

Coco sleeps under the bed.

The night is terrifying

It's early evening. The dim light from the patio filters in beneath and at the level of the door. The sound of water splashing against the dinner dishes can still be heard. Mom, as always, can't go to bed without leaving them sparkling clean.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, the light goes out and all noise ceases. The silence becomes profound and remains so for long minutes, broken only by the falling of a few branches and the rustling of the wind on the asbestos roof.

This night is marked by a bad omen. Hours earlier, Solomon, the family's dog, was seen desperately digging in the ground next to the ash tree, trying to make a den.

The best thing would be to go to sleep, to put any bad feelings to rest. But no: this is no ordinary night. Something has entered the house, and not through the door. It has managed to climb over the screen that protects it. Then a sharp bang and a low growl were heard.

Fear grips a little boy, who now lies curled up among the wool blankets, his face hidden behind the pillow to which he clings with his nails dug in.

The shuffling of feet from a strange being approaches mingles with the sound of Solomon's paws as he runs back and forth. The little boy's heart pounds in his chest. That evil creature draws ever closer. It emits muffled, guttural moans. Now it stops in front of his bedroom.

From its spectral mouth emerges a threat:

– Are you there?

Only silence is perceived, interrupted by the faint wind and another figure emerging from the darkness:

– Of course I'm here, Anselmo. This isn't the time to be arriving!

– Leave me alone, Amalia. I only went with my friends to celebrate Chícharo's birthday.

– Look at the state you're in! Come to the kitchen so I can serve you some chilaquiles.

Where does El Coco live?

I recently heard a child from this new era claim that El Coco lives in palm trees. Nothing could be further from the truth. The elders of our

village know that this monster hides in the dark corners of our homes: inside the water tank, behind the door, in the cistern, or in the wardrobe.

Yes, in that adorable and mysterious piece of furniture that holds the wonders and secrets of a family. I remember as a child being afraid to rummage behind its doors, though not enough to overcome my rebellious curiosity, always stronger than my fears. And so it was that one afternoon, I committed that unfortunate act, only to be ambushed, after a sudden leap, by a hairy beast bristling with fangs. It clung to the fabric of my trousers, followed by a litter of similar, smaller creatures, who stared down at me from the floor with their fur standing on end.

Luckily for me, it was just Doña Chana, the family's brown cat, who had been locked up

there to give birth and nurse her kittens. To them, I must have been the terrifying image of a feline bogeyman.

Chana was an adorable little cat, small in size, with fur so fluffy it doubled her size. Her romantic nature and frequent escapes had made her a mother on numerous occasions. That was why it was necessary to keep her locked inside the enormous pine cabinet. Also because, otherwise, her kittens had to be collected from every corner of the house. She had a habit of giving birth, one by one, on any piece of furniture or corner that offered her a semblance of safety.

The fright that afternoon was not unfounded. The pups of her latest litter looked more like a black Tasmanian devil than a cuddly kitten. This appearance did not prevent their mother from clinging with her claws to any dog that

dared approach them, forcing it to flee with pitiful howls.

Her ferocity shows that love is a powerful alarm capable of detecting the presence of evil. Chana never doubted the danger lurking in the fangs of a snout approaching to sniff at her young. Nature endows mothers with a sixth sense that exposes the threat behind every disguise.

Let's not forget, however, that love is also a trap, so it's necessary to tame its hidden evil. Chana had a habit of appropriating my socks and underwear, so it was common for my underwear to resemble a soldier's uniform after crossing a barbed wire fence.

I haven't forgotten, however, her habit of licking my hair all night long and settling her

kittens on my chest. She saw me as part of her litter. The day she died, she followed me around so I would keep her company in her final moments. I did so while she stared into my face, between deep breaths and purrs, until she breathed her last.

Chana was the reincarnation of a guardian angel. Her warm, rasping tongue was a sword that soothed the sorrows of the earthly world. Her eyes held the sweet gaze that accompanies a caress, like the one that hides our face in a mother's breast or behind the back of a paternal Hercules.

The truth is, El Coco prefers to live under the beds, observing our every move, no matter the distance. He has no secrets; he knows when we steal a cookie from Grandma's Olinalá tin or drink her eggnog, when we take the matches to light Dad's newspaper, when we hide the

cake from the most fragile student in school, or when we throw a tantrum in front of the teacher.

The boogeyman is omnipresent. He senses what we're thinking, knows our hiding places, tells Mom everything, and at the most inopportune moment, she tells Dad, and he... to the belt.

Many years later, I realized that El Coco was, in fact, a venerable teacher. From him, I learned to begin work at dawn, to earn the fruits of life through hard work, to give way to the elderly, to have compassion for the weak, to respect merit and all living beings, and to lay the bricks of a home.

Coco likes feet

The Bogeyman is known for pulling children's feet. That's why it's wise to heed grandmothers' advice: avoid walking barefoot and keep your feet under the covers when you sleep. The Devil has a similar habit, although he prefers to suck up anything that falls or touches the ground. There are few things as unpleasant as feeling an insect, stone, needle, nail, or gelatinous substance on your feet.

What is the reason for this fascination? Wouldn't it be the same to pull on your hands or your head? Consider that to flee, you need two nimble feet; running on your hands is clumsy. To face life's monsters, you need to have your feet firmly planted on the ground. The Bogeyman knows that his best victim is the one who doesn't know where they stand.

One night, El Coco had an encounter with Cándido, my best friend from childhood. He was a small, thin boy with indigenous roots who earned a few cents shining shoes. I liked the way he spoke, as if he were singing a soft melody. His last syllable always ended with a drawn-out, high-pitched note.

He was sleeping peacefully on his mattress—for he lacked a bed—when the sinister creature from his nightmares grabbed him by the ankles and dragged him into the yard of his home, while he covered his face with both hands. Then it abandoned him, filled with terror and tears, inside a pit his family used to store shelled corn.

At dawn, he was able to return to the place where his mattress had been, beneath which two pesos he had earned through his honorable labor had disappeared. It seemed a

small price to pay to avoid being devoured by the Bogeyman.

It was strange that, some time later, we caught his brother—ten years older than him—buying sodas and some beer. Even more so because this brother was incapable of earning a penny through work.

What does the Coco eat?

The Bogeyman eats children, without a doubt. Every grandmother knows that. But it's not the only dish in his diet: he also feeds on the breakfast that the tantrum-throwing children refuse to eat. Every child knows he nibbles at the cake fresh from the oven, and grandmothers know he savors the candies the little ones had hidden. It's unfair to blame the cat.

Her wickedness is great. She cuts off Grandpa's mustache with scissors, gives surprise pinches to the children near the old man, and threatens the student who tries to tell the teacher on another. She announces her greedy arrival when someone refuses to do their homework, swears, reveals the older sister's boyfriend, or doesn't tell the teacher where the blackboard eraser is hidden.

As you will see, he will always be on the lookout to sink his teeth into the fragile humanity of any indolent young man.

Where was El Coco born?

It is said that El Coco originated in Galicia or Portugal; its name refers to the well-known round fruit into which eyes and a mouth were carved, a tradition similar to that of Halloween pumpkins. It is likely that this object was used for the same educational purposes.

The Bogeyman is a symbol of the struggle against shadows, a figure that invites us to confront the worries that lurk in the darkness. It represents what can be hidden around the corner of a lonely street; behind overconfidence; in the reckless speed of a vehicle; in the consumption of tobacco and alcohol. It also hides in the ambition of those who believe there is no one more ambitious. It may be found in a clandestine bed or behind an insult that is met with a response.

Childhood fear is the essence of the caution that allows an adult to grow old. The bogeyman is like the Hydra: it has a thousand heads. One of them disappears when we reach youth, but it returns when our hair turns white. It pricks us with a small pain in the side, marks us with the appearance of a strange blemish, hits us on the head to make us forget

everything, sucks our breath, or oppresses our chest with great pain.

Let's be vigilant, the Bogeyman will find us someday

Children or the elderly, this aberrant being will find us when we least expect it. Today, it appears through Wi-Fi, disguised as 21st-century malware. It spies on us with a power it has never possessed before. We would do well to warn children about the many scars on its face. We must insist on never leaving them alone to face this monster. Let us not forget that fear is a natural shield against danger.

We already know that the Bogeyman can be found everywhere. All it takes is intuition to prevent him from appearing unexpectedly or being summoned by our actions. Over time, we learn countless ways to confront him, to distinguish him from other ghosts. He can be

found everywhere, but there's one place where we'll always find him.

As far as I'm concerned, I know it won't be long before I have to face its fiercest face. Just a few seconds before total emptiness and darkness. The instant needed to hear, in the deep distance, that ancient song that says:

"Go to sleep, child, go to sleep now, for the Bogeyman is coming and... he will eat you."