

So behave, minha filha,
It is the only way
To keep o Coco away.

