

The Quiet Rules

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Living here ain't such a big deal, long as you're quiet. That's the first rule: *You can't whoop and holler*, Ma says. *It'll upset the other ladies*. Boys are lucky—I can't just pee off the fire escape, so I got way more chance of behavior in the hallway. One time, my brother Rye aimed good enough to hit this bum from two stories. Bums. Don't even have the sense to get themselves to a shelter. There's six kids here total now: you, me, Rye, Little Tony, and Margarita's twins. And they're only babies. If babies can be quiet enough, so can you. If Little Tony can make himself practically invisible, given he has to drag himself around on his arms? Don't worry. You'll do fine.

Say you need to get out. Like to play or go to school. Best to climb down from here, sneak through the mud field, slip through that hole in the fence. I keep my bike there. Three-speed. You can ride it if I'm not, long as you lock it back up. 12-31-13. This way Janelle—she's the director—don't see you. She don't really want us kids here. Don't much like signs of us, neither. Thinks the moms can get better easier without us hanging all over them.

On Saturdays, Rye and me leave early in the morning for the gravel pit. There you can whoop and holler all you want. Plus, you can see the Fermi towers from the top of the piles. My ma's ex, Brett, works there and he said they got the highest safety markings in the country. They make like half of Michigan's energy. I went there. Stood right next to a reactor. Everybody goes in fifth grade. You will, too, unless your ma and you move away, but—and zero offense to your ma—hardly nobody gets that far that fast. Here, most everyone's an in-and-out: home to the men and back, home and back again.

Anyway, when Janelle comes for check-in, you can always hide in the closet, or wait in the bathtub, if you're feeling antsy. Janelle'll act real friendly, ask your mom a thousand questions, talk restraining orders and jobs and regular stitches versus dissolving. It'll go way faster if she never sees you, because you're a-whole-nother kettle of worms. You gotta understand you equal a thousand more questions. Ma will even bring a pan of macaroni right to our room with three spoons to keep us out of Janelle's hair and her out of our business. When Rye came down with strep, Janelle checked over the pill bottle to see if it was legal pills or illegal. Painkillers or antibiotics. Painkillers hafta stay in the lockup, for one. But then she worried about it catching. Harder to heal from a cracked rib when you're coughing like a dog to boot.

Still, it's easy enough, long as you get your weekdays, I mean. There's times Ma's so scared of Brett finding us on our way to school she won't even let us leave, and then you got to take hiding to a new level. Rye's only six, you know, and sometimes he actually believes he's disappeared, like this bird in a magic show we seen on cable television at our Aunt Linda's. We used to go to her trailer when things got out of hand. Even when we went back to Brett's, Aunt Linda's was our by-heart address for the DHS. 201 First Avenue. That's a tip: If your ma's got an order, you gotta know where you're supposed to live, because she's breaking the law as much as him.

Once we went to the church shelter, on the other side of Monroe. You know it or you too new? Well. There everybody sleeps on cots in the same room, and they check you for lice. You only get three days, which ain't really long enough

for cooling off. Brett could stay mad for weeks, you know. But those church ladies want most of all to keep the family together. Not Janelle. She don't care if any of these ladies get back to their men. I heard her tell somebody you got to do what's safest for everyone involved in the long term. But her opinion's shaped on account of she's a butch. You can tell by her hair. Take a look sometime. She's always got gel in there, not hair spray.

I don't even want to know why your ma left. It's always bad. My mom left Brett the first time when he hurt Tweetie. That was our bird. A canary, like they used to send down with coal miners. So here's the setup: Brett gets his knickers twisted because Ma's late coming home from the Stop-N-Save and he has to wait for dinner and Tweetie won't stop singing. Pretty voice, but any noise grates on his nerves after a while. He throws his boot at her cage and knocks it to the floor, but that only makes her sing louder. Then he grabs Tweetie so all you can see are her head and her claws and the tips of her feathers. He makes a sign with his fingers like *okay* and holds it up to her face.

I'm warning you, he says. But canaries don't speak English. They ain't like parrots.

Brett flicks Tweetie in the beak over and over. By the time Ma comes home, Tweetie's stumbling all over the carpet in our trailer like a drunk. Brett is for sure drunk. Ma smooshes Tweetie into her bosoms and cries. Brett says he'll do the same goddamned thing to Ma and us, too, if she doesn't hustle her fat ass into the kitchen and make him some fucking dinner. He starts to pound on her. She locks us in the bathroom. The police come. Brett goes to jail. We go to the church shelter. They pick the lice out of our hair and feed us good. Mashed potatoes and gravy. But three days later we just go back and that empty cage is in the living room, though it seems like you can feel it everywhere.

But anything's better than the DHS putting you with fosters, right? This kid Kevin totally lost it, went screaming through the hallway, tagging the light fixtures. He banged his head against the wall. You can still see the dent in the plaster. The other battered women—sounds like they been deep-fried, don't it? Awww. Come on. Don't get so upset. Another rule: *Best to laugh or else you'll cry*,

be the next one to go crazy. Like Kevin standing there screaming, his face red as a freakin' lobster, and all those who ain't his mother holding their bathrobes at the neck like: No way. Probably called the DHS. Or Janelle did. She has a need to CYA, cover-your-ass.

Watch out for your teacher in that way, too. 'Cause she signed a contract with the state to tell your secret if she knows it. I got Miss Carmen this year, who's been around, knows the deal, bought the T-shirt. I never said nothing about Brett, but it's a small world, and Miss Carmen's friends with my aunt. That's why she don't tell a soul and she don't ask questions and she don't call the DHS. Miss Carmen says Ma is doing the best she can. No matter where we're living, Miss Carmen makes me two peanut butter sandwiches so she can be sure Rye and I will eat something after school. Since peanut butter makes Rye choke, I always give him both jelly halves, and I eat the peanut butter halves.

Kevin going to the fosters scared Ma senseless. The day after, me and Rye had to hide under the covers playing *My Mother and Your Mother Was Hangin' Up Clothes*, using our thumbs to make it last. Ma sat by the door smoking cigarettes with her good arm, waiting for somebody to come for us, too. Rye bawled even though his pinky finger won. Even though I explained that Kevin had broken a ton of rules: *No running. No hollering. No hitting*, which counts even for light fixtures. It's gotten so invisibility terrifies Rye to death.

Kevin showed up in school again after his mom got him back. Said the foster mom made him eat Brussels sprouts and cabbage, and the guy was a perv, which I know all about. When the police come asking questions, they always want to know if Brett's a perv. I think he is. He keeps stacks of nasty magazines in his closet. But I don't much like to think about that. This is the hardest rule to learn: *It could always be worse.* That's what you gotta tell yourself. How else do you get on with it? I mean, Little Tony's mom got shot in the stomach by his dad when she was seven months pregnant. The bullet hit his spine. They pulled him out of the same hole the bullet made. Watching him drag himself around, you sometimes gotta wonder, what for?

Consider this your warning: You pick on Little Tony or Rye, and I'll whip

your ass. First time we came, Kevin showed me the ropes. Said, You got to scare the little kids into being quiet. He told Rye this story about a monster that eats you unless you choose to get magical and disappear. That's why Rye thinks he's disappeared, because he tried so dang hard to be quiet and no monster's eaten him yet. But he has these nightmares about that monster. That could just as easily get us in trouble, on account of his crying. I whipped Kevin good at the gravel pit. Busted his lip. Telling a little kid a story like that.

Now Rye don't hardly want to go out ever. He just wants to sit in our room and hug the stupid stained stuffed rabbit from the carnival. He don't even go to kindergarten anymore, which he's already supposed to be two years past, because he keeps puking all the time. And every time he pukes, he thinks he's disappearing more. And every damned time Rye has to go to the doctor, Ma sells her blood to pay for it. We go to the plasma center downtown. You been there? This machine separates out the red stuff from the clear stuff and they give her twenty bucks for that. Course, she has to weigh 110 pounds before they'll stick the needle in her arm, and when she don't, she's got to drink like two gallons of water before we go.

Then, not only do I have Rye puking and sniffing, but I got to feed her bananas and salt all day. I go over to 7-Eleven with whatever change's leftover and buy chips and hot dogs and a sticky bun for Rye's sweet tooth. Disgusting. When Margarita wants a shower, I'll hold her babies and give them a bottle of sugar water—they're real fat 'cause that's how you keep babies quiet—but I don't feel anywhere near the same about that as I do giving Rye that sticky bun. It's like I'm telling him a lie, the bad kind. He loves it, though, and when all three of us crawl into bed, I can smell the icing on his breath.

Then Ma tells us long stories about when she was a girl and they lived in a farmhouse out in the middle of nowhere and sat on the porch all hours. I stare at the holes in her arms and hate on just about everything there is. I wish I could get rid of the middleman sometimes, you know? Like Ma and Rye could just have a tube between them, and her blood could go directly into him and make him stronger and we just had twenty bucks for our needs.

Quit with the horse-shit talk, Ma says whenever we whine.

She's right. Can't kid yourself with lots of lies or you won't make it. It's half Rye's trouble. He invents a lot of stuff in his own head. Like that things was fine with Brett, and we should just go home. But this last time Brett snapped Ma's arm in two places.

We left him for good, sort of, I hope. I mean, other times, Ma would call him a lot at first, even though they're never supposed to talk by phone. They always used a code. Or my Aunt Linda called from a pay phone to get through to Ma and then put him on. My aunt's a real dumbass, if you want to know the truth. She's always saying that a woman needs a good dose of fur, which means no one can live without a man. But look at Janelle. She's a bit of a perv, sure. Still, she don't have to worry about nobody beating her ass, right?

Anyways, me and Rye got the idea of making a code so we could talk without talking. Like the sign language letters I learned in school 'cause there's this one deaf kid in our class, but we added to those. We taught it to Little Tony. We knock on the wall in the closet to say go to the fire escape. We sit on ours and talk across the way without ever making a noise. I like the way our stories pass through the air, right through the wrought-iron bars.

It's hard for Little Tony because he can't come down the fire escape, so he never gets out. I can't tell if that's a worse trap than the fact that—even after—his mom named him after Big Tony, who's in prison. But Little Tony can't even play some of the indoor games Rye and I invented. Like when we take a wooden spoon and a spatula and blow up a balloon and play silent tennis.

You all are as good as a herd of elephants, Ma says, but you need to get your yah-yahs out somehow, don't you?

Little Tony only plays card games and stuff. Boring as hell. But you do what you got to do for other people, right? And I guess that's what Ma does for Brett. He screws up and cools down and then cries and cries for forgiveness. I mean, I forgave Kevin after he went to the fosters. Couldn't hate on him no more once he said the word *perv*. But there's something about Brett's tears that don't wash away the hate quite so easy. Not for me.

Once, after about a month in here, Ma gave him permission to break the restraining order because he was begging all the time. It goes like this: I help her soak off her cast—the other arm and it’s still not healed right—so he won’t have to see it. We sneak out the fire escape, even Ma, which is hilarious. Brett picks us up at the edge of the mud field at dark. He’s holding up tickets for the spring carnival. I don’t want him to lift me into the back of his pickup, but I let him because Ma wants me to. She almost bawls when he wraps me and Rye in a stinky old blanket. Rye keeps it around him, but I shrug it off. We been in that room so damned long and the air feels so good on my skin, and anyway, no part of Brett I’d want to keep.

At the carnival, Brett gives me the tickets and three rolls of quarters and says, Go ahead. Watch Rye.

Brett and Ma stay in the pickup awhile. Disgusting as hell, but never mind. Brett’s always at her like that. Even when she’s all bruised up. So we leave Ma with Brett’s stupid ass.

Just don’t let your brother out of your sight, she says.

And it’s amazing at this carnival—the lights, the feeling of being safe inside though you’re outside, the smell of sugar on the air. Rye needs cotton candy right away, sits on the ground, and eats it all, though I want to keep moving. We try the rides, but Rye isn’t tall enough for the good ones. He wants the merry-go-round a thousand times. But it ain’t fast enough for me.

I trick him onto the ride that stays in one place but spins real fast, and you stick to the wall and the floor drops out. So much like life, not sure how somebody thought: well, won’t this be fun, but I have to try it. Rye’s scared and grabs for my hand but can’t reach. He can barely walk by the time we’re off. He’ll cry, and then he’ll want Ma, and finding her means finding Brett. Finding them together. You know how it is. Hate to see them after they’ve made up. Nobody ever makes it up to you. At least not for real. I buy Rye more cotton candy and let one pink wisp melt on my tongue. I try not to get used to sweetness like that, is the truth.

I say, Let’s go to the freak tent.

This two-headed man, both his faces painted bright blue, is sitting at the entryway, and Rye won't go in because one face has a snarl. Rye was scared of Little Tony at first, too, I remind him. I say the people in that tent deserve to make as decent a living as anybody. We can see the half-and-half and the Elephant Man 'cause I seen that movie and loved it. But Rye says that the Elephant Man on the poster looks like the disappearing monster. What if it eats him? Once that monster gets in his head, it's no use. So I stick him on the merry-go-round, give the guy a dollar to keep him there for twenty minutes. So I'm off to see the freaks. Once, Kevin called me one, and I looked it up in Miss Carmen's thesaurus, saw it can mean *maverick*, which is also: *original*, *outsider*, *rebel*. So then I felt good enough about that.

But something weird happens to me as soon as I'm inside the tent. It's like—like they're watching me instead of me watching them. I almost cry. Staring at the Elephant Man, that is. The lumps and bumps on his skin. I want to touch him. Like I used to want my dad when I was real little and could still remember his face. And I know that freak is thinking something about me. I don't want to know what, but I do.

So I stand there longer than I mean to. When I leave to find Rye, I can't. The merry-go-round guy just shrugs when I ask and chomps his smoke. I hurry around and yell Rye's name. Ma says Rye's hair is like a pat of butter, stands out like a raincoat on a rainy day. In the lights every little kid looks like him, but none of the ones I check are. I turn the corner and run smack into Ma, who's carrying a huge pink stuffed rabbit with buck teeth. Brett sips at his drink and says, What the fuck?

I can't find Rye, I say.

Ma's terrified and leaps right to: We gotta call the cops.

Me and Brett look at each other. It's always like this. I hate him but we see eye to eye where this is concerned: no cops. Because then they'd both get caught. Brett makes his voice all soft and official and asks me where I last saw Rye and where I was headed at the time. And we hurry over to the freak tent and sure enough, there's Rye standing at a distance but clearly waiting for me.

When Ma runs up to grab at Rye, he leans into her and pukes what looks like straight up blood all over the rabbit and Ma's good shirt. And now that Rye's safe, sort of, I guess, Brett takes me behind the tent and pulls his belt off and says, Didn't your mother tell you to watch him? I smell the beer on his breath and brace myself for what's coming. You got to learn to take a whipping when you earned it. But Ma comes huffing around the corner carrying my brother in her good arm and sees what Brett's about to do.

She says in that begging way, Never mind, baby. We got to take Rye to the ER.

Brett yanks down my pants—this is a talk we been having for a while: I think I'm too old but Brett says I ain't and won't never be—and he pushes me up against the metal trash cans, and his arm goes back and I know I'm about to get it good.

But then that Elephant Man slips out the back flap of the tent, and Brett's all distracted by his face and misses so the belt slams into one of the cans and it echoes like a gunshot and trash spills on Brett's boots and the Elephant Man shakes his head and spits. He looks at me same as he did earlier—like he's got X-ray vision that could go through clothes or even skin. And that makes me see what he's seeing: this girl with her white ass in the air standing in a pile of trash with a freaking perv. The Elephant Man's aware my life's worse than his because I don't go nowhere. And I'm thinking maybe he's onto something, you know? You don't fit in a place, keep moving. At least he's got the other freaks and they're always on the road, and maybe the view is nice. Maybe he can tell the difference between in and out, and that means he don't become an in-and-out.

Brett makes a face like he's tasted something bad, which usually makes anyone disappear. But the Elephant Man don't. Then the look on Brett's face changes. It's like: Well, let me get on with it, okay? But the Elephant Man just lights up a smoke and sticks it in the corner of his mouth. And I turn around and look at Brett, see the red veins in his eyes and how skinny and bowlegged he is. His hair all sweaty and standing up in two messy cowlicks. I clench my fists. The Elephant Man exhales and spits again. Then he laughs,

a big loud belly laugh. And I laugh, too. Can't help it. For some reason this makes Brett turn red, fold up his belt, and put it in his back pocket. He acts tough, like he's gonna say something. But he don't. He turns around and leaves real fast. That's the way I remember it. I pull up my pants and Brett runs away and leaves us there because he's a huge coward. And Miss Carmen says there's nothing worse.

You all need a ride? the Elephant Man asks around his smoke. That's when I do it. Real quick. I brush against his arm going past. Touch him. Barely. But I do.

Ma stops bawling and says no and calls a cab from the pay phone, and I think to myself: that's one more pint of blood. And Rye wasting all that blood puking it up. Talk about the freakin' middleman. Then the ER nurse'll just tell us again that Rye's got an ulcer, can't eat all that junk. What are we supposed to do if he won't eat nothing else?

Don't worry, I start to say, but Ma shushes me.

So I sign over to Rye: it's gonna be okay.

That's a lie, too. But I don't want him dreading his life. It's such a hard rule: *No use knowing everything awful until you gotta know.* Try and remind yourself lightning don't strike twice. At least, for most people. If you're the odd man out, don't think about it all the time. Sometimes I let myself, just for a second, believe what Ma says: She's going to get a place this time, with a pullout bed for me and Rye. When he gets nightmares, I'll be right there. He'll be safe with me.

Except I don't want Rye trusting no one, not even me. That's the last rule, the most important one. People been lying to each other since the beginning of time. *Trust no one. Not a soul.* I shouldn't have trusted Kevin. And really, you shouldn't listen to a goddamned word I'm telling you. Think I never done nothing?

'Member Tweetie? Well, when Ma left us alone in the bathroom and Brett was having his fit, breaking everything in the house, Tweetie started shaking real bad. I told Rye to get in the bathtub and pull the curtain. I was going to do a trick. Then I kissed Tweetie on her broke beak and opened the toilet and

pushed her right down under the water, made her disappear. Pretended it was no worse than the depths of some mine, drowning in methane, giving someone a warning. But I was the one who felt her heart, that tiny thudding somehow also big as a star, go out against my finger. And even after, in the stillness, that heart hoped for another minute, for time to go back and do it all different.

Rye bought my act. And I was glad. But I knew the whole time we was locked in there how her feathers looked all wet and stiff. I knew the truth about everything.

