
Originally published in *The Southern Review*, Vol. 50.1

LYDIA CONKLIN

Pioneer

THE OREGON TRAIL ran from the back entrance of Bridge Elementary down through the school yard to the edge of the woods. Cones marked the journey. Not the satisfying rubber cones you could squish down with your body weight but hard plastic cones, prim and pointed like shark teeth. The cones looped around the tree line to the right, and that's all Coco and the rest of the Culver family could see from the starting point. Who knew where the trail went after that? There were dangers, she'd heard, though she didn't know exactly what.

Coco had not been assigned to the Culver family when Ms. Harper passed out the biography cards last week. Coco's card listed her as the matriarch of the Bell family. But she didn't want to be a matriarch. While the class wandered around collecting their families, Coco asked Devon, the Bell patriarch, if she could be a child instead.

"We already have two children," Devon said. "And there can't be children without a matriarch."

"Sure there can," said Coco. "The matriarch could have died." They could make up some woman who had long since perished. Recalling her benevolence could pass the time on the trail.

"You want to be dead?" asked Devon.

"No," Coco said. Not right now, anyway. "I just don't want to be the Bell matriarch. I want to be a Bell child."

"Why?"

Coco didn't want to say so to Devon, but she was uneasy in dresses and skirts, knowing the wind could disrupt the fabric and expose the part of her that she hated to look at, that felt wrong attached to her, and that she sometimes pretended she didn't know was there. In the role of a child she could fake it, pretend to be an eighteen hundred's tomboy. As a matriarch there was no option. She would have to look like a woman. Ever since Coco's body had started to develop a few months ago, she couldn't take a bath without laying washcloths over her torso and between her legs, so she could forget about the wrongness of her body. As the cloth chilled

it suctioned to her, stiffened like plaster around her form. Only then could she bear to look down.

“I don’t have the right clothes,” she said.

“Ms. Harper said the girls could staple a sheet,” Devon said. “A long sheet. Like touching the ground.”

“Wouldn’t it get dirty?” Coco pictured herself as a bedraggled angel.

Devon shrugged.

At first Coco thought she wouldn’t travel the Oregon Trail at all. She’d never played sick before, and that seemed like the type of mischief every kid should try once. But missing the day would be a crazy move. First, because Coco loved Ms. Harper and would never lie to her. But besides that, the Oregon Trail was the culmination of the fifth graders’ hard work through Bridge Elementary. Her classmates had talked about the day since kindergarten, when they’d first glimpsed the wagons pulled through the field by what looked like small adults. The Oregon Trail would probably be reminisced about all through middle and high school as the pinnacle of their education.

The day before the Oregon Trail, Coco asked the other families in Ms. Harper’s class if she could join up with them.

“Do you need a baby?” she asked the Murdochs and the Hancocks, the Bakers and the Blackthorns. “Or an adolescent?”

“No,” they said, if they bothered with her at all. Even though it was still regular school for another day, the families were already insular and protective, clumping around desks between subjects.

“Aren’t you a matriarch yourself?” the Blackthorn matriarch asked.

“I don’t want to be,” said Coco. “I want to be a kid.”

“That’s nonsense. You should accept your station.”

“Yeah,” said the Blackthorn son, who blew his nose on his math work sheets. “Matriarchy is an incredible honor. Women rule.”

“Want to trade?” Coco asked.

“That’s gay,” he said cheerfully, as though that might be a good thing. “But thank you very much anyway.”

None of the girls assigned as daughters were interested in becoming matriarchs. Or at least they wouldn’t admit it to Coco. The best Coco could do was join the Culver family, who offered her the role of an ox.

“You can pull our wagon,” said the Culver family patriarch. “If you can find another ox, we’ll yoke you. It’ll be super.”

At home that night, Coco stuffed yellow triangles of felt with dry grass for horns and attached them to the cap of her headgear. She prepared a poncho that simulated the powerful shoulders of an animal and tied a piece of rope to her belt for a tail.

“Coco,” her mom said. “I thought you were a matriarch?”

Lately Coco didn’t like the sound of her own name, which had always sounded like a pet’s name or like the name of a girl with bright makeup in a Western saloon. It was embarrassingly girlish, like someone had stapled balloons to her chest and she suddenly had breasts. Whenever she heard it, she twitched like she’d been hit. “I used to be.”

“You look . . . You look like . . . I don’t want to say it.”

“What?” Coco struggled to speak clearly. Even though her headgear was for night wear only, she’d hooked the mouthpiece into the metal tubes on her molars, because otherwise the cap didn’t stay taut on her head. “What do I look like?”

Her horns flopped over her eyes. Her mother didn’t answer.

The next day all four fifth-grade classes lined up at the head of the Oregon Trail. Each class was divided into six families of three or four members. Coco couldn’t believe how meticulously people were dressed. The matriarchs wore full hoopskirts and aprons, bonnets and bodices with puffy sleeves, colonial dirt rubbed purposely on the hemlines. The fathers and uncles wore leather vests and hats; the boys wore britches. The families pulled red wagons and wheelbarrows to which they’d attached Hula-Hoops with sheets over them, so they looked like real covered wagons. How did they get all this stuff? Everyone must have started collecting when they’d first glimpsed the procession back in kindergarten.

Coco walked through the families in Mr. Bennett’s class and Ms. Goldberg’s class and Mrs. Hedgerow’s class. Everyone stared.

“Are you a dog?” someone asked. “With headgear?”

“Are you an alien?”

“You look gay,” said Devon, the Bell patriarch, who stood with a Radio Flyer and two motherless children.

“What do you mean?” Coco asked.

“Like a gay person? Ever heard of one?” He chuckled, joking with himself. “Every girl here’s wearing a dress. Even the kids.”

“So?” She didn’t have to look to know he was right.

“You’re wearing stretch pants and a poncho and ears.”

“I’m an ox.” She tried to sound proud, like she’d chosen the role on purpose.

“An ox?” one of her ex-children said. “You’d rather be an ox than our mother?”

Coco’s ex-children were Peter and Marley. Peter was pale and smelled like the sawdust that the janitors threw down when someone was sick on the floor. But Marley was actually popular. Coco wondered why she hadn’t stepped into the leftover role of matriarch. She was wearing the short skirt of a child.

Last week, Marley said Coco was chubby and stupid. That the headgear tubes on her molars poked into her cheeks and made her look part robot. Marley accosted Coco at the water fountain with a mechanical voice: “Ro-bot Co-co is a big-fat dumb-bell.” Meanwhile, Peter orbited around Coco in a separate sphere. While Coco tried, and failed, to make friends with whomever she could hook, Peter seemed pleased to be alone. Whenever she talked to him he smiled the wan smile of a beleaguered teacher and just nodded.

“Yes,” Coco said. “I’d rather be an ox.”

She found the Culver family at the end of the row. The Culver patriarch, a boy named Ryan, stood with the Culver matriarch, Victoria, at the front of a loaded wheelbarrow. They had no children, but still preferred Coco act the role of an ox.

“Where are your rations?” Ryan asked, indicating the bed of the wheelbarrow, which was filled with baskets. The baskets held naked loaves of supermarket bread, unshucked ears of corn, plastic containers of dry oatmeal. “I expect every member of the Culver family to contribute to our stock.”

“I brought flour,” said Victoria, who wasn’t the smiling type. She wore a dark dress and a bonnet tight around her face.

“Sorry,” said Coco. “I didn’t know oxen fed their families in colonial times.”

Ryan glared and passed the handles of the wheelbarrow to her. “I can see we need to break you.”

Mr. Bennett’s class and Ms. Goldberg’s class filed down the trail. The Culver family marched. The wheelbarrow, full as it was of grain, was exceedingly heavy. Coco had to rest the handles on her back and hunch over so she was nearly crawling. Other families, none of whom had oxen, shared the burden of their wagons and wheelbarrows. No one else had rations. Ryan swallowed handfuls of oatmeal and hunks of bread as he walked. Coco only hoped he’d keep at it and lighten the load.

Halfway to the woods, the weight of the wheelbarrow increased significantly, and Coco dropped to her knees in the grass.

“Mush!” Victoria cried. She had climbed on top of the wagon. Coco pushed back up to her feet and braced to bear the new load.

The first official obstacle on the Oregon Trail was disease. They arrived at a sign shaped like a gravestone that read DISEASE. A ghost popped up from behind the sign.

"I am the Spirit of Multiple Diseases," said the ghost.

Some of the families screamed. But it was obvious by the Long Island accent and red plastic glasses worn over the eyeholes in the sheet that the Spirit of Multiple Diseases was Ms. Goldberg. She pointed a long finger at random family members.

"Dysentery," she said. "Yellow fever. Dysentery. Scarlet fever. Yellow fever. Scarlet fever. Dysentery."

The chosen family members grabbed their hearts. Both of the Bell children were picked. Coco was given scarlet fever. Victoria, in the wagon, was selected for dysentery.

"Now," Ms. Goldberg said. "If your name starts with a letter between *A* and *E*, your disease is mild. You survive to live another day. Congratulations."

Shrieks of laughter and manic clapping rose among the mild sufferers. Coco felt her heart lift, though she didn't join the cheers.

"If your first name begins with *F* to *O*, your disease is moderate. You live."

The group of moderates included Coco's ex-child Marley, the popular girl. She and the other moderate sufferers celebrated.

"Ah," said Ms. Goldberg. "But wait. You live, but unlike the mild sufferers, you do not escape unscathed. For the remainder of the journey, you must march with one leg dragging. The choice of leg is up to you, but it must always be behind you."

Marley said, "That's bull!"

"And now for *P* to *Z*," said Ms. Goldberg. "Are you children ready for your fate?"

"Oh God," moaned Victoria from the wagon. "I don't want to limp all day in the sun."

Victoria wouldn't be doing much limping anyway, perched as she was on the rations. Even if both her feet were struck down, Coco would just keep dragging her.

"Severe sufferers," Ms. Goldberg said. "You are dead. Please step forward."

Victoria got off the wagon, lightening the load so fast that Coco's back snapped straight. Coco's ex-child Peter also marched forward, along with several other sufferers. They stood before Ms. Goldberg.

"Join the mass grave."

The severe sufferers lay down in front of the gravestone sign, the bottoms of their feet wagging at the survivors. Coco tried not to rejoice at their fate. Smiling with her headgear hurt, anyway.