Excerpts from *Rules*

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

Follow the rules.

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"Come on, David." I let go of his sleeve, afraid I'll rip it. When he was little, I could pull my brother behind me if he didn't want to do something, but now David's eight and too strong to be pulled.

Opening the front door, I sigh. My first day of summer vacation is nothing like I dreamed. I had imagined today warm, with seagulls winging across a blue sky, not overcast and damp. Still, I refuse to grab my jacket from the peg inside the front door.

"Umbrella?" David asks, a far-off stare in his brown eyes.

"It's not raining. Come on. Mom said go to the car." David doesn't move.

I get his favorite red umbrella.

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"Okay, let's go." I step onto the front porch and slide the umbrella into my backpack with my sketchbook and colored pencils.

"Let's go to the video store," David says, not moving one inch.

"You're going to the clinic. But if you do a good job, Dad'll take you to the video store when he comes home."

The video store is David's favorite place, better than the circus, the fair, or even the beach. Dad always invites me to come, too, but I say, "No, thanks." David has to watch all the previews on the store TVs and walk down each row of videos, flipping boxes over to read the parental advisory and the rating—even on videos Dad would never let him rent. David'll say, loud enough for the whole store to hear, "Rated PG-thirteen for language and some violence! Crude humor!" He'll keep reaching for boxes and flipping them over, not even *seeing* the looks people give us. But the hardest part is when David kneels in the aisle to see the back of a video box a complete stranger is holding in his hand.

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Dad says, "No one cares, Catherine, Don't be so sensitive," but he's wrong. People *do* care.

Beside me, David checks his watch. "I'll pick you up at five o'clock."

"Well, *maybe* five o'clock," I say, "Sometimes Dad's late."

David shrieks, "Five o'clock!"

"Shh!" I scan the yards around us to see if anyone heard, and my stomach flips. A moving van is parked in front of the house next door, back wide open, half full of chairs and boxes. From inside the truck, two men appear, carrying a couch between them.

My hands tremble, trying to zip my backpack. "Come on, David. Mom said go to the car."

David stands with his sneaker toes on the top step, like it's a diving board and he's choosing whether to jump. "Five o'clock," he says.

The right answer would be "maybe," but David only wants surefire answers: "yes" and "no" and "Wednesday at two o'clock," but never "maybe" or "it depends" or worst of all, "I don't know."

Next door the movers set the couch on the driveway.

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If I hurry, I can ask them before they head into the house.

"Okay," I say. "Dad will pick you up at five o'clock. That's the rule."

David leaps down the steps just as the moving men climb into the van. He might not understand some things, but David loves rules.

I know I'm setting up a problem for later because Dad's always late, but I have rules, too, and one of mine is:

Sometimes you've gotta work with what you've got.

I take David's elbow to hurry him. "Let's go past the fence and talk to those men."

A little spring mud remains under the pine trees near the fence. Only a month ago, puddles were everywhere when Mrs. Bowman called me over to say her house had been sold to a woman with a twelve-year-old daughter. "I knew you'd be pleased," she said. "I told the realtor I have a girl just that age living next door and maybe they can be friends."

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A few weeks later, I had stood on my porch, waving, as Mrs. Bowman's son drove her away to her new apartment attached to his house.

It feels wrong that Mrs. Bowman's not living in the gray-shingled house next door anymore, and her porch looks empty without her rocking chairs. But I'm tingly with hopes, too. I've always wanted a friend in my neighborhood, and a next-door friend would be best of all.

Usually in summer I do lots of things by myself because my best friend, Melissa, spends the whole vacation in California with her dad. This year'll be different, though. The girl next door and I can do all my favorite summer things together: swimming at the pond, watching TV, and riding bikes. We could even send midnight messages from our windows, using flashlights and Morse code, like next-door friends do in books.

And the best part, David won't have to come since Mom won't have to drive me and pick me up.

I bite my teeth together, fighting the memory of my last sleepover at Melissa's. When

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Mom came to pick me up, David raced around Melissa's kitchen, opening doors, looking for their cellar, even when Mom kept telling him this was a trailer and trailers don't have cellars.

"Real friends understand," Mom had said on the ride home. But here's what I understand: Sometimes everyone gets invited except us, and it's because of David.

Walking toward the van, I study the moving men. One has a blotchy face and looks all business. The younger one wears a half smile and a dirty T-shirt and jeans.

T-shirt Man seems friendlier.

"Remember the rule," I whisper, my hand pushing David's back to hurry him. "If someone says 'hi,' you say 'hi' back."

Down the walkway, I run through conversation possibilities in my head, but that one rule should be enough. There's only one question I need to ask, then I can take David right to the car.

"Hi!" I call, reaching the corner of the fence. David flickers his fingers up and down, like he's playing a piano in the air.

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T-shirt Man turns around.

"Do you know when the family's coming?" I ask. "Is it today?"

He looks to the other man in the van. "When are the Petersons coming?"

"If someone says 'hi,' you say 'hi' back!" David yells. "That's the rule!"

Both men stare past me with that familiar look. The wrinkled-forehead look that means, "What's wrong with this kid?"

I grab David's hands to stop his fingers.

"They're coming about five o'clock," the red-faced man says. "That's what she said."

"Five o'clock!" David twists under my arm.

My wrist kills from being curled backward. I grip my toes in my sneakers to hide the pain. "Thanks!" I pretend I can see my watch. "Wow, look at the time! Sorry, gotta go!"

Chasing David to the car, I hear heavy footsteps on the van's metal ramp behind me, *thunk-thunk*.

David covers his ears with his hands. "It's five o'clock. Let's go to the video store!"

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My own hands squeeze to fists. Sometimes I wish someone would invent a pill so David'd wake up one morning without autism, like someone waking from a long coma, and he'd say, "Jeez, Catherine, where have I been?" And he'd be a regular brother like Melissa has—a brother who'd give back as much as he took, who I could joke with, even fight with. Someone I could yell at and he'd yell back, and we'd keep going and going until we'd both yelled ourselves out.

But there's no pill, and our quarrels fray instead of knot, always ending in him crying and me sorry for hurting him over something he can't help.

"Here's another rule." I open the car door. "If you want to get away from someone, you can check your watch and say, 'Sorry, gotta go.' It doesn't always work, but sometimes it does."

"Sorry, gotta go?" David asks, climbing into the car.

"That's right. I'll add it to your rules."

The men carry a mattress, still in plastic, up the walkway next door. Someday soon I'm going to take a plate of cookies up those steps and ring the doorbell.

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And if the girl next door doesn't have a flashlight, I'll buy her one that turns on and off easily.

Mom says I have to deal with what is and not to get my hopes up, but how else can hopes go but up?

"Wear your seat belt in the car," David states. "That's the rule."

"You're right." I click the seat belt across me and open my sketchbook to the back pages. That's where I keep all the rules I'm teaching David so if my

some-day-he'll-wake-up-a-regular-brother wish doesn't ever come true, at least he'll know how the world works, and I won't have to keep explaining things.

Some of the rules in my collection are easy and always:

Say "excuse me" after you burp.

Don't stand in front of the TV when other people are watching it.

Flush!

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But more are complicated, sometimes rules:

You can yell on a playground, but not during dinner.

A boy can take off his shirt to swim, but not his shorts.

It's fine to hug Mom, but not the clerk at the video store.

And a few are more hints than rules—but matter just as much:

Sometimes people don't answer because they didn't hear you. Other times it's because they don't want to hear you.

Most kids don't even consider these rules. Sometime when they were little, their mom and dad must've explained it all, but I don't remember mine doing it. It seems I've always known these things.

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Not David, though. He needs to be taught everything. Everything from the fact that a peach is not a funny-looking apple to how having long hair doesn't make someone a girl.

I add to my list:

If you want to get away from someone, check your watch and say, "Sorry, gotta go!"

"It's Mom!" David yells. "Let's go to the video store!"

She's on the porch, locking our front door. I'll get in trouble if Mom finds out I let him think the wrong thing. "I'm depending on you, Catherine," she'll say. "How will he learn to be independent if everyone lets him behave and speak the wrong way?"

"You're going to occupational therapy," I tell David, "at the clinic."

He frowns. "Let's go to the *video store*."

David may not have the sorry-gotta-go rule down, but he's got this one perfect:

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If you say something over and over and over, maybe they'll give in to shut you up.

"You're going to OT," I say. "Maybe —"

"Maybe" is all it takes. David twists toward me as far as his seat belt allows, his eyes flashing.

I cover David's mouth with my hand so the movers don't hear him scream.

Don't run down the clinic hallway.

Page 13 When David was three and started coming to the clinic for occupational therapy, I tagged along because I was too little to stay home alone. Now I'm twelve and can stay home if I want, but I still like to come. I like talking to Mom on the ride over and back and shopping in the stores across the street, and I love the road between our house and the clinic. It follows the ocean's shoreline, and I look for snowy egrets standing stick-still in the salt marshes and osprey circling, hunting fish. At high tide, waves sparkle under the wooden bridges, and I can guess the tide before I even see the water, just by closing my eyes and breathing the air through the open car
Page 14 windows. Low tide smells mud-black and tangy, but high tide smells clean and salty.

The clinic is a few streets from the ocean, and in the summer sometimes Mom and I walk to the waterfront park while David has his appointment. It's the only time in the week that I get Mom completely to myself and someone else is in charge of David. Mom likes to stay in the clinic waiting room so she can hear if David has a hard time, but I like when we leave because then she doesn't look away from me every time she hears him shriek.

At the clinic there's a waiting room and a long corridor of doors to little offices for hearing tests, speech therapy, and occupational therapy. David comes on Tuesdays and Thursdays to see Stephanie, a woman with kind eyes and an office full of games, swings, a trampoline, and more balls than I've ever seen outside a school playground. I think it'd be fun to go with Stephanie and do what she calls "playing," but David thinks it's work.

I wait while Mom says hello to the other waiting-room people, but as soon as Stephanie
Page 15 takes David's hand, I ask, "Can we go to the park? We haven't been since last fall."

"It's going to rain." Mom sits down on the waiting room couch. "And it'll be cold by the water. You didn't even bring your jacket."

"Can we go shopping, then?" I glance out the window to the line of stores across the street. My favorite is Elliot's Antiques. From the sidewalk it seems only a door, tucked between two downtown shops, but behind the door and up a musty-smelling staircase is a sign: ELLIOT'S ANTIQUES. The whole store is like an attic, full of stuff someone's grandparents once owned but had no more use for. Things not quite good enough to keep, but not quite bad enough to throw away.

"David had a hard time last week," Mom says. "I need to make sure Stephanie can handle it. Why don't we read?"

Mom crosses her legs, like she's settled to stay. I slump on the couch beside her and check if anyone looks like they'll mind Mom reading out loud. I haven't been to the clinic since my last school vacation, but I recognize the waiting-room people because their appointments
Page 16 are nearly the same time as David's every week. Mrs. Frost, a tiny old lady, reads a magazine in

the big chair between the front windows (she brings her even-older brother for speech therapy because he had a stroke). The receptionist with her blond, beauty-parlor hair types fast on her computer. Carol, a young mother wearing a big skirt and hoop earrings, sits in the rocking chair near the bookshelf. She leans down, handing her baby with Down syndrome chunky plastic blocks from the toy basket. In the chair next to the exit, Mrs. Morehouse, Jason's mother, checks her watch.

And there's Jason. I'm not sure how old Jason is, maybe fourteen or fifteen, but even though he's almost grown, his mother stays with him in the waiting room. Jason can't go anywhere unless someone pushes his wheelchair.

I open my backpack, and Mom cleans her glasses on the bottom edge of her shirt. When I was seven, Mom began reading the Harry Potter series to me, and even though I can read
Page 17 easily to myself now, we still read each new book together. I never think of the characters without hearing her voices.

I pass her the book. "Read quiet."

She turns to our chapter, and I arrange my colored pencils on the couch next to me.

Hunting out the window for something to draw, I consider the line of stores and restaurants across the street, but they look tired and "between." In a week or two, the gift shop window will have splashy beach towels and plastic sand buckets, the hotel will show off the "No" lit up with the "vacancy," and the parking lot will be full of seagulls strutting between the cars and perched on the streetlights, screeching for someone to drop a bite of sandwich or a French fry.

I wish time would hurry and there'd be sailboats tying up at the landing and tour buses passing through, and I'd already have the first hellos traded with Somebody Peterson, the girl next door.

I figure by five fifteen that first hi-trading could be over. Especially if I just happen to be outside at five o'clock when she arrives.

Page 18 I sink back into the vinyl couch cushions, sketchbook propped against my knees, listening to Mom's voice changing, character to character.

There's not much new to draw in the waiting room. The same yellowed awards cluster the walls, the same books spill off the bookshelf, and the same old toys are heaped in the toy basket. And there are only two people I haven't already drawn: Jason and his mother.

I worry that glancing will turn into staring too easy with Jason, and I hate when people stare at David. But Jason's mother fidgets—crossing her legs, picking up magazines, putting them down, smoothing her short, flipped-under, brown hair—so she'd be harder to draw.

Mom said Jason started coming to the clinic after Christmas, but the first time I saw him was February vacation. That day I didn't know where to look, so I looked at his feet on his wheelchair footrests.

Maybe by drawing Jason, I could look at him easier.

Page 19 *Looking closer can make something beautiful.*

Sometimes I can change how I feel about something by drawing it. Drawing makes me find the curves, the shadows, the ins and outs, and the beautiful parts. I solved my hating snakes by drawing their scales, tiny and silvery, overlapping and overlapping, until all I saw was how perfect they were. Can't say I'd want a snake crawling across me, but I don't have to run screaming to Dad every time I see a garden snake now.

"Should I go on?" Mom asks. "I could stop there."

"No, keep reading."

I turn to a clean page in my sketchbook and swoop a faint pencil line, beginning the outline of Jason's head: over the top, down his temple and cheek, around the bumps of jaw and chin, and back to where my line began.

I don't know what's wrong with Jason, and it doesn't seem polite to ask. Whatever it is, though, it's something big. There's a tray on Jason's wheelchair, and on the tray is a

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communication book. At first Jason's book seems like a big blue photograph album, but inside it's full of word cards, not photographs. Jason can't speak, but he turns the pages and touches the cards to tell his mother if he wants a drink, or has to use the bathroom, or is mad about something.

Today he's mad—fighting mad. Jason slides his hand across his book, jabbing at cards. His fingers curl, clawlike, as his knuckle raps one word and another.

"Yes, I know they had a guitar," Mrs. Morehouse says, fiddling with her earring. "But I told you, we didn't have time to stop. If I had stopped, you'd have been late for speech!"

Jason stabs his book. I hope he has a "So what?" or a "Whatever!" card.

His hands twitch, and he makes rumbling-throat sounds, near to growling.

Mom shuts our book.

Jason's jaw is a little crooked, not as perfect as I drew. But if I draw how it really is, it might look like I made a mistake.

Reddish brown waves of hair sweep over Jason's brow. A few wayward strands dangle

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near his eyes. Hair's my favorite thing to draw, but I only rough it in. Otherwise, I may not have time to finish before Jason's speech therapist comes out to get him.

"What?" Jason's mother asks.

I'll draw his eyes downcast, looking at his book. That way they'll be mostly lids, and it won't matter that I don't know what color they are.

"Girl don't? What girl?"

Everything falls quiet. I glance up.

Mrs. Morehouse is staring at me. "Are you drawing my son?"

My pencil freezes, midstroke.

"Just because he can't talk," she says, "don't assume he doesn't mind!"

Everyone looks at me. My fingers move over my sketchbook, finding the corner. "I'm sorry," I whisper, turning the page. It takes all my strength, every ounce, not to cry.

"A drink?" I hear Mrs. Morehouse say. "All right. Wait here."

Mom reaches over, but I scoot down the couch, out of reach.

I pick up a lime-colored pencil and swish a tiny blade of grass on my page. One
Page 22 eyelash-curve of green, cutting all that white.

Footsteps pass me, but I don't look up. I tick line after line, making grass.

"Oops," Mrs. Morehouse says. "It's only a little spill."

I risk a peek. If that were David, he'd be wild to get those clothes off, but Jason sits there, a dark water spot spread on the front of his navy Red Sox shirt. Maybe he doesn't mind. Or maybe he knows there isn't another shirt. Or maybe he's used to being wet. David wouldn't care about any of those things. That shirt'd be off, faster than you could blink. And the pants, too—if any had spilled there and I didn't remind him of the pants rule quick enough:

Keep your pants on! Unless Mom, Dad, or the doctor tells you to take them off.

Mom opens our book again. "Let's see, where were we?"

Page 23 "Harry was about to use his cloak."

"That's right."

As she reads, I think how useful a cloak that made me invisible would be right now. If I had one, I'd throw it over my head and run out the door and across the parking lot and the street, all the way through the waterfront park to the wharf, and board the first boat I saw going somewhere, anywhere else.

Mom reads, the receptionist types at her computer, Mrs. Frost looks at a magazine, and the baby sleeps on Carol's lap, his little fingers still clutching a pink plastic block.

"HI, JASON!"

Jason's smiling speech therapist finally comes out to get him. I'm relieved to see her, even though Mom stops reading when she comes.

"How's his day been going?" the therapist asks his mother.

"He wanted to stop at a yard sale," Mrs. Morehouse says. "So, he's upset."

"Oh?" The therapist turns to Jason. "YOU WANTED" (hands pointing, pulling) "TO STOP"
Page 24 (one hand karate-chopping the other) "AT A YARD SALE?" (fingers flying, eyebrows arched in a question).

Jason scowls.

His therapist pouts, her finger tapping his communication book. "Sad."

I swallow a giggle. Sad? Is she kidding? If I were Jason, I'd want cards that said: "Get out of my face!" and "Go away!" and "This stinks a big one!"

The therapist pushes Jason's wheelchair down the corridor, and Mrs. Morehouse picks up her purse. "I have a couple of errands," she tells the receptionist. "I'll be right back."

The bell above the clinic door jangles as she leaves. Through the window, I watch her cross the parking lot to her van. "What do you think Jason would do with a guitar?" I ask Mom.

"I don't know," she says. "Maybe just having one would be enough."

Watching the van's red taillights, I wonder, Enough for what? But as the van pulls away, I close my eyes and make a wish. *Please go back and buy that guitar*.

In case Mom's right.

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"I didn't mean to hurt Jason's feelings. I was only sketching."

"You could tell him that," Mom says.

I cringe. "But he can't answer me."

"Maybe he'll point to the answer in his book. Or maybe he'll answer in his head." Mom returns to reading, and I draw the front of a gray-shingled house, porch steps, and a front door with a doorbell. I reach for a blue-sky pencil, but pick up midnight black instead.

I hear a faraway David-shriek, and Mom stops reading to watch the corridor. But then it's quiet, and I figure David gave in and did whatever Stephanie wanted.

My drawing takes shape under my hand: lemon for the stars, cream for the moon, pine for the trees along the fence, charcoal gray for the darkened windows, all but one.

When the clinic bell jangles again, I peek up long enough to see Jason's mother isn't holding a guitar.

"HERE WE ARE!"

The speech therapist pushes Jason's wheelchair up beside me. "I saw you drive in," she

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says to his mother. "He was so upset, we stopped early."

Mom slides her elbow over in a "here's your chance, Catherine" nudge. "Hi, Jason," she says. "How are you today?"

His head stays bowed, his chin almost touching his chest.

Mom's question hangs in the air. Maybe Jason is answering in his head? Maybe he's think-saying, "I'm fine, thank you."

Or maybe, "Well, I've been better."

Or maybe, he's think-screaming, "I'm in this wheelchair, you idiot! How do you *suppose* I am?"

Whatever he's thinking, his silence stings me. I lay my sketchbook on my lap. "I'm sorry about that guitar," I tell the reddish brown waves of hair on Jason's head. "I like music, too."

His head snaps up and Jason stares hard into my eyes. His eyes are stunning, ice blue.

Mrs. Morehouse spins his chair toward the door, and Mom stands up to help.

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"It's okay." Mrs. Morehouse holds the door open with her foot. "I can get it."

I pick up my palest-yellow pencil and add a dot to my drawing, gleaming in a window. From the dot, I sweep down a shivering beam cutting the darkness. I imagine myself sitting on my bed, hugging my knees, counting Morse code dashes and dots.

A-r-e y-o-u t-h-e-r-e?

The bell jangles again. I look up to see Mrs. Morehouse in the doorway, watching me. She crosses her arms over her stomach.

Mrs. Frost drops her magazine and even the receptionist has stopped typing, her hands held above her keyboard like a conductor waiting to cue a symphony.

"Jason insisted I come back," Mrs. Morehouse says, "and tell you he likes the picture you're drawing." She turns to leave.

I look out the window to Jason at the top of the ramp. "Wait!" Lifting my page, I pull gently so it'll tear neatly. Colored pencils fall off my lap, scattering and rolling across the floor, but I

don't bother with them. "If he likes it, he can have it. Please tell him the dot in the window is a flashlight."

His mother smiles. "I'll tell him."

I'm too embarrassed to watch her give Jason my picture, so I get down on my knees and hunt for colored pencils, some of which have rolled under the heater.

"That was kind of you, sweetheart," Mom says.

I slump back on the couch. Though I move my orange pencil over a fresh page, I'm only making lines. Too-busy-to-talk lines. Leave-me-alone lines. I bear down so hard, my pencil lead breaks.

"Sorry! Gotta go!" David runs through the waiting room, heading for the door to outside, his brown hair damp with sweat. Mom jumps up to block his way.

I flip to my rule collection and add:

If you want to get away with something, don't announce it first.