

Colby



Inklings Magazine

Volume 2
Issue 2 *Spring 2016*

Article 17

April 2016

Caleb's Rules

Jessica Greenwald
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/inklings>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Greenwald, Jessica (2016) "Caleb's Rules," *Inklings Magazine*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 17.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/inklings/vol2/iss2/17>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Magazine* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact enrhodes@colby.edu.

caleb's rules

Jess Greenwald

Avery winced as broken glass crunched under her boots, the sound as loud as a gunshot in a library in the quiet, chalky stillness. The smoke, pervading and everywhere, had always seem to swallow sound, catch in her throat, the ash flaking underneath Caleb's eyelashes like silver freckles. She froze, swore softly (she was pleased that Caleb knew no swear words in English, at least) her heart hammering, feeling sweat begin to moisten the nape of her neck. She peered around at the truck.

Caleb sat in the passenger seat on the pile of phonebooks she'd collected from stranger's homes so he could see over the dashboard, his blue eyes large and anxious, exactly as she'd left him. He met her gaze, then raised a thumbs-up. Eight years younger, Caleb, Avery often thought, was the braver one. She nodded back, forcing a reassuring smile, then turned and carefully picked her way across the ruined concrete to the half-destroyed mess of a gas station, this time watching for broken window panes or sticky beer bottles, dusted in a thin layer of ash, like everything else. The thin gray sun blazed overhead, a burned-out lightbulb on a dying planet. A shuffling rat the size of a cat probing the inside of rust-stained trashcan eyed her warily.

Avery and Caleb's way of existence relied on the avoidance of other people because it broke the first mandate of "Caleb's Rules," a list that Avery had only started to help teach Caleb to write, but had, somehow, become the rules they lived by.

rule one: don't trust strangers

Avery remembered a time in which you could trust strangers, you could smile at them on public transportation, you could introduce yourself to them in the supermarket while you asked where to find the eggs. But it was no longer that time, there were no subways and supermarkets anymore, and this rule was something she'd learned in the beginning, two years ago, when she was fourteen, before she had even found Caleb.

It was before she had really learned to find food, carefully and quietly, and she had come across a group of adults she was seconds for asking for help. She'd been starving. It had been days since she had eaten, or drunk anything other than ashy puddles of rainwater that tasted like cigarette smoke and stained her teeth gray. They were camped out in someone's yard, drinking warm beer

around a fire roasting something weirdly shaped. Avery'd assumed it was some kind of wild animal, like she had stooped to eat a dead cat a week ago out of desperation, but the thing roasting was strange enough that she peered at it closer. Her vision sharpened, and she could see it was two hands, two feet, wrinkled, the fingernails painted a chipped shade of raspberry. They were old lady hands; they spoke of nursing homes, and expensive perfume that smelt like coffins and hydrangeas, of framed photos of half-smiling grandchildren. Avery's mouth went dry, and then she'd puked all over herself, staining her T-shirt, before backing away slowly. She didn't speak to anyone else until she found Caleb almost two months later.

He had been a terrified six year old who was playing dead and still sucked his thumb; she, an equally terrified fourteen year-old who was still mostly shocked that one month ago she had been planning her stupid *Quinceanera* with her *abuela*, and was now eating dead cats on the side of the road. She had gone to a church, to pray for something. She picked around a still bundle of blankets outside coated in ash like dust in an old house, knowing but not knowing, swallowing bile. She had knelt at the altar, in front of a crooked crucifix, trying to remember one of the prayers her *abuela* had taught her, Spanish or English, but she couldn't remember any, her blood pounded in her ears. Suddenly, her skin prickled and she spun and there he was, laying on one of the pews. When she had first seen him, this child with china doll skin, a map of tiny veins like an intricate spider-web on a sprawled arm, her heart had sunk. In that moment, all she could see was Jamie, Jamie, Jamie, with his chubby fists and stupid baby words and soft baby curls like cornsilk the color of ink. Him coughing up sticky blood with bits of black, screaming for breast milk from a copse, and she could taste vomit she had long since ejected. She felt hollow, scraped clean.

“She felt hollow,
scraped clean.”

She would bury this one, she had thought. She didn't have a shovel, but *fuck it*, she was going to bury this one if she had to dig the grave with her bare hands. She turned to go, to look for something, *anything*—

“Please help me,” it was soft, but clear. Like those blue eyes like twin bruises staring right at her. Please...she could envision a long-dead mother patiently correcting the kid when he forgot his “please”s and “thank-you”s.

She'd felt hot tears rise to her cheeks, but she couldn't move. “*Dios*,” and it was her mother's voice, not hers—tired brown eyes and aching cotton smile.

Now, she stared at the list scrawled onto her palm in ballpoint pen:

notebook paper, coffee, aspirin, batteries, tampons, gas, toilet paper, shampoo, baby powder, peanut butter, cigarettes

Most of the things on Avery's list were absolute essentials, which was what had driven them so far from their latest hiding spot. (Especially the tampons, but Caleb didn't need to know about that just yet. Sometimes she would lie awake at night worrying about stupid shit like the inevitable prospect of the world running out of

tampons, which was embarrassing.)

It was the third gas station they had stopped at so far. The more rural (safer) ones had all been completely picked over and overrun with roaches. Avery suspected they would outlive them all, just like everyone had joked about, when the world ending was something people joked about or watched movies about. Her skin was crawling, she kept thinking of Caleb on his phonebooks and it felt like, for a moment, she couldn't breathe, but she shoved it down and opened the door with shaking fingers, bitten fingernails and dry knuckles.

There was a time when walking into a gas station in her small town would have elicited stares, not-too-quiet whispers, bulky white men eyeing her closely like they expected her to shove 15 packages of gum into her pocket and make a run for it. She had always been different in that small town in Northern Texas, where all the girls in her grade seemed to be debutants, and half the old white people in the town seemed to be related to her father, who had grown up there, who belonged there. Gas stations these days weren't like that, and, despite that they weren't because everybody died, Avery was grateful for it.

Inside, Avery skirted the broken window glass and noted with relief that this gas station was fully stocked.

A little too stocked, whispered a hesitant voice in her mind, but she shoved it down. A discarded hose from outside leaked a thin layer of gasoline onto the sticky, wet linoleum floors, which annoyed her because gas was such a precious commodity these days.

She was just reaching for a beautiful plastic package of AAAs, when a low voice said, "Stop." She could feel the barrel of the gun pressed like dry fingertips to the nape of her neck.

Her heart hammered. Slowly, she raised her hands and turned around.

It was an older guy, with salt-and-pepper cropped hair, a crazy beard that totally screamed "apocalypse ain't got no time for this shaving shit" She remembered she used to read comics about that sort of thing.

From between shelves and behind the register, six grubby-looking, apocalypse-worn men stepped out of their hiding spots. *A trap*, Avery realized. *I'm fucking dumb*.

"What's your name?" demanded the man with the gun.

Avery exhaled, willing her voice not to shake. "Avery Ramirez-Clarke."

"Avery?" repeated the guy skeptically.

"Yeah," she said lamely, thinking of the white girl named her father had insisted on, that her mother had hesitantly agreed to, thinking of how she might explain it to her many cousins and sisters she called every Sunday by phone in rapid-fire Spanish. Her parents had met in California; her father, a graduate student at Stanford University, beautiful and blond; her mother, a custodian employed by the university who had spent the last ten years cleaning houses to get her Green Card, dark-haired and lovely.

Her mother would tell the story over chamomile tea with honey, worn brown

hands wrapped around a mug Avery had cracked once, banging it against the sink when she'd rinsed it.

Something about the sadness in quiet declarations caused Avery to demand in a squeaky child voice: "Don't you love Dad?" she had sat rapt, born with her mother's wild black hair, her father's huge green eyes, swaddled under thick hand-sewn quilts in soupy Texas winters.

"Claro, *mija*," her mother would explain, "But sometimes love isn't enough."

"Then what is?" she'd asked, terrified of the answer.

"Goodnight," her mother would say instead, kissing her temple. Until Avery's fourteenth birthday, sixth months and three days before the world fell apart, she finally answered honestly, "*Nada, mija. Nada.*"

"Are you alone?" the man barked, snapping her reverie like a rubber band.

"Yes," she said immediately, meeting his eyes with an unwavering stare.

rule two: lie when you gotta

He laughed, the sound like ice cracking over a pond. "You better be telling the truth. I don't like lying, right, boys?"

A chorus of male agreement, some deep chuckles. One peeled off outside to verify her straight-up lie. Avery was pretty sure any older man who referred to his older man friends as "boys" had serious penis issues. She peered around. Bearded, dirty hair and deep-set eyes that had seen too much death to care about much beside booze, sex, and more death. No women except a frail-boned strawberry blonde and who was, by the looks, pregnant. Avery felt bad for her. A baby in this mess? She could hardly imagine.

Outside, the wind blew the ash, rattling the broken windows. She closed her eyes, trying to fight back the panic that tightened her chest, dropped her stomach. Hopefully Caleb would be hiding in the backseat, just as she always told him to. They wouldn't check inside each car. They were too many parked cars; rusting and full of dead people who had tried to run from something you couldn't run from. She felt the cold edge of the gun with each beat of her heart. She prayed they wouldn't shoot her. She wasn't sure if Caleb would survive without her, and Caleb had to survive. For Jamie. For her mom. For all her stupid high school friends who had just wanted to go to proms and bad small-town diners with boys with pimples, who had probably suffocated on ash, just like everybody else.

"Who are you?" she demanded, and her voice came out strong and hard, like polished ivory.

Gun-Man-With-Potential-Penis-Issues laughed. "You can call me Uriah. I have a feeling we're gonna get real friendly, real fast." He smirked, his steel-eyed gaze traveling from her dirt-smudged Converse to her unwashed black T-shirt, the long scar that traced down her neck, the line of her breasts. She swallowed hard, her stomach like coiled rope. Avery raised her chin and met the eyes of the strawberry blonde.

She realized the other girl was chanting something under her breath, over and

over like prayer, and she realized with a start the other girl was mouthing "run" *Fuck*. Maybe she should pray they shoot her, after all.

Her father's voice in her brain, a warm laugh in the words: *This some deep shit, chickie*. He used to say that when she was losing Monopoly.

A gruff shove, scuffling feet. She turned. Her entire body froze. She blinked back darkness. She felt her knees weaken; she tried to straighten.

Caleb, staring down at the handgun pointed at him, unafraid, all skinny elbows and bruised knees and dirty hair the color of sunlight (when it was clean, she really ought to...) huge angry eyes like cities burning, freckles like sunkisses across his arms and his cheekbones, a wild mix of the cling of childhood softness and a world that had died and frozen him solid.

"Alone, huh?" demanded Uriah, staring at Caleb. The boy met his eyes—bruise on aluminum—unflinchingly.

"I lied." said Avery flatly, finding her voice.

"Who's the kid?" returned Uriah immediately.

"My brother," she lied, and the sight of him undefended enabled her to swallow her deep-seated fear of gunfire, shots in the stomach and bullet scrapes on the ribs, and cross the tiny gas station, gather him into his arms. She smoothed his hair with a mother's practiced fingers, staring at them challengingly.

I'll protect you. I'll die trying.

Uriah snorted. She shrugged. "We have the same dad." It wasn't true, but it could be. Curly blonde hair and golden skin was a dead ringer for *both* Caleb and her father, though one was long dead.

"Look," she said, "We get it. This station is your territory. We'll get out of your hair. We'll even throw in all our provisions, if you need anything." She clutched Caleb with white fingers; she could feel his heart hammering. "The world may have died, but we're just trying to survive, just like you. We're all people. We're unarmed, outnumbered. It doesn't have to be like this."

They stared at her in shock for a long moment.

"That was very pretty, girl." A fatter man laughed. (Being fat in the apocalypse was kinda impressive, she thought briefly.) "I want her first, damnit."

Caleb reddened with anger. Suddenly, he seemed too old, too hardened. She gripped his shoulders, a warning.

"I want the kid," grunted a skinny man with greasy hair in the back, his grin like molasses.

Avery felt dizzy. She felt like she might puke, or pass out, or both, at the same time. She made a choking noise. "Does humanity have to die with this fucking planet?" she whispered. Her idea. Her fault. Her Caleb. Her responsibility.

"Look, bitch," drawled Uriah. "First thing you oughtta know with the apocalypse and all: everything is long dead. The cops, the fuckin' president, the lizards and the flies. We're alive, but we're basically dead, or we will be soon. That fuckin' meteor smacked into California and sent tsunamis that wiped out Asia and Hawaii and those goddamn earthquakes and volcanoes did the rest. And all that ash?"

You see no fuckin sun? It's been two years. Nothing grows. Things just die. You ain't gonna live a long fuckin life with no shit grandkids. So get off your goddamn high horse and take a look around. I've got power and like hell I'm about to fuckin use it without feelin' guilty. Sit the fuck down and stop talking." He indicated the ground with the gun.

She looked at the floor, sticky and wet with that stupid wasted gasoline. He wanted them to sit there? Sit there in spilled gasoline and die or worse?

"Okay, okay," she said, squeezing Caleb's shoulders and her fingers inching slowly to the pocket of her jeans, the movement masked by his back. There was something important there. A certain guilty pleasure, one Caleb hated, but now it as all she had.

"That's right, you stupid bitch." laughed Uriah. The rest joined in. For a moment, the hand on his gun was looser and for a nanosecond, he blinked.

Her hand shot out. She flicked the lighter, dropped it. It was one, fluid motion of fear, of desperation. The flames were high and immediate and white hot. She jerked Caleb back. The smoke.

rule three: run fast

"Jesus!" Uriah shouted, firing blindly, but they were already lunging for the window, the jagged broken glass tearing at their arms and faces like clawed fingernails. They hit sun-warmed concrete hard, scrambling to their feet, clumsy footsteps following. Avery was sure she had never run this fast in her life. Caleb's hand, clammy with sweat, arms pumping, lungs screaming, legs aching, throwing open the car door, reverse, slam the gas, tires squealing on torn concrete, Caleb barely inside, the door swinging wildly, flooring the gas, dust and ash rising behind them. The retreating form of Uriah and his "boys", shouting behind them, the road, the dust, the ash, the speedometer hitting 80, the car shuddering. A silent minute of hard breathing, anxious sweating, car-creaking. At some point Caleb had shut the door, slid on his seatbelt. Stupid kid. A seatbelt? Somehow, too, he had saved the goddamn phonebooks; they lay haphazard at his small, sneakered feet. The dusty blankets and loose paper towels and sticky soda cans in the back rolled and fluttered in the ashy wind from the window.

She knew the guys wouldn't follow. She and Caleb were too far away, too much effort, a waste of gas and resources. It was one thing when they were easy prey, another to chase down a rusty truck screeching 80. She thought about the strawberry blonde who hadn't been lucky like them, and felt like weeping, but didn't.

"Avery." Caleb's voice, clear, still a child's voice, but calm. "Slow down."

"Shut up," she snapped. "Shut the fuck up."

His eyes were huge with aching empathy.

Finally, she felt tears rise to her cheeks, hot and blurry, but she didn't move to swipe them away, her hands were clenching the steering wheel, skin blooming white.

"Avery," he said gently, a lighthouse in a storm, a lifeboat on the Titanic, oxygen on a dying planet. His tiny white hand speckled with ash like stardust, on her jeans, her knee. "It's okay. We got away."

"I know," she whispered. Why wouldn't her heart stop hammering so wildly, then?

She drove in silence for a long few minutes, gradually decreasing the speed of the car as she calmed down. How was he so brave? Watching his whole family burn up, left to die in a half-burned church? This world had failed him. He had told her once about his school, his advanced reading group, his friends, his last birthday party, his younger sister in preschool, but after that, he never brought it up again.

"He was wrong, you know." the kid said softly.

"What about?" She tore her eyes from the dusty road, her mind on what would they do next, about the supplies they needed, about their gas supply. They needed to get back before nightfall to their hiding spot, but they didn't have enough gas. She felt too terrified to risk another station. She decided to stop when they were far enough way, when she saw another abandoned car.

She glanced at him. Caleb looked so certain, so earnest, so beautiful.

**"Because that's
what you and me
do. We survive."**

"That guy." he said simply. "We're alive. We're gonna be for a long while. Because that's what you and me do. We survive. We found each other, and we'll live. We'll get old. He only said that because he didn't know us."

She was trying to give up lying to him, an old bad habit, but she wasn't sure she could forgive herself if she did now. "I hope you're right, crazy boy." It was true. "I'll keep saving you until I die, you know that right?"

He smiled out the window: the gray sky, the ashen sun, the shriveled trees. "I know."