

## *Neon Leon*

BARRY LEWIS

Halloween is Coco Robichaux's favorite holiday. Almost as good as trick-or-treating is that her Uncle Lucien always comes to visit around that time. He drives over from Bay St. Louis a day or two before All Saints' to help his sister Melva clean up the family tombs, most of which are over in St. Louis Number 2 Cemetery and at Saint Roch's.

Uncle Lucien also tells great stories. The Robichaux kids love his tales about his childhood in New Orleans, about fishing-camp life out in the Rigolets east of the city, and about all the crazy people that live across the Lake in Bay St. Louis. Best of all, however, are Uncle Lucien's scary stories, those that tell how, on Halloween, ghosts and other creatures are everywhere in south Louisiana. Of these stories, the ones that always push them to the edges of their seats are about the *loup-garou*, the south Louisiana werewolf.

This year, the first thing Coco asked Uncle Lucien when he got to her house was to tell them a *loup-garou* story. He teased her by saying he didn't remember any more scary stories and she was too old for that stuff anyway. However, on Halloween night, when Coco and her little brother Joe got home with their bags of trick-or-treat goodies, they went to sit in the kitchen where the grown-ups were talking and laughing. It was then that Uncle Lucien told them the scariest *loup-garou* story ever. By the time he was half-finished, Coco and Joe were bug-eyed, and Melva was telling him to tone it down because he wasn't the one who was going to have to get up if they had nightmares.

"Uncle Lucien," Coco asked after he had finished his story, "how big are *loup-garous*? As big as grown-ups?"

"Baby, you know, I'm not real sure. I've only seen one in my whole life, and I didn't see all of it. It looked kind of like a big, big mean dog with tall ears, red eyes, and these humongous teeth." He bared his teeth at her. "I bet *loup-garous* get real big, probably even bigger than Mr. Toranto."

The children laughed at that because Mr. Toranto, the old man who ran the grocery store on the next block down Dauphine Street, was the tallest and fattest person any of them had ever seen.

"Wow," marveled Coco in kind of a teasing way. "*Loup-garous* must really be something awful. I bet they're not scared of anything."

Her uncle laughed and emptied the dregs of his coffee in the sink. Setting the cup down on the counter, he looked at her with a serious expression. "I tell you, Coco, you know what scares the *loup-garou*? Any of you know?" He looked up at Melva and Coco's dad, Blackie, both of them shaking their heads. He laughed and leaned back against the counter with his arms folded. "Frogs!" he said, "they're scared of frogs."

Joe laughed and said, "Nahhhh! You're teasing us, Uncle Lucien. Nothing so big and mean would be scared of something like a frog." Coco, however, nodded thoughtfully. "I can see that, sure. I'm kind of scared of frogs too. I remember once, when I was little, Mama and I went by somebody's house over on Burgundy, and they had been making frog legs, and there was a whole bunch of frogs on a croaker sack right out on the curb. They didn't have legs no more, but they was still alive, and they scared me. Ever since then I haven't liked frogs."

Her uncle laughed at his serious little niece and said in a comforting way, "Everybody's afraid of something. That's for sure. But you know, Coco, the *loup-garou* is also afraid of something ain't nobody else afraid of—salt! You sprinkle salt on the *loup-garou*, and you set him on fire, you. Burn him all up."

The children and Blackie laughed at Uncle Lucien's remark, and Coco said, "Uncle, you just making all this up to get us scared. There ain't really no *loup-garous*, and they ain't scared of frogs, and salt don't do nothing to them; just like there ain't no Santa Claus."

Coco's little brother frowned and said, "There is so! Uhh-huhh! You don't know everything, Coco. You better not say that about Santa Claus, or you ain't gonna get nothing at Christmas."

Uncle Lucien smiled patiently at them and said to Coco, "It's okay to believe what you want to believe, but, listen here, there really are *loup-garous*. I'll tell you how you can catch one and see for yourself that he's real. You get your mama's colander—you know, the thing with all the holes in it that she drains spaghetti noodles in—and you put it outside tonight. Then, when the *loup-garou* come by, as he's certain to do 'cause it's Halloween, he'll have to stop and count every little hole in that colander before he goes on."

The children laughed, and Blackie looked at the floor, smiling and shaking his head. "I'm not kidding you," Uncle Lucien said to him. "Man, I tell you 'bout the *loup-garou*; holes drive him nuts. That's right, holes! He's got to count 'em all up and know how many there is."

Shortly afterward, Coco's mama made the children go upstairs and wash up and put on their pajamas. In a little bit, the grown-ups all came upstairs and tucked them in, after helping find the right stuffed animals and Joe's blue blanket, which he couldn't go to sleep without.

Coco lay in her bed for a long time thinking about what Uncle Lucien had said. She sure would like to catch a *loup-garou* . . . if there really were *loup-garous*. She decided to try.

Later that night, after the grown-ups were asleep, Coco eased out of bed, pulled on her clothes, and, taking a flashlight from her nightstand, she sneaked quietly downstairs. In the dark kitchen, she got her mama's metal colander from a cabinet near the stove and, from the spice shelf, the big round box of salt.

She tiptoed back through the house and, opening the front door and the screen, she edged outside and closed the door softly behind her. It was a warm dark night, quiet except for the sound of cars passing every once in a while over on Esplanade. Looking around, she placed the colander in a spot on the little porch where she could still hide unseen within salt-throwing distance. Going around the corner of the porch, she squatted down and settled herself for a long wait that, she feared, was probably pointless.

She was jolted awake by the soft sounds of "click . . . click . . . click" coming from near the colander. Alarmed, she almost yelled, but calming herself, she opened the top of the salt box and, pushing silently to her feet, she moved her head to where she could see with one eye around the corner of the porch. Her heart pounded furiously as she saw a dark figure hunched over the colander, making strange clicking sounds. A *loup-garou*! She gritted her teeth, got ready, counted to three, and spun around the corner flinging salt all over the dark figure.

The *loup-garou* arched its back with a blood-chilling scream and fell on the porch steps covered in a light dusting of salt. Coco flattened herself against the wall in fear. "I killed it," she thought. "There really are *loup-garous*, and I killed one, just as Uncle Lucien said you could do. I wonder if I'm gonna get in trouble? What if there's a hunting season on *loup-garous*, like there is on ducks?"

Coco heard faint sounds coming from the porch, and, screwing up her courage, she looked around the corner again. She noticed for the first time how strangely small the werewolf was. Uncle Lucien was sure wrong about their size. She watched in fascinated horror as it began to twist and turn. Then it burst into an aura of colored flames. "Oh, no!" thought Coco. "That *loup-garou*'s gonna burn all up before I get a good look at it."

While Coco watched, uncertain of what to do, the flames drew together to form a neon sign that read "Bordage's Fresh Fish" in big green letters framed in an oval field of double red lines. The sign hovered for a few seconds above the writhing *loup-garou*. With a small "pop!" it drifted into the oleander bushes in the next yard, where it hung, brightly lit, flashing on and off.

There was silence, darkness, and the now still form of the *loup-garou* on the porch steps. Coco wondered if it was dead. She also had some pretty big questions about the fish sign, but they could wait.

The *loup-garou* stirred. Coco drew in her breath sharply and flattened herself back against the wall on the corner of the porch.

The *loup-garou* drew up its knees and rolled over onto its back. "Aw, Jeez!" it moaned. "Gimme a break! Another case of the neons! That's two times in one week. What does it take to get people to leave off with the salt? I gotta get a shower. I ain't going around the neighborhood pumping out signs all night."

Coco was stunned and poked her head around the corner. "You talked!" she blurted out. The *loup-garou* squealed and rolled into a tight little ball with its arms covering its head, yelling "Don't hit me! Don't hit me!"

"I'm not going to hit you," Coco said irritably. "Just be quiet. You're making too much noise. You're gonna wake up the whole neighborhood." The *loup-garou* slowly lowered its arms and saw that his attacker was a girl only a head or so larger than he was. He relaxed some. "Jeez, kid! You just scared me out of a hundred years' growth."

"You must get scared an awful lot," Coco observed skeptically. "You ain't much bigger than a beagle. I thought *loup-garous* were supposed to be humongous."

The *loup-garou* burst into multicolored flames again, and a small sign that read "Fresh Shucked Oysters" in red neon script popped off. They both watched as it floated down Dauphine Street and lodged under the eaves of a house in the next block.

"How do you do that?" Coco asked. "I thought *loup-garous* were supposed to catch on fire when you sprinkled them with salt." The werewolf shrugged his shoulders. "Nahhh. The way I heard it, the fire thing got started hundreds of years ago, before humans had ever seen neon lights. The closest thing people knew about was fire, so that's what they called it."

"You mean all *loup-garous* make neon signs when you salt them?"

"Uh-uhh. Some of them, all they can do is one crooked row of one color. The best, however, like me, can zap out major signage in a single burp."

"Are you saying that neon signs come from *loup-garous*?"

"Check it out, kid. You ever seen a neon sign company?"

"No."

"You know why?"

"No."

"Because we got the market sewed up. I tell you, this U. S. of A. wouldn't have no neon lights without us."

"I'm getting a headache," said Coco, sitting down on the porch.

"You should try running around covered in salt," the werewolf observed dryly, sitting down beside her.

They both sat on the stoop and watched a drunk in a beat-up Plymouth try to park in a Dauphine Street space already occupied by a motorcycle. "You got a name?" Coco asked.

"Yeah. It's Leon."

"Leon? How come you got a name like Leon? I thought monsters were supposed to have names like 'Killer' or 'Behemoth' or 'Cyclops.'"

"What's wrong with Leon? You got no right to go around telling someone they can't have the name they want. Besides, how far do you think I'd get with a name like 'Behemoth'?"

"Not real far," agreed Coco. "Around my school, you'd get beat up in a minute."

"See what I mean," responded Neon petulantly.

Coco picked up the colander from the porch, and Leon held out a paw. "Hey, yeah, thanks. I wasn't done with that. Pass it here."

"So my uncle was right about one thing. *Loup-garous* really do have a problem about counting holes."

"Yeah, well, it is something of a werewolf thing. Don't get me wrong, though. It's not like we *have* to count stuff. It's, I dunno, just kind of relaxing, like knitting."

"Well, why were you going 'click-click' right before I salted you? Is that some *loup-garou* chant or something?"

"Click-click? Oh, I know. Nahh. It's just the keys on my calculator."

"Your calculator?"

"Yeah. You know how it is with some folks. Some have a head for numbers, and some don't. It's the same with werewolves. I got a lousy memory. Without my handy-dandy K&B calculator, I'd still be stuck on my first colander."

"You know, werewolves don't really seem to be the horrible monsters that grown-ups make them out to be."

"Oh, we have our moments. Take my brother TJ, for example. He can slap a fright on somebody right quick, let me tell you." With

that remark, Leon burst into cold, colored flames again as he burped a small yellow "Ice Cold Beer" sign into the air. "Pardon me," he said offhandedly. He clicked away on the calculator, marking his place on the colander with the claw of one paw.

"How about frogs?" Coco asked.

"Where?" The *loup-garou* edged closer to Coco on the porch, looking around anxiously.

"Nothing," said Coco. "You answered my question. You know what, Leon? Grown-ups, they don't know much about the real world."

Leon looked at her blankly.

The following morning, Melva was the first one downstairs, so she put on the coffee and got the paper off the stoop. Since it was a pretty day she decided to open the back door while she read the paper at the kitchen table. She unlocked the door, pulled it open, and stood there astonished. Finally, she turned around, walked into the narrow hallway, and yelled up the stairs, "Hey, Blackie! Ya gotta come see this. The yard is full of neon signs, and the ugliest dog I have *ever* seen is sleeping on the back steps. Did I miss something last night?"

"Wait!" cried Coco, as she came running from her room.

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