

“Rules of the Road”
Cristina Fernandez

Rule #3: “Stop pulling your punches.”

“I dunno what you’re talking about.”

“Ellie, I’ve seen you lift a tractor with one hand. It shouldn’t have taken you that long to deal with those three FBI schmucks. We barely made it to the car.”

“I just didn’t want to waste my energy so fast. Sorry, Ben.”

What she means: I don’t want my power to scare you the way it sometimes scares me.

“It’s alright, just don’t next time. We can’t get caught.”

Rule #7: “Do. Not. Punch. Teachers.”

“Okay, I get it.”

“I shouldn’t have to say that! Just so you know! Some things should be implied.”

“I know, but she said that enhanced people were diseased and that we should be.”

“Yeah, she was the worst, but you outed yourself. They called the cops. If I hadn’t been nearby-”

What he doesn’t say: I’m seventeen. I have a high school diploma, a driver’s licence, thirty seven dollars to my name, a last name we don’t even share. If I hadn’t been nearby, they would have taken you to wherever they’ve been locking up the kids who can bench press buildings and I wouldn’t have been able to do a damn thing but watch.

Instead he says: “Don’t do stupid things like that. We can’t keep running, Ellie, we need to settle somewhere, pretend to be normal. We need to hide in plain sight.”

“Well, I need to pee.”

“I’m not stopping this car until we cross the state lines.”

“Ben!” The squeal of tires, a new lane on the highway.

“Don’t punch teachers!”

Rule #14: “You should be eating five vegetables a day.”

“Give it back!”

“No, enough PopTarts, you need to eat something green.”

“This is because of *her*, isn’t it?”

“Nutrition is important for little sprouts like you. Green Sour Patch Kids don’t count.”

Rule #16: “Stop messing with Hazel’s stuff.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m serious, Ellie. Cut it out. Give her back her laptop. You’re acting like a five year old.”

“You’re acting like an adult. Like a gross old person and I don’t wanna be friends with you anymore.”

“Look, Hazel has given up so much for us, and you keep being a massive... booger.”

“Of course you’re taking her side. Because you loooooove her.”

“Look, Hazel and I are... Hazel is...” A long sigh, a dumb-looking smile and a blush.

“Grooooooooooooooss! She’s ruining everything.”

“She’s not. She’s letting us stay here. She’s trying to help us. Ellie, we need her to help us.”

“No we don’t. We’ve never needed anybody’s help. We should just leave now. We always do.”

“Look, I like Hazel, okay? A lot. And it’s still me and you, little dude, just like I promised. But we said we’d settle down when it was safe. And we’re safe here. So just give her a chance. Please.”

Rule #23: “Don’t listen to pop music, oh my god.”

“Hey! I like that song.”

“No, it’s all synthetic beats and nonsense buzzwords. It’s rotting your brain and making you complicit. Here. God, you’re lucky I have a great music taste.”

“What’s complicit mean?”

“It means lame. You ever heard of Green Day, kid.”

“No. Isn’t that a really old band from like a million years ago?”

“I’m ignoring that. Now shut up and absorb some awesome.”

Rule #25: “Never fall in love.”

Blood on her hands, blood on his shirt, dotted on the already-dirty walls wherever they touch them.

What she wants to say: I’m sorry; It’s my fault; I wasn’t strong enough; It should have been me.

What he wants to say: I already miss her; At least it wasn’t you; Looks like it’s just us again, kid.

“And don’t drink until you’re thirty five.” Another beer bottle tumbles to the carpet, empty.

Rule #29: “Oh my God, don’t hang posters above stove.”

“You said I could decorate the apartment however I want. Hey, put it back.”

“Yes, decorate, not burn our house down. Jesus, Ellie.”

What he says for the first time: our house.

What they do for the first time After Hazel: smile.

Rule #34: “Don’t trust anybody.”

What she sees: Ben with bruises that could have been hers, cut on his lip, grinning but frowning with his eyes, washing blood off his knuckles in another dirty motel sink.

What he sees: his little sister in everything but blood, the strongest person he knows, the family he could have lost today because he thought more people were like Hazel.

“Even you?”

A small laugh. “Especially me, little dude. I make up half the shit that comes out of my mouth.”

Rule #38: “Don’t grow up.”

What he means: “Don’t leave me. You’re all I have left.”

What she says: “I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“Yeah, I know. Just try okay. Take it from a newly minted adult, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“It’s the taxes, right? Those sound super boring.”

“Yeah. Taxes are the worst.”