

CORNAVUA

Jacque Roethler

Dishes. Again. Cups, glasses, tomato-souped bowls, every spoon in the house. In neat rows ready to be singed and seared. Rain. Again. May, June. Two sunny days. Dan's off playing a gig. Again.

Outside, Colin. In the rain. Chanting. There's a Navajo girl in his kindergarten. She and her father came in to do a grass dance for the children. Colin was seized with admiration, and now he's doing a rain dance.

"Hayawaka, hayawaka, hayawaka," he chants. The rain streaming down his back, his face, getting into his eyes. I told him a month ago to stop this. There's already been too much rain. Water in the basement. The weeds exuberantly taking over my garden. No time to weed it unless I want to wear twenty pounds of mud on my shoes. My feet. But every time it rains, which is, of course, every day, out he goes to do his rain dance.

He told me that when you say "hayawaka," it only rains. If you want a serious storm with thunder and lightning and deadly wind, then you chant, "Hayawaka cornavua." I have at least convinced him to leave the cornavuas out of his chanting, and the violent storms he invoked in the spring have given over to gentle constant rains, sometimes so fine that they are merely mists, before which even the intense sun of June retreats meekly like a shy child before a gregarious uncle. He tells me further, blue eyes burning with the awfulness of the truth he is telling, that when you say "cornavua" three times in a row, a great storm blows up, maybe a tornado. A hurricane. I love this belief in the power of words in my son. And the continuous rain proves him right.

Squeeze out the dish soap, the bottle defecating a fine yellow cowpatty in the little cup. I laugh at the thought of washing my dishes in shit. Slam the door, throw the lever, fire the thing up. Water rushes out and dashes against the filthy dishes, the temperature level rises as does the noise. A whirlwind, a rainstorm, a tropical cloudburst inside the machine, hot and hasty. But not, think I, as fast and hot as the ideas that whip around in my brain. I like the

sound of the dishwasher. So conclusive. "That job's done, that job's done," it whispers sibilantly.

Go to the door. Look out at Colin, seriously dancing on the sodden front lawn. The feeling I have for this little person goes beyond love. In him lies power. Watching him comprises one of my chief pleasures. Now I have two imaginations.

A beautiful child. Golden fairy-tale hair, spun from straw. Sapphire eyes. A fine, pointed little chin. Two freckles under his right eye. Kindergarten skinny, bare stretches of skin between the elastic bottoms of his pantlegs and his grass-speckled bare feet. These pants fit him in February. He can dance like this for hours.

When he finally comes in, blue-lipped and happy, he leaves his clothes on the rug in the entry, and streaks naked across the house to the shower. He loves showers, bubble baths, to sit under the faucet and let the water crash into his lap. My water baby. A naiad on loan to me for this lifetime.

I sit on the couch, Erle Stanly Gardner ignored, lying in my lap, and listen to the water sounds. Mellifluous voice of my son mingling with the water.

A knock. Someone at the door. Who can it be? Our friends are so scrupulously polite they all call before they come. Only unannounced visitors, Jehovah's Witnesses, and girl scouts.

And gunmen. For when I open the door, there stands a wiry little man. Both front teeth gone. A sorry Gilbert Roland mustache crawls indolently across his meager upper lip. Grease and dirt under his fingernails. And in his hand, a gun.

I can't take him seriously. A cowardly little person. Even with a gun in his hand, he looks powerless. I laugh. He shoves the gun into my stomach and says, "Shut up." He pushes past me into the house. He stands there, uncertainly, dripping on Colin's already-wet clothes. I face him. What can I do? I hear Colin singing in the bathtub, and hope that this asshole can't hear him.

"I'm hungry," he says.

"You mean, you came here with a gun to get me to feed you?" I say incredulously.

Instead of answering, he waves the gun toward the kitchen. He sits at Colin's place at the table, the gun lying in the circle of his arms in front of him, looking gloomily out of the streaming window. I make him a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup, the quickest meal I can think of. Maybe he'll eat and leave. While I am making it, Colin gets out of the tub, and comes into the kitchen, modestly wrapped in a pink towel. Sensing danger, he comes to stand silently by my leg.

As I set steaming soup before the gunman, I consider pouring it onto his crotch. "Scald his balls," ricochets and reverberates in my mind. But I know this is stupid. Like V. I. Warshawski getting on a houseboat with a killer. I think I will find another way to outsmart this little fart. Outsmarting him shouldn't be hard, but there's not much more dangerous than an idiot behind a gun.

He eats greedily, but with only one hand. The other lies on the gun. I sit across the table from him, keeping an eye on him. Colin still stands close to me, hasn't left my side once. I am touched to see the gunman dip the sandwich into the soup. I think I am going to cry. Such a childlike thing to do. How do children grow up into people like this? Where is his mother? What would she think about his waving a gun at me and my son? I don't ask this, because I know the child in him is dead, killed by the adult he became, like all the children grown-ups once were. Or maybe he never was a child. Maybe he was born with the worm mustache on his lip, like the child in the Addams Family movie.

I pat Colin on the fanny and tell him to go upstairs and get some clothes on. The gun comes up.

Ridiculous, I think. He's afraid of a six year old. "Jesus Christ," I say "he's only a child. He can't run around naked all day."

We stare at each other. He puts the gun down, and returns to eating.

Colin slowly leaves the room, and goes upstairs. I try to send him a telepathic message. Stay upstairs. Don't come near this creep. Just being near him will contaminate you. The miasma of his ineffectual evil will cover you and make you filthy. But his psychic ear does not hear me, and he comes back downstairs. He feels safer near me, which I must acknowledge is a serious mistake.

Later, after the little man has eaten, we sit in the living room and watch cartoons. What is he? A rapist? A murderer? A kidnapper? A child molester? So far, he's been none of these. I look at him, slack-jawed in the chair, and know that he himself doesn't know the answer. He doesn't know why he's here. He's just a pathetic little man, ugly, pushed around, and the real reason he's here is because me and my son are the only people over whom he has any power. Having made use of this power, his imagination has failed him. He doesn't know what to do. I feel a momentary surge of pity for him, which only makes the anger, when it comes, stronger. Shithead.

He falls asleep. Avoiding the painful decision of what to do next. I consider taking the gun, but know that this is dangerous. He may wake up, and, pushed into making the decision that he really is a cold-blooded killer, shoot my stomach away. I've not touched a gun before, and don't want to now. It may start a new season in my life, dark and dangerous and I want nothing to do with it. I look at Colin, lay a finger to my lips. He nods solemnly. We get up off the couch, and go out the back door. With common consent, we head to the Olivers, drawn by Mary Oliver's large warm aura, which, we are convinced, will have a talismanic power against the angry interloper. It is a mile to the Olivers. As if still afraid of making a noise that will waken sleeping murderer-to-be, we walk, rather than run. We don't speak.

We both know he's behind us. We turn. He is running down the hill, powered by the force of the curses coming from his mouth. He tries to hold the gun up and aim while he is running. Shit shit shit! Why didn't I get the

gun from him when I had the chance? I turn to face him. He is almost within hitting distance of us.

I shout at him, "Cornavua, cornavua, cornavua," meaning it. Extend my left hand, fingers pointed so that he and the wind know what I mean, so that the rays of my power may find their miserable mark.

He's so fixed on me and Colin that he doesn't even notice at first. The wind, summoned, begins to circle around him. The sky darkens and the wind soughs, then rushes, then screams. Finally, he notices. He stands, a look of witless fright on his pathetic face while the wind nets him in a whirlwind, a tiny tornado. Where I stand, my son god beside me, it is so still that Colin's fine hair doesn't even move, but sits on his head like a yellow cap. But we can hear the locomotive cry of the storm. We watch the cyclonic wind imprison him. We watch as it sucks the bastard up with a hungry slurp, then moves off across the cornfield, lifting and breaking apart, until it is just fragments of black cloud against the gray sky, still spitting pitiful specks of rain, tickling our faces.

We turn to head home. Colin scampers around me, chanting, "Hayawaka" again. The clouds thicken, darken. The raindrops fatten, become pregnant, spatter, stream, pour. We are drenched when we get home.