

To Control a Rabid Rodent

by Lorraine López

The day after thirteen-year-old Jonathan Escamilla accidentally shot and killed his neighbor while aiming at a prairie dog with rabies in his backyard, his mother Inocencia decided it was high time for the boy to go next door to apologize to the surviving members of the dead man's family.

"Don't 'but, Mom' me, sir," Inocencia snapped at her son that night. She snapped the television set off. "You shot that poor man next door, after all, and it's just plain rude not to go on over there and apologize." Inocencia was the kind of woman who sent thank-you notes for thank-you notes. "I spent all afternoon chilling that pineapple Jello mold for you to take over there and you're not backing out now."

"Da-ad!" Jonathan implored his father desperately.

"You heard your mother, son. Do what she says."

"They're our neighbors, for goodness sake!" Inocencia threw up her hands. "Do you want them to think...that, that... we're the kind of people who just shoot folks without dropping by to say sorry?"

Jonathan shrugged. He didn't think sorry would do it. Somehow he didn't think a gelatin mold would compensate either, and he was more than a little sensitive to the notion that they—based on his rough encounter with the deceased—might be eye-for-an-eye types, only satisfied by shooting him in return for their father's death. "It was an accident."

"All the more reason to get over there and beg their pardon. What do you say when you bump



someone in the street accidentally, huh?" she demanded. Here, again, Jonathan felt the comparison grossly inadequate. "You apologize for things you didn't do on purpose that hurt other people, and you do it right away before they forget!" Her voice

took on that familiar hysterical pitch that scraped the nerve endings behind Jonathan's teeth. "So get up, out of that chair, comb your hair, and take my Jello salad over right this minute, young man! And I mean right this minute, before those miniature marshmallows pucker up like raisins!"

"You heard your mother, son."

If Jonathan were the kind of boy who cursed, he might have said: "Goddamn you! You're crazy!" and stormed straight up to his room. If he were sarcastic, he would have asked why they had a death wish for their only child. But, Jonathan really was a good boy, who never did anything to displease his parents, outside of slaying Mr. Hudanish, the neighbor.

So, he gathered up the Jello mold from the kitchen counter and held it—cold and hard in its aqua plastic shell—against his breast as he stepped out onto the back porch to make his way across the yard to the Hudanish house. He hoped vainly that Tupperware—in addition to keeping fresh foods from spoiling—was also bulletproof.

The Hudanish gate slapped shut on Jonathan's buttocks stinging them like a spank. Inside the tall fence, the Hudanish yard startled him—though he'd seen it once before—even more than the tightly coiled spring on the gate.

In the dead of August, when most people fought to keep tumbleweeds from their dry dirt lawns, the Hudanishes kept an emerald carpet of closely

cropped and very dense...grass! Jonathan rubbed his eyes. Mr. Hudanish had flowers, even, delicate lacy blooms along the walk and thick beds of geranium, pansy, marigolds—even rose bushes.

Jonathan felt certain as he picked his way carefully along the stone path that the people who tended these plants in this garden would not like to find a stalk of grass bruised. And they were not likely—in his mind—to be all that nice about his killing Mr. Hudanish, albeit accidentally.

He brushed his knuckles lightly against the doorframe, hoping he would not be heard and could retreat honorably—gelatin salad in hand—to tell his parents, “I knocked, but no one answered. I guess they moved to Kansas, or something.”

“Coming!” Jonathan heard a voice sing out from the dark, quiet house. “I’m coming.” The back door yawned wide, and the screened door framed the thin face of a young man. The fly-spotted mesh gave the man a cinematic look as though he were being gazed at through a gauze-covered lens. “Well,” he smiled, puckishly, “where are you hiding it?”

“Hiding what?” Jonathan had never heard a grown man talk in such a high-pitched, lilting voice.

“The pizza, silly!”

“What pizza?”

“You didn’t bring the pizza?” The young man seemed terribly disappointed.

“I brought a Jello salad,” Jonathan proffered the plastic bowl.

“I don’t think I ordered a salad.” The man narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Who are you?”

“Jonathan Escamilla.” The words escaped like criminals from prison.

“A cousin? What?” The young man rotated his hand to indicate Jonathan should give a little more information.

“I’m Jonathan Escamilla from next door.”

“Next door?”

“I’m the one that...you know...” Jonathan felt every ounce of water in his body draining through his armpits in a violently itchy way. “I’m the one that shot Mr. Hudanish.”

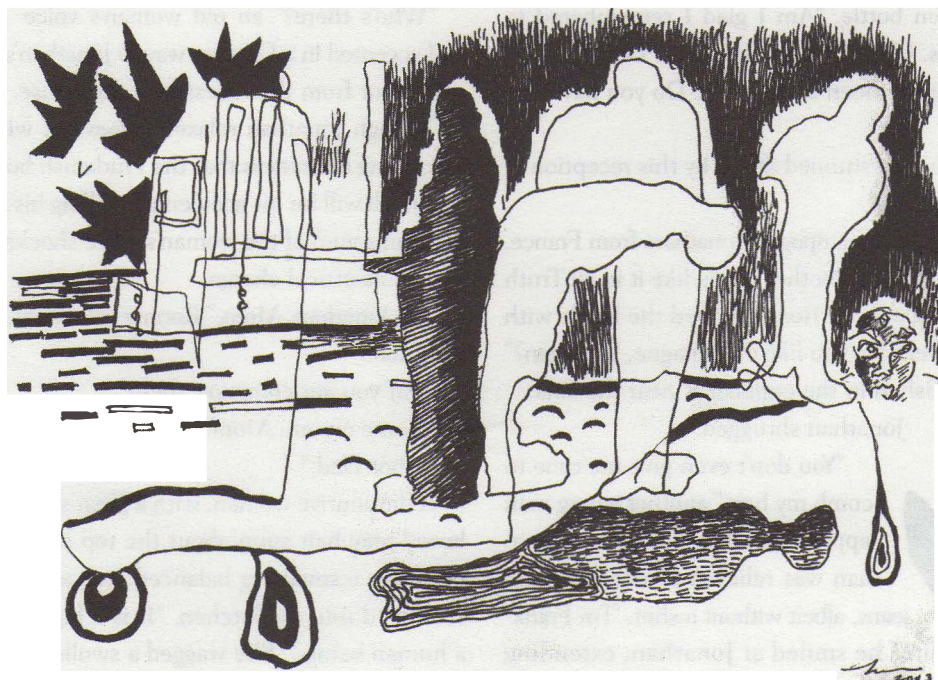
“That was you!”

“Yes, I’m very sorry. You see, it was an accident. I really didn’t mean to.”

“So you’re the kid that killed Dad,” the Hudanish scion scratched his chin regarding Jonathan more speculatively.

“I brought you this Jello salad my mom fixed,” Jonathan offered the bowl again.

“A Jello salad!” the man laughed. “That’s price-



less!" He pulled open the screen door to admit his neighbor. "So you are Jonathan." He took Jonathan's hand in his and shook it warmly. "Do you know I've kind of been expecting you?"

Jonathan stepped uncertainly into the kitchen. The young Hudanish may or may not have outlined his eyes in black and dusted his cheeks with a rosy powder, but he was definitely draped in some kind of kimono dress with salmon-colored water lilies printed on it. Jonathan wanted to dump the salad on the counter and run out of the kitchen like a *cucaracha* when the lights go on.

"Ronnie, who is it?" another voice called from beyond the kitchen.

"It's Jonathan Escamilla!" Ronnie answered.

"Does he have the pizza?"

"He brought a Jello salad!"

"Isn't he the pizza boy?"

"No, he's the champagne boy!" Ronnie shrieked.

"Come on out here, Franklin! You'll never believe this!"

"I'm half-dressed!"

"No, really, you've got to get out here. This is the kid that killed Dad!" Ronnie reached to pull open the refrigerator door. He brought out a great dark green bottle. "Am I glad I remembered to bring this. I bought it in New York. Do you know how long I've been saving this? Do you have any idea?"

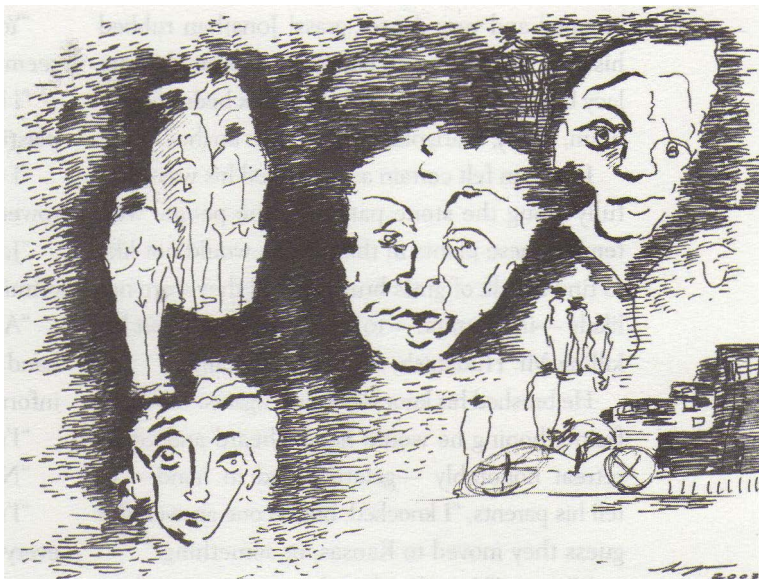
Jonathan —stunned dumb by this reception— shook his head.

"This is real champagne, Jonathan, from France. I doubt if there's another bottle like it in all Truth or Consequences." Ronnie wiped the bottle with a dishtowel. "Do you like champagne, Jonathan?"

He fished in the cupboards near the sink.

Jonathan shrugged.

"You don't even give me time to comb my hair," another young man appeared in the doorway and Jonathan was relieved to note he wore jeans, albeit without a shirt. "I'm Franklin," he smiled at Jonathan, extending



his hand. "I know, I know it's a dreadful name. It's the kind of name you give a kid you don't like very much."

"I'm Jonathan," he murmured, clasping the warm fleshy hand.

"Jonathan? How perfectly droll."

"Puh-leeze don't start with that name thing," begged Ronnie, belting his kimono more firmly. "Franklin's a fiend for names." He knelt to peer into a cabinet under the sink. "Where in blazes are those glasses I bought?"

"Who's there?" an old woman's voice —thin and accented in a German way to Jonathan's ear called out from the recesses of the house.

Though Jonathan relaxed somewhat with the increasing awareness that the Hudanish boy bore him no ill will for his accidentally killing his father, the frail sound of the woman's voice shocked him like an electrical charge.

"It's Jonathan, Mom," Ronnie called out, "from next door."

"Haf you got company, then?"

"Come on out, Mom. Come and meet the kid that shot Dad."

A diminutive woman, with a great skein of yellowed gray hair spun about the top of her ovoid head like a small egg balanced atop a larger egg, shambled into the kitchen. "It is a big sin to kill a human being," She wagged a swollen finger at



Jonathan. “We must be more careful with life. All of us.”

“I - I - I’m terribly sorry, ma’am. I apologize for shooting Mr. Hudanish. Really I do. I am really, really sorry to everyone and I mean it.”

“Ta-da!” crowed Ronnie, proudly bearing four crystal flutes from under the sink. “Franklin, you uncork while I rinse these out.”

“Can you see my face, boy?” the old woman demanded, suddenly and desperately, thrusting her chin toward the kitchen light. Jonathan winced inwardly at the bald lumps of purplish scar tissue and the intricate amber detailing of old bruises and welts. “Do you know where my nose used to be?” The topography of her bumpy face comprised of endless fissures, craters and broken tributary blood vessels drove Jonathan even further toward the door until he was uncomfortably aware of the knob molding into the base of his spine.

“Can you take some bubbly?” asked Ronnie, filling a glass with foam and putting it in Jonathan’s thick hand. “We are about to toast you. So you don’t even have to drink any, really. Just hold the glass up like this.” And Ronnie struck a pose that reminded Jonathan of the Statue of Liberty.

“When you killed my husband, when you killed Mr. Hudanish,” the old woman tried to explain, taking Jonathan’s hands into her own. “When you did that, I was born again. A new baby!” Her lopsided smile —paralyzed on the right side and twitching timorously on the left pricked Jonathan’s conscience. He had only meant to control a rabid rodent. “An’ after seven years —seven years I don’t see him, I write letters, I call from the pay phone— after seven years, you have given me back my son!” Mrs. Hudanish cried, as she raised her glass to be filled. **MM**

