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There Are Rules

I like rules I can follow. I like lines. I like them straighter than I can draw them. I love letters neater than I can write and words I can't spell. I can read so fast. If I don't know a word I skip it. I read the words I know and see a lot I don't, but I don't need to look them up — the sentences make themselves.

"The opposite of disappointed is appointed." "I ate a bole of cherries." In class, I fight unfair stupid rules, like the way 'colonel' is 'kernel.' To me, they are two words, one 'Kolonol' in my books, one 'kernel' people say.

If I'm happy reading or playing *Prairie* in my room, I'm mad at you if you say, "Dinnertime." If my friend comes over when I'm deep playing, I want her gone.

I love the back seat when it's just mine; the boys' talking is murmuring in the way back and the grownups are grumbling in the front. I lie down with the seat soft on my back and push my feet on the cool window. She hands me a spiral notebook and can find a pen in her pocket book. We're going to be at the farm in six hours.

This is how I write my book. I fill up the whole notebook and feel the story's end creeping up before it does.

She types my story, my whole notebook book, in beautiful old-time letters because it's about a unicorn. My father mails it to his brothers and my uncle writes me a letter. I love to look at the neatly typed letters and flip my story's pages. I leave it on my teacher's desk, then she reads it to our class, which takes a long time, then she says that I wrote it.

Now I have some new friends. Katherine Cobb says, "I didn't know mustered was something you did. I never knew you mustered up courage," laughing.

I point at the mustard on the lunch table and say, "There's your mustard." I am famous and she's wanting a story right now. I know it.

The beach is bright and soft. We take our shoes off and ork across the sand. After the dry sand comes hard, then shell land, a carpet of smooth broken shells. I can crouch here and kneel in the watery pieces, push my hands down and lift up the heavy dripping piles of shell bits and wet sand, feeling the edges with my thumbs.

"What did you get?" the others say. They are hunters with conchs and scallops.

I hold out the pieces. "Feel this."

My brother shakes his head. "You're so

dumb.”

After morning, my shoulders and arms heat up. When I look up, sun is everywhere. I look back down. Sun spikes off my glittery shell road. There is too much light. I cry.

The ocean is nicer than anything. My mother holds the back of my board and pushes me out over the waves. Past the breakers, I watch my hands floating below my board and she watches her toes poking out of the water as she floats. We're waiting for the right wave, but it is quiet and deep green out here and I'm happy just floating in the cool water.

My cousin and I walk down the beach path while we wait for the others to get ready. From the top of the path, the ocean looks full of the sun. We are waiting. The dune curves in beside me, sea oats fencing around the top. We sit in our cave and push our hands down in the warm sand. We scoop sand to pile it on our legs, the sand heavy and sliding off gently. I lie back and push my head back in the sand; the way it gives makes my ears tingle. She pours sand down the top of her bathing suit. We fill our suits with warm soft sand, then roll onto our bellies and all around the dune, covering our hair, eyebrows, arms, and legs with sand until the grownups come and grab our arms.

We march way too fast with them clamped on our arms the whole way back down the beach path to the house.

My aunt is talking fast, “I did not raise you to run off and act like a NATIVE! We had no idea where you were! Like RAGAMUFFIN children, waiting to be stolen!”

My mother is silent and will not look at me. She looks ahead. Her face is hard. I am searching for her eyes and stumble in the soft sand. She yanks me forward, blushing. But I can't look away from her, and I fall again and again. Each time, she blushes and yanks me forward.

They stop us by the outside shower and turn on the freezing water and rip off our bathing suits right there on the sidewalk with people biking by. We cry shivering and run out of the cold stream but they keep shoving us back in together under the freezing water, until finally the sand is all gone and we get to cover ourselves with white towels and go inside.

I read in the Public Library. You can see it from our hammock and I can walk there by myself. I can read books with real spines and hard covers. I read books for the old grades, whatever I want, even if I'm too young to understand. I always understand something. I read *The Boxcar Children* and play Boxcar Children at recess even if no one wants to play with me. I make up the other kids and play in the bushes near the building. Only Boxcar Children or kickball, nothing else at recess.

When he's in the library, my older brother's in the *Mad Magazine* aisle. We call it that

because the stack is as high as the stool. We fold the back covers in that special way so their pictures become different pictures. Mine becomes a sweating man kneeling through a wooden frame with a hanging blade. Another man's bloody head grins from a basket.

My brother explains, "Guillotine. That's what they do to French murderers."

I feel the tops of the aisles growing darker. Then I'm scared of all the books and everything and almost cry.

Sometimes my house gets too loud and tight. Then my mother takes me to the bus station and buys a ticket and stands and waves while I ride away to Wilmington.

My grandmother's little house is always the same. I read all the notes we've left before on the little chalkboard on her refrigerator. Henry's all say "HENRY!" That's all he knows. I check the bowl for peppermints. I find Betty, the doll from when my mother was little, and the stuffed dog I like on my bed.

My grandmother's always in blue sweaters and gray skirts, the heavy silver cross her mother gave her hanging low.

She says, "Chicken or pizza?" and I say, "Noodles!"

We eat in front of the little tv; roasted chicken and warm buttery noodles. I love noodles and have more. She has more Le Sueur Peas which you say 'la sewer' and they all call

'baby peas.' I only have four peas which is fine here.

We watch *Matlock* and I read on the floor at the same time. This is the quietest house. We sit on the porch in the dark and we both go to bed at the same time. I have my own bedside lamp here to test a few times before she leaves the room. I'm tucked in all the way to my shoulders on both sides; turning over feels heavy.

"Bon Nuit," she says at the door.

I say, "Bon Nuit, Bon Nuit, I love you, Bon Nuit."

My older brother breaks my piggy bank's head off with his shoe and eleven dollars end up on my floor. I am the money collector; I can keep things like dollars and Halloween candy forever. I am also the money sharer, and that is why we break the bank.

Ben Franklin dings when we come in. The candy is in two aisles, ordered by price from the top to bottom row. My brother keeps track of the money and we choose Jolly Ranchers, Fire Balls, Sugar Daddys, Now and Laters, Twizzlers, Runts, and Hostess Cupcakes.

On the curb behind school, he hands over a cupcake with a black icing top and a white icing ribbon. The sun is shining but we're cool. There is a streak of red leaves around the top of the tree in the field in front of us.

"That tree's wearing a scarf!"

He says, "Why are you such a freak?" Then he laughs and says, "Let's begin our feast!"

The feast is perfect. We're sitting on the curb and my shoes are flat on the asphalt with candy piles on both sides. Ants follow each other in front of my toes. We trade Pixie Sticks and drop our wrappers in the drain pipe. Two fat birds keep knocking each other off a tree branch next to our bikes. We wrap up the left-overs to hide under the boxwoods and he grins.

I can tell we won't fight today. I can feel it. He's almost two years older, a little bigger and stronger and faster and everything. Eleven dollars is a fine amount for a day of being friends.

No matter how much time you spend building Stuffed Animal Town, no matter how many roads you make, lining up the blocks and fixing them when you knock them over, no matter how long it takes to empty all the shoe boxes filled with shoes and markers and crayons and Legos and to decide which animal gets which shoebox car, no matter how much your arms and neck ache as you spread the carpet clear of lines and how carefully you plow the new field rows into the blue with your fingers to make the great rectangular field for your bunny farmer, no matter how much work it is to find a place for everyone in town and think of jobs for them all; when it's time to clean up and get ready for bed, the heaps of rubbish have to go

back into the shoebox cars and the blocks into the toy box and all the animals except for Teddy get shut away in their cupboard. The field takes a footprint from your brother and if you cry about all this, it is just because you are tired; it is not from seeing all your hard work smashed and feeling your heart tearing from it.

If somebody comes in here to murder us, I'll lie still so still he'll skip this room. If he comes in anyway I'll keep my eyes closed until he grabs me and shakes me and thinks I'm already dead and goes away. If I hear him in time, I'll open the window by my bed and run grab my baby brother. We'll climb out onto the roof and run over to the dead apple tree. My baby brother is too small to climb down the apple tree so I'll have to push him off the roof and climb down and carry him to the Ambler's. My brother will cry if I wake him up so I'll have to beg him and say, "Ice cream," and maybe drag him. If there's a fire, we'll go out the same way.

My older brother's room does not have an escape route. His windows go straight down.

I told him, "You need a ladder or you'll have to jump all the way down into those boxwoods if the house catches on fire or a murderer comes up the stairs."

He said, "You are such a freak!"

He must know a way I can't see. I'll just take Henry.

My mother has a garden and I have a garden. Hers is big and behind the little shed and has chicken wire around it to keep the deer away. Mine is a small square with bricks all around it in between the house and the shed. Mine is new.

My mother has so much: tomatoes, grapes, watermelons, strawberries, things I don't know what are, things we sometimes pull by accident for weeds. Hers is full of earthworms and she wants more so we collect them. If you chop a worm on a stone, both halves are worms for a while.

We planted bulbs that looked like onions a long time ago in mine, and now it's green sprouts and waiting. I wait and wait.

"Trust me," she keeps saying.

I weed and wait.

Then green stalks become flowers: red, pink, yellow, white, and orange, beautiful. They cover my garden with a color blanket and bend into each other's petals when the breeze comes.

"Now," laughs my mother. "Now those brothers will be jealous!"

I want to move into a pea pod and sleep under my petal sky. She laughs and kisses me.

After school, I come up the driveway and find Mrs. Lee bent over my garden. I run and see her cutting them at the bottoms with mean orange clippers. I run inside, but my father will not stop Mrs. Lee.

He says, "I'm so proud of you! The church

wants your flowers!"

"No!" I say. I stand by the steps and tremble. I repeat, "No."

Mrs. Lee looks at my mother. She has a basketful of my garden.

My mother frowns at me. The sun is in her brown hair on her sleeveless shoulders.

"There are rules," she says, "and sharing is one of them."

I look down at my garden, which has been shared. Mrs. Lee did not clip neatly. She took tops from all over. The new color in my petal sky is green. Green stalks out of the dark ground bleeding milky white.

We watch *The Wizard of Oz*. I turn into Dorothy, except instead of Toto I have Sally who stinks and is a Golden Retriever but can't fetch. I kneel in the living room after dinner with my knees tucked under the blue chair; that's my desk in the living room. I sing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" into my Fisher Price tape recorder. Fisher Price tape recorders are different from my brother's because you have to hold down fast forward and rewind, but they record which is a fine thing if you've got a blank tape. I sing, rewind, play and listen, rewind, sing, rewind, and play and listen again, over and over until I think I'm going to cry because I sound so lonely and sad.

My brother says, "Shut up!" which we're not allowed to say. We hear our mother in the

kitchen, and he says, "Please be quiet!"

My tape recorder won't play. I shake it. I take it to my mother. She finds some new batteries while my brother says, "No, don't, leave the old ones in!"

It still won't play. I open the basement door and go down the cool dirt smelling steps and take a screwdriver off of the wall of little hooks where my dad hangs his tools and climb off the stool and run up the steps. In my room I kneel with the tape recorder flipped over on the bed, then carefully unscrew the four screws like the Handy Man does for Mr. Rogers. Whistling, I try to take the back off, but it only comes apart a little. I flip it up straight again and pull the halves apart.

Inside, there are wires and little blobs of hard stuff and a green rectangle. I feel the wires and the blobs and my father grabs my shoulder and the screwdriver.

I stand up and turn around and say, "I was fixing it!"

He lifts up my tape recorder uncarefully, the front swings by its green square and wires.

I reach up.

"No," he says and pulls away. "Do you know what curiosity does?"

I'm scared the tape recorder's insides will give and the swinging half will fall to the floor.

"It kills the cat. Yours killed your toy. You leave things alone. And don't touch my tools. Forget about this," he says, pointing my tape

recorder at me, then he turns and walks away with it.

How can I forget? Tears make his back look wavy and I need my whole chest to breathe. I won't say sorry.

Now I'm Helen Keller. Mrs. Cronan already read us the story, so I'm learning Braille from my brother's book, *The Braille Alphabet*. But every time I know A and B, I learn C and can't remember A. The dots aren't even bumps that I can feel with my finger tips. This is not how Helen must have felt racing through the garden with her teacher who held her hand under cold pump water and against the rough tree trunks, who'd let her feel the cold metal wheelbarrows and raked her fingers through soft squeaking grass.

We get our reward for writing letters to the teacher going to space. We almost didn't get rewarded because of Clay, but everyone got so mad at Clay that he cried two days ago and yesterday he gave Mrs. Cronan his letter. She read it to us:

"Dear Christa M., Good luck on the *Challenger*. I saw your kids on tv. Your friend, Clay (Second Grade, Amherst Elementary School)"

So we get to have the tv in our class and I am in the front next to Lesley who has a Michael Jackson purse but doesn't want me staring at it and Gregory Ingbar who doesn't ride the bus to

school. After all the waiting and static, being in the front doesn't help me because I think the shuttle is a white building.

"It's not, trust me," says Gregory.

I think the day is special even if you don't want to be an astronaut, which I don't, because you can feel all the other kids in America watching tv in their classes right now. My heart is pressed back against my back bone which keeps sliding down. Our teacher wants to go to space too; she's a great teacher who doesn't make me feel embarrassed like Mrs. Brown in first grade; I think she should go the next time the *Challenger* takes a trip. I think a lot, then I don't at all, then a lot again, because I'm excited, the same way I feel when we have birthdays. When the thoughts go away I want to grab someone even though I'm at school; I want to hug someone in my class right now.

We try to count down for Mrs. Cronan. The shuttle is shaking and Mrs. Cronan waves her hand and says, "Ten!"

We say, "Nine! Eight!" and the shaking white shuttle goes right at eight.

When it lifts we cheer and scream and try to stand up and keep on yelling. I'm not even watching, I'm watching the class, until the shuttle explodes and the smoke streams apart and back down and Mrs. Cronan screams, but not like us. Now we are silent.

She screams like we should all freeze, like grownups should not scream. She keeps

screaming.

I float up and over to see Mrs. Cronan's twisted face. Then I am sitting down again and thinking.

Whales are mammals. Dolphins are mammals. Sharks are fish. I'll have popcorn and apple juice when I get home, how long until then? I'd like to see my mother. Why did I get the Gonzo lunch box? I like Animal. Henry likes Gonzo. He likes his bent nose. Why? He hates the twisty long nose frog puppet our aunt gave him for Christmas. He's scared of it. He cries if you wave it at him. He doesn't cry as much as he used to when he was two. This year he makes faces at dinner.

What will we have for dinner?

What do my parents look like, exactly, if I drew them?

After dinner I watch the *Challenger* blowing up again with my family. The blue sky is seamless. The ocean is where they landed. I sink back into me and I'm crying.

At first my head opens and crying is all out out out. There is blackness all around me. The things around me are flying away; everything is slipping out of me. There's our old carpet under my knee. I can't look up or away from it because that could go too. I'm scared to move. Even the blue carpet is wobbling on the other side of each tear; I have to reach out and touch it and leave my hand there. I can't remember anything.

A shudder makes me look up, right past the television. There's my mother — she's reaching out her hands. I cry at her as she grabs me and pulls me up onto her lap. My mother's shirt and arms are cooler than me and I can rest against them, crying, while she rocks and smooths my hair and smells like lotion. Even when I stop crying I don't feel different or better, I feel heavy. Something's pushing down my throat and I'm scared. I've sat here forever and no one's making this better, so I sit up on her thighs.

My mother and father watch me. I look up from my knees at them and see her sad eyes and he is a tired father and I am lost. I am crying and feel so lost.

We all leave the living room acting normal. I'm watching: my father hands sleeping Henry to my mother. He turns on the light in his study. My brother leads my mother and Henry and me up the stairs. I want to stop them but don't know what else to do but follow. I watch in the bathroom: she runs the water and I stand behind her and wait.

After the shampoo is out of my eyes and her hands are off my head and I've soaped and rinsed, the bath is mine. I lean back in the water and lie down so the water is over my ears and tickles the edges of my eyes. I watch the white ceiling. I float and sink, my arms and legs rising and sinking. My ears are full. I hear thick water and my breathing. I knock on the

edge of the tub and listen to that. I hear the low nothing noise. I see my mother again. I know she wants to make me go to bed. I watch her hovering up there, but I can't hear her; I am down here.

The shuttle keeps exploding, again and again. I wonder if they felt it coming and got scared and held hands or if it just happened like it did for us. First you feel a blast in your chest that knocks out your tears and makes everything fall apart. Then you're alone, you're floating.

I take the escape route. It's magic, nothing like my plan. Instead of the apple tree, I use my book. I follow the words, all lined up and looking warm under my flash light. No one knows I'm reading. My back and legs relax against the bed. Our room is still and quiet, just Henry breathing. I am just turning pages. The story moves. Then I hear it: silence, deep and bigger than a house; the sound of the wide night filling in the space where I just was.

In my story, we cross over the night, the knight, the whipping boy, an Indian giver, Job, and a coyote. Trees bow and beau and bough. We fly to the light. When we are sad, we sing. We are scared, but we hold on. We fly past angels. We see the ocean with amber waves. Even our mother and father and brothers are here, in their dreams. We find God, and love, and sunlight for the morning.

