

HOUSE RULES

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ALLEN & UNWIN

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*For Nancy Friend Stuart (1949–2008)
and David Stuart*

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HOUSE RULES

CASE 1: SLEEP TIGHT

At first glance, she looked like a saint: Dorothea Puente rented out rooms to the elderly and disabled in Sacramento, California, in the 1980s. But then, her boarders started to vanish. Seven bodies were found buried in the garden, and traces of prescription sleeping pills were found in the remains, through forensic toxicology analysis. Puente was charged with killing her boarders so that she could take their pension checks and get herself plastic surgery and expensive clothing, in order to maintain her image as a doyenne of Sacramento society. She was charged with nine murders and convicted of three.

*In 1998, while serving two consecutive life sentences, Puente began corresponding with a writer named Shane Bugbee and sending him recipes, which were subsequently published in a book called *Cooking with a Serial Killer*.*

Call me crazy, but I wouldn't touch that food with a ten-foot pole.

Emma

Everywhere I look, there are signs of a struggle. The mail has been scattered all over the kitchen floor; the stools are overturned. The phone has been knocked off its pedestal, its battery pack hanging loose from an umbilicus of wires. There's one single faint footprint at the threshold of the living room, pointing toward the dead body of my son, Jacob.

He is sprawled like a starfish in front of the fireplace. Blood covers his temple and his hands. For a moment, I can't move, can't breathe.

Suddenly, he sits up. "Mom," Jacob says, "you're not even *trying*."

This is not real, I remind myself, and I watch him lie back down in the exact same position—on his back, his legs twisted to the left.

"Um, there was a fight," I say.

Jacob's mouth barely moves. "And . . . ?"

"You were hit in the head." I get down on my knees, like he's told me to do a hundred times, and notice the crystal clock that usually sits on the mantel now peeking out from beneath the couch. I gingerly pick it up and see blood on the corner. With my pinkie, I touch the liquid and then taste it. "Oh, Jacob, don't tell me you used up all my corn syrup again—"

"Mom! Focus!"

I sink down on the couch, cradling the clock in my hands. "Robbers came in, and you fought them off."

Jacob sits up and sighs. The food dye and corn syrup mixture has matted his dark hair; his eyes are shining, even though they won't meet mine. "Do you honestly believe I'd execute the same crime scene twice?" He unfolds a fist, and for the first time I see a tuft of corn silk hair. Jacob's father is a towhead—or at least he *was* when he walked out on us fifteen years ago, leaving me with Jacob and Theo, his brand-new, blond baby brother.

“*Theo* killed you?”

“Seriously, Mom, a kindergartner could have solved this case,” Jacob says, jumping to his feet. Fake blood drips down the side of his face, but he doesn’t notice; when he is intensely focused on crime scene analysis, I think a nuclear bomb could detonate beside him and he’d never flinch. He walks toward the footprint at the edge of the carpet and points. Now, at second glance, I notice the waffle tread of the Vans skateboarding sneakers that *Theo* saved up to buy for months, and the latter half of the company logo—NS—burned into the rubber sole. “There was a confrontation in the kitchen,” Jacob explains. “It ended with the phone being thrown in defense, and me being chased into the living room, where *Theo* clocked me.”

At that, I have to smile a little. “Where did you hear that term?”

“*CrimeBusters*, Episode Forty-three.”

“Well, just so you know—it means to punch someone. Not hit them with an actual clock.”

Jacob blinks at me, expressionless. He lives in a literal world; it’s one of the hallmarks of his diagnosis. Years ago, when we were moving to Vermont, he asked what it was like. *Lots of green*, I said, *and rolling hills*. At that, he burst into tears. *Won’t they hurt us?* he said.

“But what’s the motive?” I ask, and on cue, *Theo* thunders down the stairs.

“Where’s the freak?” he yells.

“*Theo*, you will *not* call your brother—”

“How about I stop calling him a freak when he stops stealing things out of my room?” I have instinctively stepped between him and his brother, although Jacob is a head taller than both of us.

“I didn’t steal anything from your room,” Jacob says.

“Oh, really? What about my sneakers?”

“They were in the *mudroom*,” Jacob qualifies.

“Retard,” *Theo* says under his breath, and I see a flash of fire in Jacob’s eyes.

“I am *not* retarded,” he growls, and he lunges for his brother.

I hold him off with an outstretched arm. “Jacob,” I say, “you shouldn’t take anything that belongs to *Theo* without asking for his permission. And *Theo*, I don’t want to hear that word come out of your mouth again, or *I’m* going to take your sneakers and throw them out with the trash. Do I make myself clear?”

“I’m outta here,” Theo mutters, and he stomps toward the mudroom. A moment later I hear the door slam.

I follow Jacob into the kitchen and watch him back into a corner. “*What we got here,*” Jacob mutters, his voice a sudden drawl, “*is . . . failure to communicate.*” He crouches down, hugging his knees.

When he cannot find the words for how he feels, he borrows someone else’s. These come from *Cool Hand Luke*; Jacob remembers the dialogue from every movie he’s ever seen.

I’ve met so many parents of kids who are on the low end of the autism spectrum, kids who are diametrically opposed to Jacob, with his Asperger’s. They tell me I’m lucky to have a son who’s so verbal, who is blisteringly intelligent, who can take apart the busted microwave and have it working again an hour later. They think there is no greater hell than having a son who is locked in his own world, unaware that there’s a wider one to explore. But try having a son who is locked in his own world and still *wants* to make a connection. A son who tries to be like everyone else but truly doesn’t know how.

I reach out to comfort him but stop myself—a light touch can set Jacob off. He doesn’t like handshakes or pats on the back or someone ruffling his hair. “Jacob,” I begin, and then I realize that he isn’t sulking at all. He holds up the telephone receiver he’s been hunched over, so that I can see the smudge of black on the side. “You missed a fingerprint, too,” Jacob says cheerfully. “No offense, but you would make a lousy crime scene investigator.” He rips a sheet of paper towel off the roll, dampens it in the sink. “Don’t worry, I’ll clean up all the blood.”

“You never did tell me Theo’s motive for killing you.”

“Oh.” Jacob glances over his shoulder, a wicked grin spreading across his face. “I stole his sneakers.”

In my mind, Asperger’s is a label to describe not the traits Jacob *has* but rather the ones he lost. It was sometime around two years old when he began to drop words, to stop making eye contact, to avoid connections with people. He couldn’t hear us, or he didn’t want to. One day I looked at him, lying on the floor beside a Tonka truck. He was spinning its wheels, his face only inches away, and I thought, *Where have you gone?*

I made excuses for his behavior: the reason he huddled in the bottom of the grocery cart every time we went shopping was that it was cold in the supermarket. The tags I had to cut out of his clothing were unusu-

ally scratchy. When he could not seem to connect with any children at his preschool, I organized a no-holds-barred birthday party for him, complete with water balloons and Pin the Tail on the Donkey. About a half hour into the celebration, I suddenly realized that Jacob was missing. I was six months pregnant and hysterical—other parents began to search the yard, the street, the house. I was the one who found him, sitting in the basement, repeatedly inserting and ejecting a VCR tape.

When he was diagnosed, I burst into tears. Remember, this was back in 1995; the only experience I'd had with autism was Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*. According to the psychiatrist we first met, Jacob suffered from an impairment in social communication and behavior, without the language deficit that was a hallmark of other forms of autism. It wasn't until years later that we even *heard* the word *Asperger's*—it just wasn't on anyone's diagnostic radar yet. But by then, I'd had Theo, and Henry—my ex—had moved out. He was a computer programmer who worked at home and couldn't stand the tantrums Jacob would throw when the slightest thing set him off: a bright light in the bathroom, the sound of the UPS truck coming down the gravel driveway, the texture of his breakfast cereal. By then, I'd completely devoted myself to Jacob's early intervention therapists—a parade of people who would come to our house intent on dragging him out of his own little world. *I want my house back*, Henry told me. *I want you back*.

But I had already noticed how, with the behavioral therapy and speech therapy, Jacob had begun to communicate again. I could see the improvement. Given that, there wasn't even a choice to make.

The night Henry left, Jacob and I sat at the kitchen table and played a game. I made a face, and he tried to guess which emotion went with it. I smiled, even though I was crying, and waited for Jacob to tell me I was happy.

Henry lives with his new family in the Silicon Valley. He works for Apple and he rarely speaks to the boys, although he sends a check faithfully every month for child support. But then again, Henry was always good with organization. And numbers. His ability to memorize a *New York Times* article and quote it verbatim—which had seemed so academically sexy when we were dating—wasn't all that different from the way Jacob could memorize the entire TV schedule by the time he was six. It wasn't until years after Henry was gone that I diagnosed him with a dash of Asperger's, too.

There's a lot of fuss about whether or not Asperger's is on the autism spectrum, but to be honest, it doesn't matter. It's a term we use to get Jacob the accommodations he needs in school, not a label to explain who he is. If you met him now, the first thing you'd notice is that he might have forgotten to change his shirt from yesterday or to brush his hair. If you talk to him, you'll have to be the one to start the conversation. He won't look you in the eye. And if you pause to speak to someone else for a brief moment, you might turn back to find that Jacob's left the room.

Saturdays, Jacob and I go food shopping.

It's part of his routine, which means we rarely stray from it. Anything new has to be introduced early on and prepared for—whether that's a dentist appointment or a vacation or a new student joining his math class midyear. I knew that he'd have his faux crime scene completely cleaned up before eleven o'clock, because that's when the Free Sample Lady sets up her table in the front of the Townsend Food Co-op. She recognizes Jacob by sight now and usually gives him two mini egg rolls or bruschetta rounds or whatever else she's plying that week.

Theo's not back, so I've left him a note—although he knows the schedule as well as I do. By the time I grab my coat and purse, Jacob is already sitting in the backseat. He likes it there, because he can spread out. He doesn't have a driver's license, although we argue about it regularly, since he's eighteen and was eligible to get his license two years ago. He knows all the mechanical workings of a traffic light, and could probably take one apart and put it back together, but I am not entirely convinced that in a situation where there were several other cars zooming by in different directions, he'd be able to remember whether to stop or go at any given intersection.

"What do you have left for homework?" I ask, as we pull out of the driveway.

"Stupid English."

"English isn't stupid," I say.

"Well, my English *teacher* is." He makes a face. "Mr. Franklin assigned an essay about our favorite subject, and I wanted to write about lunch, but he won't let me."

"Why not?"

"He says lunch isn't a subject."

I glance at him. “It *isn’t*.”

“Well,” Jacob says, “it’s not a predicate, either. Shouldn’t he *know* that?”

I stifle a smile. Jacob’s literal reading of the world can be, depending on the circumstances, either very funny or very frustrating. In the rearview mirror, I see him press his thumb against the car window. “It’s too cold for fingerprints,” I say offhandedly—a fact he’s taught me.

“But do you know *why*?”

“Um.” I look at him. “Evidence breaks down when it’s below freezing?”

“Cold constricts the sweat pores,” Jacob says, “so excretions are reduced, and that means matter won’t stick to the surface and leave a latent print on the glass.”

“That was my second guess,” I joke.

I used to call him my little genius, because even when he was small he’d spew forth an explanation like that one. I remember once, when he was four, he was reading the sign for a doctor’s office when the postman walked by. The guy couldn’t stop staring, but then again, it’s not every day you hear a preschooler pronounce the word *gastroenterology*, clear as a bell.

I pull into the parking lot. I ignore a perfectly good parking spot because it happens to be next to a shiny orange car, and Jacob doesn’t like the color orange. I can feel him draw in his breath and hold it until we drive past. We get out of the car, and Jacob runs for a cart; then we walk inside.

The spot that the Free Sample Lady usually occupies is empty.

“Jacob,” I say immediately, “it’s not a big deal.”

He looks at his watch. “It’s eleven-fifteen. She comes at eleven and leaves at twelve.”

“Something must have happened.”

“Bunion surgery,” calls an employee, who is stacking packages of carrots within earshot. “She’ll be back in four weeks.”

Jacob’s hand begins to flap against his leg. I glance around the store, mentally calculating whether it would cause more of a scene to try to get Jacob out of here before the stinging turns into a full-blown breakdown or whether I can talk him through this. “You know how Mrs. Pinham had to leave school for three weeks when she got shingles, and she couldn’t tell you beforehand? This is the same thing.”

“But it’s eleven-fifteen,” Jacob says.

“Mrs. Pinham came back, right? And everything went back to normal.”

By now, the carrot man is staring at us. And why shouldn’t he? Jacob *looks* like a totally normal young man. He’s clearly intelligent. But having his day disrupted probably makes him feel the same way I would if I was suddenly told to bungee off the top of the Sears Tower.

When a low growl rips through Jacob’s throat, I know we are past the point of no return. He backs away from me, into a shelf full of pickle jars and relishes. A few bottles fall to the floor, and the breaking glass sends him over the edge. Suddenly Jacob is screaming—one high, keening note that is the soundtrack of my life. He moves blindly, striking out at me when I reach for him.

It is only thirty seconds, but thirty seconds can last forever when you are the center of everyone’s scrutiny; when you are wrestling your six-foot-tall son down to the linoleum floor and pinning him with your full body weight, the only kind of pressure that can soothe him. I press my lips close to his ear. “*I shot the sheriff,*” I sing. “*But I didn’t shoot no deputy . . .*”

Since he was little, those Bob Marley lyrics have soothed him. There were times I played that song twenty-four hours a day just to keep him calm; even Theo knew all the verses before he was three. Sure enough, the tension seeps out of Jacob’s muscles, and his arms go limp at his sides. A single tear streaks from the corner of his eye. “*I shot the sheriff.*” he whispers, “*but I swear it was in self-defense.*”

I put my hands on either side of his face and force him to meet my eyes. “Okay now?”

He hesitates, as if he is taking a serious inventory. “Yes.”

I sit up, inadvertently kneeling in the puddle of pickle juice. Jacob sits up, too, and hugs his knees to his chest.

A crowd has gathered around us. In addition to the carrot man, the manager of the store, several shoppers, and twin girls with matching constellations of freckles on their cheeks are all staring down at Jacob with that curious mix of horror and pity that follows us like a dog nipping at our heels. Jacob wouldn’t hurt a fly, literally or figuratively—I’ve seen him cup his hands around a spider during a three-hour car ride so that, at our destination, he could set it free outside. But if you are a stranger and you see a tall, muscular man knocking over dis-

plays, you don't look at him and assume he's frustrated. You think he's violent.

"He's autistic," I snap. "Do you have any questions?"

I've found that anger works best. It's the electric shock they need to tear their gaze away from the train wreck. As if nothing's happened, the shoppers go back to sifting through the navel oranges and bagging their bell peppers. The two little girls dart down the dairy aisle. The carrot man and the manager do not make eye contact, and that suits me just fine. I know how to handle their morbid curiosity; it's their kindness that might break me.

Jacob shuffles along behind me as I push the cart. His hand is still twitching faintly at his side, but he's holding it together.

My biggest hope for Jacob is that moments like this won't happen.

My biggest fear: that they *will*, and I won't always be there to keep people from thinking the worst of him.

Theo

I've had to get twenty-four stitches on my face, thanks to my brother. Ten of them left a scar cutting through my left eyebrow, after the time that Jacob knocked over my high chair when I was eight months old. The other fourteen stitches were on my chin, Christmas 2003, when I got so excited about some stupid gift that I crumpled the wrapping paper, and Jacob went ballistic at the sound. The reason I'm telling you this has nothing to do with my brother, though. It's because my mother will tell you Jacob's not violent, but I am living proof that she's kidding herself.

I am supposed to make exceptions for Jacob; it's one of our unwritten house rules. So when we need to take a detour away from a detour sign (how ironic is *that?*) since it's orange and freaks Jacob out, that trumps the fact that I'm ten minutes late for school. And he *always* gets the shower first, because a hundred billion years ago when I was still a baby Jacob took the first shower, and he can't handle having his routine messed up. And when I turned fifteen and made an appointment to get my learners permit at the DMV—an appointment that got canceled when Jacob had a meltdown over buying a pair of new sneakers—I was expected to understand that these things happen. The problem is, something happened the next three times I tried to get my mom to take me to the DMV and, finally, I just stopped asking. At this rate, I'll be riding my skateboard till I'm thirty.

Once, when Jacob and I were little, we were playing in a pond near our house with an inflatable boat. It was my job to watch Jacob, even though he was three years older than I am and has had just as many swimming lessons as I have. We overturned the boat and swam up underneath it, where the air was heavy and wet. Jacob started talking about dinosaurs, which he was into at the time, and he wouldn't shut

up. Suddenly I began to panic. He was sucking up all the oxygen in that tiny space. I pushed at the boat, trying to lift it off us, but the plastic had created some kind of seal on the surface of the water—which only made me panic even more. And sure, with twenty-twenty hindsight, I know I could have swum out from underneath the boat, but at that moment it didn't occur to me. All I knew, at the time, was that I couldn't breathe. When people ask me what it's like growing up with a brother who has Asperger's, that's what I always think of, even though the answer I give out loud is that I've never known anything different.

I'm no saint. There are times I'll do things to drive Jacob crazy, because it's just so damn easy. Like when I went into his closet and mixed up all his clothes. Or when I hid the toothpaste cap so that he couldn't put it back on when he was done brushing his teeth. But then I wind up feeling bad for my mom, who usually bears the brunt of one of Jacob's meltdowns. There are times I hear her crying, when she thinks Jacob and I are asleep. That's when I remember that she didn't sign up for this kind of life, either.

So I run interference. I'm the one who physically drags Jacob away from a conversation when he's starting to freak people out by being too intense. I'm the one who tells him to stop flapping when he's nervous on the bus, because it makes him look like a total nutcase. I'm the one who goes to his classes before I go to my own, just to let the teachers know that Jacob had a rough morning because we unexpectedly ran out of soy milk. In other words, I act like the big brother, even though I'm not. And during the times when I think it's not fair, when my blood feels like lava, I step away. If my room isn't far enough, I get on my skateboard and tool somewhere—anywhere that isn't the place I am supposed to call home.

That's what I do this afternoon, after my brother decides to cast me as the perp in his fake crime scene. I'll be honest with you—it wasn't the fact that he took my sneakers without asking or even that he stole hair out of my brush (which is, frankly, *Silence of the Lambs* creepy). It was that when I saw Jacob in the kitchen with his corn-syrup blood and his fake head injury and all the evidence pointing to me, for a half a second, I thought: *I wish*.

But I'm not allowed to say my life would be easier without Jacob around. I'm not even allowed to think it. It's another one of those unwritten house rules. So I grab my coat and head south, although it is

twenty degrees outside and the wind feels like knives on my face. I stop briefly at the skateboarding park, the only place in this stupid town where the cops even let you skate anymore, although it's totally useless during the winter, which is like nine months of the year in Townsend, Vermont.

It snowed last night, about two inches, but there's a guy with a snowskate trying to Ollie off the stairs when I get there. His friend is holding a cell phone, recording the trick. I recognize them from school, but they're not in my classes. I'm sort of the antiskater personality. I take AP everything, and I have a 3.98 average. Of course, that makes me a freak to the skating crowd, just like the way I dress and the fact that I like to skate make me a freak to the honors crowd.

The kid who's skating falls down on his ass. "I'm putting that on YouTube, bro," his friend says.

I bypass the skate park and head through town, to this one street that curls like a snail. In the very center is a gingerbread house—I guess you call them Victorians. It's painted purple and there's a turret on one side. I think that's what made me stop the first time—I mean, who the hell has a *turret* on their house, besides Rapunzel? But the person who lives in that turret is a girl who's probably ten or eleven, and she has a brother who's about half her age. Their mom drives a green Toyota van, and their dad must be some kind of doctor, because twice now I've seen him come home from work wearing scrubs.

I've been going there a lot, lately. Usually I crouch down in front of the bay window that looks into the living room. I can see pretty much everything from there—the dining room table, where the kids do their homework. The kitchen, where the mom cooks dinner. Sometimes she opens the window a crack and I can almost taste what they're eating.

This afternoon, though, nobody is home. That makes me feel cocky. Even though it's broad daylight, even though there are cars going up and down the street, I walk behind the house and sit down on the swing set. I twist the chains around and then let them untangle, even though I am way too old for this kind of stuff. Then I walk up to the back porch and try the door.

It opens.

It's wrong, I know that. But all the same, I go inside.

I take off my shoes because it's the polite thing to do. I leave them on a mat in the mudroom and walk into the kitchen. There are cereal bowls

in the sink. I open the fridge and look at the stacked Tupperware. There's leftover lasagna.

I take out a jar of peanut butter and sniff inside. Is it just my imagination, or does it smell better than the Jif we have at *our* house?

I stick my finger in and take a taste. Then, with my heart pounding, I carry the jar to the counter—plus another jar of Smucker's. I take two slices of bread from the loaf on the counter and rummage in the drawers till I find the silverware. I make myself a PB&J sandwich as if it's something I do in this kitchen all the time.

In the dining room, I sit down in the chair that the girl always sits in for meals. I eat my sandwich and picture my mother coming out of the kitchen, carrying a big roast turkey on a platter. "Hey, Dad," I say out loud to the empty seat on my left, pretending that I have a real father instead of just a guilty sperm donor who sends a check every month.

How's school? he would ask.

"I got a hundred on my bio test."

That's incredible. Wouldn't be surprised if you wind up in med school, like I did.

I shake my head, clearing it. Either I've imagined myself into a TV sitcom or I have some kind of Goldilocks complex.

Jacob used to read to me at night. Well, not really. He read to himself, and he wasn't reading as much as he was reciting what he'd memorized, and I just happened to be in the same general geographic location, so I couldn't help but listen. I liked it, though. When Jacob talks, his voice rolls up and down as if every sentence is a song, which sounds really strange in normal conversation but somehow works when it's a fairy tale. I remember hearing the story about Goldilocks and the Three Bears and thinking she was such a loser. If she'd played her cards right, she might have been able to stay.

Last year, when I was a freshman at the regional high school, I got to start over. There were kids from other towns who knew nothing about me. I hung out the first week with these two guys, Chad and Andrew. They were in my methods class and seemed pretty cool, plus they lived in Swanzey instead of Townsend and had never met my brother. We laughed about the way our science teacher's pants were hemmed two inches too short and sat together in the caf at lunch. We even made plans to check out a movie if a good one was playing on the weekend. But then Jacob showed up in the caf one day because he'd finished his

math packet in some freakishly short amount of time and his teacher had dismissed him, and of course he made a beeline for me. I introduced him and said he was an upperclassman. Well, that was my first mistake—Chad and Andrew were so psyched at the thought of hanging out with an upperclassman that they started asking Jacob questions, like what grade he was in and if he was on a sports team. “Eleventh,” Jacob said, and then he told them he didn’t really like sports. “I like forensics,” he said. “Have you ever heard of Dr. Henry Lee?” He then yapped for ten straight minutes about the Connecticut pathologist who’d worked on major cases like O. J. Simpson and Scott Peterson and Elizabeth Smart. I think he lost Chad and Andrew somewhere around the tutorial on blood spatter patterns. Needless to say, the next day when we picked lab partners in methods, they ditched me fast.

I’ve finished my sandwich, so I get up from the dining room table and head upstairs. The first room at the top is the boy’s, and there are dinosaur posters all over the walls. The sheets are covered with fluorescent pterodactyls, and a remote-control *T rex* lies on its side on the floor. For a moment, I stop dead. There was a time when Jacob was as crazy about dinosaurs as he is now about forensic science. Could this little boy tell you about the therizinosaurid found in Utah, with fifteen-inch claws that look like something out of a teen slasher flick? Or that the first nearly complete dinosaur skeleton—a hadrosaur—was found in 1858 in New Jersey?

No, he’s just a kid—not a kid with Asperger’s. I can tell, just by looking into the windows at night and watching the family. I know, because that kitchen with its warm yellow walls is a place I want to be, not somewhere I’d run away from.

I suddenly remember something. That day when Jacob and I were playing in the pond underneath the inflatable boat, when I started to freak out because I couldn’t breathe and the boat was stuck on top of us? He somehow broke the suction-cup seal of the boat on the surface of the water and wrapped his arms around my chest, holding me up high so that I could swallow huge gulps of air. He dragged me to the shore, and he sat beside me shivering until I could figure out how to speak again. It’s the last time I remember Jacob watching out for *me*, instead of the other way around.

In the bedroom where I’m standing, there’s a whole wall of shelves filled with electronic games. Wii and Xbox, mostly, with a few Nintendo DS

tossed in for good measure. We don't have any gaming systems; we can't afford them. The crap Jacob has to take at breakfast—a whole extra meal of pills and shots and supplements—costs a fortune, and I know that my mother stays up nights sometimes doing freelance editing jobs just so that she can pay Jess, Jacob's social skills tutor.

I hear the hum of a car on the quiet street, and when I peek out the window I see it: the green van turning in to the driveway. I fly down the stairs and through the kitchen, out the back door. I dive into the bushes, where I hold my breath and watch the boy spill out of the van first, wearing hockey gear. Then his sister gets out, and finally his parents. His father grabs a bag of equipment from the hatch, and then they all disappear into the house.

I walk to the road and skate away from the gingerbread house. Underneath my coat is the Wii game I grabbed at the last minute—some Super Mario challenge. I can feel my heart pounding against it.

I can't play it. I don't even really want it. The only reason I took it is I know they'll never even know it's missing. How *could* they, when they've got so much?