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Papão: A Portuguese Horror Novella

by

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BICHO-PAPÃO. NOUN. PORTUGUESE ORIGIN. (PLURAL: BICHOS-PAPÃES)

1) bogeyman (menacing, ghost-like monster in Portuguese folklore).

Synonyms: Papão (puh-pong).

“Say not in grief ‘he is no more’ but in thankfulness that he was.”

– Hebrew Proverb

“The paradox of trauma is that it has both the power to destroy and the power to transform and resurrect.” - Peter A. Levine

“There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds.” - Laurell K. Hamilton

Gone Too Soon

MARISSA CARVALHO SAT QUIETLY ON THE EDGE OF HER BED, STARING OUT THE window of her bedroom as the rain poured down. She focused on the separate streams of water running down the thick piece of glass, divided into four squares by its wooden framing. Through the window, Marissa could see the numerous identical two-story homes lined up side by side. This pattern of homes was normal in the small suburban city of Elk Grove in Northern California.

In Marissa's twelve years of her young life, the perfectly aligned rows of mirroring houses were as common to her as the blue sky in the morning and the bright stars at night. Each house with the same roof tiles, two-story architecture, and small backyards. Aside from the random hot tub or hammock, the houses were practically clones of each other. Marissa's family home was no different. Another in the endless lineup of clones.

Two houses down, Marissa focused her attention on a gray Chevy Suburban slowly heading up the driveway and entering the garage. From the garage, a man ran out and down to the end of the driveway. He grabbed the trash can that was resting on the sidewalk and pulled it back near the house, moving quickly in order to get out of the rain as quickly as possible. As he placed the trash can near the home, a woman and two children came out to greet him. The man hunched over and ran toward them as the others laughed and ran away toward the front of the house. All four entered their home and closed the door behind them.

Marissa kept her gaze on the family until they disappeared inside their

home. She found herself yearning for the fun they were having. The joy on their faces as they ran alongside each other in the rain. A father playfully chasing his wife and kids through the downpour into the comfort of their home.

That looks like fun, Marissa thought. Wish I could have that.

Marissa quickly thought of the moments she shared with her father and mother. The games they would play. The trips they would go on. Her father helping her with her homework. Marissa handing him tools while he worked on his truck. All those memories would remain in the past, never to be relived outside her mind. From now on, those moments would always be eclipsed by her latest memory, one that occurred only a few hours earlier in the day.

The memory of watching her father's casket lowered into the open earth.

Downstairs, the house was busy with the chatter of visitors. People dressed in formal black attires, eating food and reminiscing on the life of their dearly departed friend. The conversations are a free flowing blend of English and Portuguese. Marissa was familiar with this atmosphere, growing up in a Portuguese family that fully embraced its culture. The heartbreaking vocals of Fado singer Amália Rodrigues exuded from the home sound system and echoed throughout the home, providing the appropriate background score to the Lusitanian descendants in the house.

In the kitchen, leaning against the sink, Marissa's mother Grace stared straight ahead. Wearing a simple black dress with her long brown hair draped behind her, Grace kept her puffy-eyed gaze on the large table in the living room. Draped with a long sheet, the table was topped with multiple dishes filled with hors d'oeuvres, many of which were of Portuguese cuisine. At the center of the table was a large, framed portrait of Grace's husband, Michael. Grace locked on her deceased husband's brown eyes. Taking in his slick black hair and big smile, Grace thought of all those times when his smile would bring her comfort. A smile that made it seem like no matter

what the obstacle, everything would be alright. Her eyes welled up as she reminisced until she finally broke her gaze, lowered her head, and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Ay, Graça,” said the elder woman approaching her. “I’m so sorry, cara linda.”

Grace recognized her right away. Mrs. Maria Silva, dressed in all black and topped off with a black scarf wrapped around her head. Maria and Grace’s mother, Gilda Santos, knew each from their youths, growing up on the Azores Island of Terceira. Their families left for the United States in the late 1960s, when the “Estado Novo” fascist regime was still in power and embroiled in its continuous wars in their respective colonies. The Santos and Silva families were one of the many checked in through Ellis Island, then made their way to Northern California.

Whether they originated from the mainland, the Azores, or Madeira island, most Portuguese immigrants entering the United States choose three areas to call home: The northeastern New England states, California, and Hawai’i. Massachusetts and Rhode Island provided the Portuguese the fisherman-friendly ports reminiscent of the ports in Portugal and the Azores. The vast farm land of California’s Central Valley was appealing to the immigrants looking to raise cattle, crops, and vineyards. As for Hawai’i, the introduction of Portuguese immigration dates back to the reign of the Hawaiian Kingdom. Azoreans would immigrate to O’ahu and Maui looking for a new start in a familiar island setting. By the grace of the Hawaiian rulers of the time, Portuguese immigrants were welcomed to the islands. As a gift for their generous hospitality, the Portuguese introduced a small guitar called the ukulele to the Hawaiians, as well as a delicious pastry called the malasada.

The Santos and Silva families chose to reside in California. Maria remained in Elk Grove, while Gilda moved to the Monterey Peninsula shortly after Grace married Michael.

“Graça, why your mother is not here?” Maria asked. “I haven’t seen her

in so long.”

“It’s getting a little more difficult for her to move around nowadays,” Grace answered. “I spoke with her earlier.”

“I bet she find some new man. A strong man like Joaquin de Almeida.” Grace gave a light smile as she listened to the typical speculation older Portuguese take part in.

“I’m sure she would,” Grace responded.

“Aye, criança, I don’t now why I’m bringing that up,” Maria said. “You’ve just lost the love of your life and I’m talking about your mãe’s love life.” *Ah, there it is*, Grace thought. *There was the patented ‘stating the obvious with the worst timing’ delivery.* Maria was hitting all the stereotypes today.

“It’s okay, Maria,” Grace said. “It means so much that you came.”

The two embraced and Maria made her way out the front door. Grace would continue to say goodbye to the steady flow of family and friends making their way out. Before leaving, some would ask how Marissa was. Grace would answer by saying she just needed to be by herself. In actuality, Grace was worried. Her daughter had barely said a word since the news of her father’s death. Aside from the tears she shed that day and at the funeral, Marissa had seemed to have gone numb. Grace hoped that the news she received from her mother would maybe bring a little cheer to Marissa. And now that the house was empty, Grace saw an opportunity to be with her daughter.

Marissa was still in the same spot, seated on her bed. Her gaze had moved from the window down to the doll that she clutched in her hands. The doll was of a young woman cloaked in ancestral garb from the Azores. A scarf wrapped around the head, covering the hair. A long dress with red and white designs on it. Her father bought it for her on their family trip to the islands a few years back. It used to be displayed next to the mirror on her desk. Now, Marissa was gripping it tightly in her hands. One of her personal connections to her father.

Marissa heard the creak of her bedroom door. She turned her head in

time to see her mother slowly enter the room.

“Hey, baby girl,” Grace said.

“Hey,” Marissa responded with an emotionally drained tone.

“Is it okay if I sit with you?” Grace asked. There was a brief silence, followed by a slow nod from Marissa. Grace walked to the bed and sat next to her daughter, who instinctively leaned against Grace. A comforting feeling came over Grace. As shut off as Marissa had been since her father’s passing, she still showed affection to her mother.

My daughter knows I’m here. Thank god, she thought to herself.

“Did everyone leave?” Marissa asked.

“About five minutes or so ago,” Grace answered. “They asked for you. Especially Maria.”

“Grandma’s friend?”

“Yes.”

“Good thing I stayed up here.”

Grace gave a light chuckle at her daughter’s comment. Marissa gave a small smile that faded away after a few seconds. Marissa did not have any ill will toward Maria, but she was in no mood to weather the storm that was Portuguese nosiness and dramatic reactions. Grace looked at her daughter as Marissa continued to fiddle with the doll. Grace lightly brushed her hand through Marissa’s hair. She felt now would be a good time to deliver the news.

“So, how do you feel about getting out of here for a little while?” Grace asked.

Marissa turned her head toward her mom, who was looking back at her.

“What do you mean?” Marissa asked. “Like, going for a walk? In the rain?”

“No. I mean like a brief getaway. Just you and me.”

“Where?” Marissa asked.

“To Avó’s house,” Grace answered. “She invited us to stay with her for a while. It’s been a while since we visited. It’ll be nice to be by the ocean

again.”

Marissa pulled her self away slightly and sat straight up. She turned to her mother, who was trying to read Marissa’s expression.

“Think it’ll help?” Marissa asked.

“Couldn’t hurt,” Grace responded. “It can be our way of being close to him.”

After a moment, Marissa gave a slight smile and nodded. Grace smiled, then pulled her daughter in for a long hug. Marissa embraced her back. The two enveloped and shared each other’s pain.

“I miss him so much,” Marissa said with a shaky voice.

“I know, baby girl, “ Grace said. “I miss him too.”

Marissa’s bedroom was dark. Only the slight gleam from the street lamps outside streamed their way onto the room walls. Marissa was lying on her back in bed, wearing a long t-shirt that reached her knees. She had the bedsheet pulled up to her chest. Her eyes remained trained on the ceiling.

Marissa had been lying in bed for the past hour. Her mind was running and showing no signs of wanting to rest. Marissa’s emotions were running a muck in her mind and heart. She was excited to be leaving for Monterey in the morning. That’s where her Avó, her grandmother, lived. Monterey was her family’s favorite beach town. Whenever a heat wave was headed their way, they’d pack up and runaway to the cooler peninsula for a weekend. Sitting on the beach, bundled up in hoodies and blankets, roasting marshmallows on a small bonfire. Her mother searching for seaglass in the sand. Her father filming the scenery around them using his best smart phone cinematic techniques. The three of them falling napping to the sound of the waves of the Pacific Ocean crashing along the surf. Comforting memories that felt like a warm blanket around Marissa’s heart.

Now, those memories would be tainted. Her excitement for her family’s favorite spot was overshadowed by the pain eating away at her. From now

on, her Monterey memories would be short one family member forever. A vacancy in their loving trio that would never be filled.

Marissa's eyes welled up as her gaze remained locked on the ceiling. She would remain that way as her eyelids finally grew heavy. The weight gradually increased until they were fully shut. As a single tear streamed from her left eye down to her ear, Marissa drifted off into a quiet sleep.

Marissa could feel the cold breeze flowing through her hair. The sounds of seagulls in the distance and the waves crashing against a rocky shore. She opened her eyes and before her was the beauty of the Pacific Ocean. A thin line on the horizon separated the water from the cloudy overcast above.

Marissa smiled as she gazed upon her favorite setting. She was standing near a cliff on the Monterey Peninsula. The vast ocean water stretched out beyond her peripherals on either side. The sight was serene and beautiful. She turned her head slightly to the left and noticed a bench a few feet away from the edge of the cliff, about twenty feet away from her.

There was a figure sitting on the bench.

Judging by the appearance, Marissa believed it to be a man. As she focused in on the figure, she recognized the red hooded sweatshirt and knew exactly what it was. It was a Benfica soccer club hooded sweatshirt. Her dad's sweatshirt of his favorite soccer team.

Marissa sprinted toward the bench. Her eyes were welling up and a wide smile grew on her face.

"Daddy!" She yelled out as she approached closer to the bench. Marissa stopped just five feet short of the bench. The joy on her face was now replaced with confusion. In the blink of an eye, the midday overcast transformed into evening fog. All sound was muted; the chirping seagulls and crashing ocean waves were gone.

The most noticeable change was the bench. Where her father was seated only seconds ago, now there was only the Benfica sweatshirt displayed across the backrest of the bench. Her dad was nowhere to be seen. Marissa's

eyes searched wildly around the area in front of her, but there was no sign of him anywhere. Then, she heard a low grumble of a voice. At first, she could not make out what it was and could not determine where it was coming from. After a few seconds, everything was silent again. Then, the low grumble returned from behind her.

“Você está sozinho.”

Marissa turned around rapidly, but there was nothing but fog. While she wouldn't call herself fluent in Portuguese, she could understand more than she could speak, and she knew exactly what was said to her.

You are alone.

“Who's there? Who said that?” Marissa shouted at the fog. Goosebumps covered her skin as the fear that someone was watching her, tormenting her, washed over her. Before she could repeat her question, a heavy hand fell on her shoulder and gave a tight grip. Marissa screamed into the foggy night.

Marissa startled herself awake from the nightmare. She was sitting in the passenger seat of her mother's Range Rover. She turned to her mom, who noticed Marissa's sudden jump.

“Bad dream?” Grace asked.

Marissa took a moment before she answered. “I think so,” she responded.

“What was it about?”

“Uh... I can't remember.”

That was a lie. Marissa remembered every moment. The ocean. The sweater. The heavy hand. All of it. But she didn't feel like going into it, so she decided to keep it to herself. Grace returned her focus to the road.

“It's okay, baby girl,” she said. “We're almost there.”

Marissa leaned back in her seat and looked out the passenger window at the passing trees. Grace continued to steer the Range Rover west on Highway 156 toward Monterey.