

Aristotle
and
Dante
Discover
the
Secrets
of the
Universe

ALSO BY BENJAMIN ALIRE SÁENZ

POETRY

Calendar of Dust
Dark and Perfect Angels
Elegies in Blue
Que Linda la Brisa
Dreaming the End of War
The Book of What Remains

FICTION

Flowers for the Broken
Carry Me Like Water
The House of Forgetting
In Perfect Light
Names on a Map

YOUNG ADULT

Sammy and Juliana in Hollywood
He Forgot to Say Goodbye
Last Night I Sang to the Monster

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

A Gift from Papa Diego
Grandma Fina and Her Wonderful Umbrellas
A Perfect Season for Dreaming
The Dog Who Loved Tortillas

Aristotle
and
Dante
Discover
the
Secrets
of the
Universe

BENJAMIN ALIRE SÁENZ

SIMON & SCHUSTER **BFYR**

NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON
TORONTO SYDNEY/MELBOURNE NEW DELHI



SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2012 by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR is a trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com. The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Also available in a SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR hardcover edition
Book design by Chloë Foglia

The text for this book is set in Berling.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR paperback edition April 2014

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:
Sáenz, Benjamin Alire.

Aristotle and Dante discover the secrets of the universe /
Benjamin Alire Sáenz.

p. cm.

Summary: Fifteen-year-old Ari Mendoza is an angry loner with a brother in prison, but when he meets Dante and they become friends, Ari starts to ask questions about himself, his parents, and his family that he has never asked before.

ISBN 978-1-4424-0892-0 (hc)

[1. Coming of age—Fiction. 2. Families—Fiction. 3. Mexican-Americans—Fiction. 4. Friendship—Fiction. 5. Homosexuality—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.S1273Ar 2012

[Fic]—dc22

2010033649

ISBN 978-1-4424-0893-7 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-4424-0894-4 (eBook)

*To all the boys who've had to learn
to play by different rules*

A Note to Readers

This is a work of historical fiction, set in the late 1980s in El Paso, Texas, on the border of the United States and Mexico. The thoughts, dialogue, and behavior of the characters are reflections of the time period they live in and the world they are surrounded by.

It is my wish for you, dear readers, that you live in more inclusive and enlightened times than Ari and Dante.

—Benjamin Alire Sáenz

Acknowledgments

I had second thoughts about writing this book. In fact, after I finished the first chapter or so, I had almost decided to abandon the project. But I'm lucky and blessed enough to be surrounded by committed, brave, talented, and intelligent people who inspired me to finish what I started. This book would not have been written without them. So here is my small and certainly incomplete list of people I'd like to thank: Patty Moosebrugger, great agent, great friend. Daniel and Sasha Chacon for their great affection and their belief that I needed to write this book. For Hector, Annie, Ginny, and Barbara, who have always been there. My editor, David Gale, who believed in his book and the whole team at Simon & Schuster, especially Navah Wolfe. My colleagues in the Creative Writing Department whose work and generosity continually challenge me to be a better writer and a better person. And finally, I would like to thank my students, past and present, who remind me that language and writing will always matter. My gratitude to all of you.

WHY DO WE SMILE? WHY DO WE LAUGH? WHY DO
we feel alone? Why are we sad and confused? Why do we read
poetry? Why do we cry when we see a painting? Why is there
a riot in the heart when we love? Why do we feel shame?
What is that thing in the pit of your stomach called desire?

*The Different Rules
of Summer*

The problem with my life was that it was someone else's idea.

One

ONE SUMMER NIGHT I FELL ASLEEP, HOPING THE WORLD would be different when I woke. In the morning, when I opened my eyes, the world was the same. I threw off the sheets and lay there as the heat poured in through my open window.

My hand reached for the dial on the radio. “Alone” was playing. Crap, “Alone,” a song by a group called Heart. Not my favorite song. Not my favorite group. Not my favorite topic. “You don’t know how long . . .”

I was fifteen.

I was bored.

I was miserable.

As far as I was concerned, the sun could have melted the blue right off the sky. Then the sky could be as miserable as I was.

The DJ was saying annoying, obvious things like, “It’s summer! It’s hot out there!” And then he put on that retro Lone Ranger tune, something he liked to play every morning because he thought it was a hip way to wake up the world. “Hi-yo, Silver!” Who hired this guy? He was killing me. I think that as we listened to the William Tell Overture, we were supposed to be imagining the Lone Ranger and

Tonto riding their horses through the desert. Maybe someone should have told that guy that we all weren't ten-year-olds anymore. "Hi-yo, Silver!" Crap. The DJ's voice was on the airwaves again: "Wake up, El Paso! It's Monday, June fifteenth, 1987! 1987! Can you believe it? And a big 'Happy Birthday' goes out to Waylon Jennings, who's fifty years old today!" Waylon Jennings? This was a rock station, dammit! But then he said something that hinted at the fact that he might have a brain. He told the story about how Waylon Jennings had survived the 1959 plane crash that killed Buddy Holly and Richie Valens. On that note, he put on the remake of "La Bamba" by Los Lobos.

"La Bamba." I could cope with that.

I tapped my bare feet on the wood floor. As I nodded my head to the beat, I started wondering what had gone through Richie Valens's head before the plane crashed into the unforgiving ground. *Hey, Buddy! The music's over.*

For the music to be over so soon. For the music to be over when it had just begun. That was really sad.

Two

I WALKED INTO THE KITCHEN. MY MOM WAS PREPARING lunch for a meeting with her Catholic-Church-lady friends. I poured myself a glass of orange juice.

My mom smiled at me. “Are you going to say good morning?”

“I’m thinking about it,” I said.

“Well, at least you dragged yourself out of bed.”

“I had to think about it for a long time.”

“What is it about boys and sleep?”

“We’re good at it.” That made her laugh. “Anyway, I wasn’t sleeping. I was listening to ‘La Bamba.’”

“Richie Valens,” she said, almost whispering. “So sad.”

“Just like your Patsy Cline.”

She nodded. Sometimes I caught her singing that song, “Crazy,” and I’d smile. And she’d smile. It was like we shared a secret. My mom, she had a nice voice. “Plane crashes,” my mother whispered. I think she was talking more to herself than to me.

“Maybe Richie Valens died young—but he did something. I mean, *he really did something*. Me? What have I done?”

“You have time,” she said. “There’s plenty of time.” The eternal optimist.

“Well, you have to become a person first,” I said.

She gave me a funny look.

“I’m fifteen.”

“I know how old you are.”

“Fifteen-year-olds don’t qualify as people.”

My mom laughed. She was a high school teacher. I knew she half agreed with me.

“So what’s the big meeting about?”

“We’re reorganizing the food bank.”

“Food bank?”

“Everyone should eat.”

My mom had a thing for the poor. She’d been there. She knew things about hunger that I’d never know.

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess so.”

“Maybe you can help us out?”

“Sure,” I said. I hated being volunteered. The problem with my life was that it was someone else’s idea.

“What are you going to do today?” It sounded like a challenge.

“I’m going to join a gang.”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m Mexican. Isn’t that what we do?”

“*Not* funny.”

“Not funny,” I said. Okay, not funny.

I had the urge to leave the house. Not that I had anywhere to go.

When my mom had her Catholic-Church-lady friends over, I felt like I was suffocating. It wasn’t so much that all her friends were over fifty—that wasn’t it. And it wasn’t even all the comments

about how I was turning into a man right before their eyes. I mean, I knew bullshit when I heard it. And as bullshit went, it was the nice, harmless, affectionate kind. I could handle them grabbing me by the shoulders and saying, "Let me look at you. *Dejame ver. Ay que muchacho tan guapo. Te pareces a tu papa.*" Not that there was anything to look at. It was just me. And yeah, yeah, I looked like my dad. I didn't think that was such a great thing.

But what really bugged the living crap out of me was that my mother had more friends than I did. How sad was that?

I decided to go swimming at the Memorial Park pool. It was a small idea. But at least the idea was mine.

As I was walking out the door, my mom took the old towel I'd slung over my shoulder and exchanged it for a better one. There were certain towel rules that existed in my mother's world that I just didn't get. But the rules didn't stop at towels.

She looked at my T-shirt.

I knew a look of disapproval when I saw one. Before she made me change, I gave her one of my own looks. "It's my favorite T-shirt," I said.

"Didn't you wear that yesterday?"

"Yes," I said. "It's Carlos Santana."

"I know who it is," she said.

"Dad gave it to me on my birthday."

"As I recall you didn't seem all that thrilled when you opened your father's gift."

"I was hoping for something else."

"Something else?"

"I don't know. Something else. A T-shirt for my birthday?" I looked at my Mom. "I guess I just don't understand him."

"He's not that complicated, Ari."

"He doesn't talk."

"Sometimes when people talk, they don't always tell the truth."

"Guess so," I said. "Anyway, I'm really into this T-shirt now."

"I can see that." She was smiling.

I was smiling too. "Dad got it at his first concert."

"I was there. I remember. It's old and ratty."

"I'm sentimental."

"Sure you are."

"Mom, it's summer."

"Yes," she said, "it *is* summer."

"Different rules," I said.

"Different rules," she repeated.

I loved the different rules of summer. My mother endured them.

She reached over and combed my hair with her fingers. "Promise me you won't wear it tomorrow."

"Okay," I said. "I promise. But only if you promise not to put it in the dryer."

"Maybe I'll let you wash it yourself." She smiled at me. "Don't drown."

I smiled back. "If I do, don't give my dog away."

The dog thing was a joke. We didn't have one.

Mom, she got my sense of humor. I got hers. We were good that way. Not that she wasn't something of a mystery. One thing that *I completely got*—I got why my father fell in love with her. Why she

fell in love with my father was something I still couldn't wrap my head around. Once, when I was about six or seven, I was really mad at my father because I wanted him to play with me and he just seemed so far away. It was like I wasn't even there. I asked my mom with all my boyhood anger, "How could you have married that guy?"

She smiled and combed my hair with her fingers. That was always her thing. She looked straight into my eyes and said calmly, "Your father was beautiful." She didn't even hesitate.

I wanted to ask her what happened to all that beauty.

Three

WHEN I WALKED INTO THE HEAT OF THE DAY, EVEN THE lizards knew better than to be crawling around. Even the birds were laying low. The tarred patches on the cracks of the street were melting. The blue of the sky was pale and it occurred to me that maybe everybody had fled the city and its heat. Or maybe everyone had died like in one of those sci-fi flicks, and I was the last boy on earth. But just as that thought ran through my head, a pack of guys who lived in the neighborhood passed me on their bikes, making me wish I *was* the last boy on earth. They were laughing and messing around and they seemed like they were having a good time. One of the guys yelled at me, “Hey, Mendoza! Hanging out with all your friends?”

I waved, pretending to be a good sport, *ha ha ha*. And then I flipped them the bird.

One of the guys stopped, turned around and started circling me on his bike. “You want to do that again?” he said.

I gave him the bird again.

He stopped his bike right in front of me and tried to stare me down.

It wasn’t working. I knew who he was. His brother, Javier, had

tried to mess with me once. I'd punched the guy. Enemies for life. I wasn't sorry. Yeah, well, I had a temper. I admit it.

He put on his mean voice. Like it scared me. "Don't screw with me, Mendoza."

I gave him the bird again and pointed it at his face just like it was a gun. He just took off on his bike. There were a lot of things I was afraid of—but not guys like him.

Most guys didn't screw with me. Not even guys who ran around in packs. They all passed me on their bikes again, yelling stuff. They were all thirteen and fourteen and messing with guys like me was just a game for them. As their voices faded, I started feeling sorry for myself.

Feeling sorry for myself was an art. I think a part of me liked doing that. Maybe it had something to do with my birth order. You know, I think that was part of it. I didn't like the fact that I was a pseudo only child. I didn't know how else to think of myself. I was an only child without actually being one. That sucked.

My twin sisters were twelve years older. Twelve years was a lifetime. I swear it was. And they'd always made me feel like a baby or a toy or a project or a pet. I'm really into dogs, but sometimes I got the feeling I was nothing more than the family mascot. That's the Spanish word for a dog who's the family pet. *Mascoto*. Mascot. Great. Ari, the family mascot.

And my brother, he was eleven years older. He was even less accessible to me than my sisters. I couldn't even mention his name. Who the hell likes to talk about older brothers who are in prison? Not my mom and dad, that was for sure. Not my sisters either.

Maybe all that silence about my brother did something to me. I think it did. Not talking can make a guy pretty lonely.

My parents were young and struggling when my sisters and brother were born. "Struggling" is my parents' favorite word. Sometime after three children and trying to finish college, my father joined the Marines. Then he went off to war.

The war changed him.

I was born when he came home.

Sometimes I think my father has all these scars. On his heart. In his head. All over. It's not such an easy thing to be the son of a man who's been to war. When I was eight, I overheard my mother talking to my Aunt Ophelia on the phone. "I don't think that the war will ever be over for him." Later I asked my Aunt Ophelia if that was true. "Yes," she said, "it's true."

"But why won't the war leave my dad alone?"

"Because your father has a conscience," she said.

"What happened to him in the war?"

"No one knows."

"Why won't he tell?"

"Because he can't."

So that's the way it was. When I was eight, I didn't know anything about war. I didn't even know what a conscience was. All I knew is that sometimes my father was sad. I hated that he was sad. It made me sad too. I didn't like sad.

So I was the son of a man who had Vietnam living inside him. Yeah, I had all kinds of tragic reasons for feeling sorry for myself. Being fifteen didn't help. Sometimes I thought that being fifteen was the worst tragedy of all.

Four

WHEN I GOT TO THE POOL, I HAD TO TAKE A SHOWER. That was one of the rules. Yeah, rules. I hated taking a shower with a bunch of other guys. I don't know, I just didn't like that. You know, some guys liked to talk a lot, like it was a normal thing to be in the shower with a bunch of guys and talking about the teacher you hated or the last movie you saw or the girl you wanted to do something with. Not me, I didn't have anything to say. Guys in the shower. Not my thing.

I walked to the pool and sat on the shallow side and put my feet in the water.

What do you do in a pool when you don't know how to swim? Learn. I guess that was the answer. I *had* managed to teach my body to stay afloat on water. Somehow, I'd stumbled on some principle of physics. And the best part of the whole thing was that I'd made the discovery all on my own.

All on my own. I was in love with that phrase. I wasn't very good at asking for help, a bad habit I inherited from my father. And anyway, the swimming instructors who called themselves lifeguards sucked. They weren't all that interested in teaching a skinny fifteen-year-old punk how to swim. They were pretty much interested in

girls that had suddenly sprouted breasts. They were obsessed with breasts. That's the truth. I heard one of the lifeguards talking to one of the other lifeguards as he was supposed to be watching a group of little kids. "A girl is like a tree covered with leaves. You just want to climb up and tear all those leaves off."

The other guy laughed. "You're an asshole," he said.

"Nah, I'm a poet," he said. "A poet of the body."

And then they both busted out laughing.

Yeah, sure, they were budding Walt Whitmans, the two of them. See, the thing about guys is that I didn't really care to be around them. I mean, guys really made me uncomfortable. I don't know why, not exactly. I just, I don't know, I just didn't belong. I think it embarrassed the hell out of me that I was a guy. And it really depressed me that there was the distinct possibility that I was going to grow up and be like one of those assholes. *A girl is like a tree?* Yeah, and a guy is about as smart as a piece of dead wood infested with termites. My mom would have said that they were just going through a phase. Pretty soon they would get their brains back. Sure they would.

Maybe life *was* just a series of phases—one phase after another after another. Maybe, in a couple of years, I'd be going through the same phase as the eighteen-year-old lifeguards. Not that I really believed in my mom's phase theory. It didn't sound like an explanation—it sounded like an excuse. I don't think my mom got the whole guy thing. I didn't get the guy thing either. And I was a guy.

I had a feeling there was something wrong with me. I guess I was a mystery even to myself. That sucked. I had serious problems.

One thing was for sure: there was no way I was going to ask one of those idiots to help me out with my swimming. It was better to be alone and miserable. It was better to drown.

So I just kept to myself and sort of floated along. Not that I was having fun.

That's when I heard his voice, kind of squeaky. "I can teach you how to swim."

I moved over to the side of the pool and stood up in the water, squinting into the sunlight. He sat down on the edge of the pool. I looked at him suspiciously. If a guy was offering to teach me how to swim, then for sure he didn't have a life. Two guys without a life? How much fun could that be?

I had a rule that it was better to be bored by yourself than to be bored with someone else. I pretty much lived by that rule. Maybe that's why I didn't have any friends.

He looked at me. Waiting. And then he asked again. "I can teach you how to swim, if you want."

I kind of liked his voice. He sounded like he had a cold, you know, like he was about to lose his voice. "You talk funny," I said.

"Allergies," he said.

"What are you allergic to?"

"The air," he said.

That made me laugh.

"My name's Dante," he said.

That made me laugh harder. "Sorry," I said.

"It's okay. People laugh at my name."

"No, no," I said. "See, it's just that my name's Aristotle."

His eyes lit up. I mean, the guy was ready to listen to every word I said.

“Aristotle,” I repeated.

Then we both kind of went a little crazy. Laughing.

“My father’s an English professor,” he said.

“At least you have an excuse. My father’s a mailman. Aristotle is the English version of my grandfather’s name.” And then I pronounced my grandfather’s name with this really formal Mexican accent, “*Aristotiles*. And my real first name is Angel.” And then I said it in Spanish, “*Angel*.”

“Your name is Angel Aristotle?”

“Yeah. That’s my real name.”

We laughed again. We couldn’t stop. I wondered what it was we were laughing about. Was it just our names? Were we laughing because we were relieved? Were we happy? Laughter was another one of life’s mysteries.

“I used to tell people my name was Dan. I mean, you know, I just dropped two letters. But I stopped doing that. It wasn’t honest. And anyway, I always got found out. And I felt like a liar and an idiot. I was ashamed of myself for being ashamed of myself. I didn’t like feeling like that.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Everyone calls me Ari,” I said.

“Nice to meet you, Ari.”

I liked the way he said *Nice to meet you, Ari*. Like he meant it.

“Okay,” I said, “teach me how to swim.” I guess I said it like I was doing him a favor. He either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

Dante was a very precise teacher. He was a real swimmer,

understood everything about the movements of arms and legs and breathing, understood how a body functioned while it was in the water. Water was something he loved, something he respected. He understood its beauty and its dangers. He talked about swimming as if it were a way of life. He was fifteen years old. Who was this guy? He looked a little fragile—but he wasn't. He was disciplined and tough and knowledgeable and he didn't pretend to be stupid and ordinary. He was neither of those things.

He was funny and focused and fierce. I mean the guy could be fierce. And there wasn't anything mean about him. I didn't understand how you could live in a mean world and not have any of that meanness rub off on you. How could a guy live without some meanness?

Dante became one more mystery in a universe full of mysteries.

All that summer, we swam and read comics and read books and argued about them. Dante had all his father's old *Superman* comics. He loved them. He also liked *Archie and Veronica*. I hated that shit. "It's not shit," he said.

Me, I liked Batman, Spider-Man, and the Incredible Hulk.

"Way too dark," Dante said.

"This from a guy who loves Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*."

"That's different," he said. "Conrad wrote literature."

I was always arguing that comic books were literature too. But literature was very serious business for a guy like Dante. I don't remember ever winning an argument with him. He was a better debater. He was also a better reader. I read Conrad's book because of him. When I finished reading it, I told him I hated it. "Except," I said, "it's true. The world is a dark place. Conrad's right about that."

“Maybe your world, Ari, but not mine.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said.

The truth is, I’d lied to him. I loved the book. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever read. When my father noticed what I was reading, he told me it was one of his favorite books. I wanted to ask him if he’d read it *before* or *after* he’d fought in Vietnam. It was no good to ask my father questions. He never answered them.

I had this idea that Dante read because he liked to read. Me, I read because I didn’t have anything else to do. He analyzed things. I just read them. I have a feeling I had to look up more words in the dictionary than he did.

I was darker than he was. And I’m not just talking about our skin coloring. He told me I had a tragic vision of life. “That’s why you like Spider-Man.”

“I’m just more Mexican,” I said. “Mexicans are a tragic people.”

“Maybe so,” he said.

“You’re the optimistic American.”

“Is that an insult?”

“It might be,” I said.

We laughed. We always laughed.

We weren’t alike, Dante and I. But we did have a few things in common. For one thing, neither one of us was allowed to watch television during the day. Our parents didn’t like what television did to a boy’s mind. We’d both grown up with lectures that sounded more or less like this: *You’re a boy! Get out there and do something! There’s a whole world out there just waiting for you . . .*

Dante and I were the last two boys in America who grew up

without television. He asked me one day. “Do you think our parents are right—that there’s a whole world out there waiting just for us?”

“I doubt it,” I said.

He laughed.

Then I got this idea. “Let’s ride the bus and see what’s out there.”

Dante smiled. We both fell in love with riding the bus. Sometimes we rode around on the bus all afternoon. I told Dante, “Rich people don’t ride the bus.”

“That’s why we like it.”

“Maybe so,” I said. “Are we poor?”

“No.” Then he smiled. “If we ran away from home, we’d both be poor.”

I thought that was a very interesting thing to say.

“Would you ever?” I said. “Run away?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You want me to tell you a secret?”

“Sure.”

“I’m crazy about my mom and dad.”

That really made me smile. I’d never heard anyone say that about their parents. I mean, no one was crazy about their parents. Except Dante.

And then he whispered in my ear. “That lady two seats in front of us. I think she’s having an affair.”

“How do you know?” I whispered.

“She took off her wedding band as she got on the bus.”

I nodded and smiled.

We made up stories about the other bus riders.

For all we knew, *they* were writing stories about *us*.

I'd never really been very close to other people. I was pretty much a loner. I'd played basketball and baseball and done the Cub Scout thing, tried the Boy Scout thing—but I always kept my distance from the other boys. I never ever felt like I was a part of their world.

Boys. I watched them. Studied them.

In the end, I didn't find most of the guys that surrounded me very interesting. In fact, I was pretty disgusted.

Maybe I was a little superior. But I don't think I was superior. I just didn't understand how to talk to them, how to be myself around them. Being around other guys didn't make me feel smarter. Being around guys made me feel stupid and inadequate. It was like they were all a part of this club and I wasn't a member.

When I was old enough for Boy Scouts, I told my dad I wasn't going to do it. I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Give it a year," my dad said. My dad knew that I sometimes liked to fight. He was always giving me lectures about physical violence. He was trying to keep me away from the gangs at my school. He was trying to keep me from becoming like my brother who wound up in prison. So, because of my brother, whose existence was not even acknowledged, I had to be a good boy scout. That sucked. Why did I have to be a good boy just because I had a bad-boy brother? I hated the way my mom and dad did family math.

I humored my dad. I gave it a year. I hated it—except that I learned how to do CPR. I mean, I didn't like the bit about having to breathe into someone else's mouth. That sort of freaked me out. But for some reason the whole thing fascinated me, how you could get

a heart to start again. I didn't quite understand the science of it. But after I got a patch for learning how to bring someone back to life, I quit. I came home and gave the patch to my dad.

"I think you're making a mistake." That's all my dad said.

I'm not going to wind up in the slammer. That's what I wanted to say. Instead, I just mouthed off. "If you make me go back, I swear I'll start smoking pot."

My father gave me a strange look. "It's your life," he said. Like that was really true. And another thing about my father: He didn't give lectures. Not real ones. Which pissed me off. He wasn't a mean guy. And he didn't have a bad temper. He spoke in short sentences: "It's your life." "Give it a try." "You sure you want to do that?" Why couldn't he just talk? How was I supposed to know him when he didn't let me? I hated that.

I got along okay. I had school friends. Sort of. I wasn't wildly popular. How could I be? In order to be wildly popular you had to make people believe that you were fun and interesting. I just wasn't that much of a con artist.

There were a couple of guys I used to hang around with, the Gomez brothers. But they moved away. And there were a couple of girls, Gina Navarro and Susie Byrd, who liked to torment me as a hobby. Girls. They were mysteries too. Everything was a mystery.

I guess I didn't have it so bad. Maybe everybody didn't love me, but I wasn't one of those kids that everyone hated, either.

I was good in a fight. So people left me alone.

I was mostly invisible. I think I liked it that way.

And then Dante came along.

Five

AFTER MY FOURTH SWIMMING LESSON, DANTE INVITED me to go over to his house. He lived less than a block from the swimming pool in a big old house across the street from the park.

He introduced me to his father, the English professor. I'd never met a Mexican-American man who was an English professor. I didn't know they existed. And really, he didn't look like a professor. He was young and handsome and easygoing and it seemed like a part of him was still a boy. He seemed like a man who was in love with being alive. So different from my father, who had always kept his distance from the world. There was a darkness in my father that I didn't understand. Dante's father didn't have any darkness in him. Even his black eyes seemed to be full of light.

That afternoon, when I met Dante's father, he was wearing jeans and a T-shirt and he was sitting on a leather chair in his office, reading a book. I'd never known anyone who actually had an office in his own house.

Dante walked up to his father and kissed him on the cheek. I would have never done that. Not ever.

"You didn't shave this morning, Dad."

“It’s summer,” his dad said.

“That means you don’t have to work.”

“That means I have to finish writing my book.”

“Writing a book isn’t work.”

Dante’s father laughed really hard when he said that. “You have a lot to learn about work.”

“It’s summer, Dad. I don’t want to hear about work.”

“You never want to hear about work.”

Dante didn’t like where the conversation was going so he tried to change the subject. “Are you going to grow a beard?”

“No.” He laughed. “It’s too hot. And besides, your mother won’t kiss me if I go more than a day without shaving.”

“Wow, she’s strict.”

“Yup.”

“And what would you do without her kisses?”

He grinned, then looked up at me. “How do you put up with this guy? You must be Ari.”

“Yes, sir.” I was nervous. I wasn’t used to meeting anybody’s parents. Most of the parents I’d met in my life weren’t all that interested in talking to me.

He got up from his chair and put his book down. He walked up to me and shook my hand. “I’m Sam,” he said. “Sam Quintana.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Quintana.”

I’d heard that phrase, *nice to meet you*, a thousand times. When Dante had said it to me, he’d sounded real. But when I said it, I felt stupid and unoriginal. I wanted to hide somewhere.

“You can call me Sam,” he said.

"I can't," I said. God, I wanted to hide.

He nodded. "That's sweet," he said. "And respectful."

The word "sweet" had never passed my father's lips.

He gave Dante a look. "The young man has some respect. Maybe you can learn something from him, Dante."

"You mean you want me to call you Mr. Quintana?"

They both kept themselves from laughing. He turned his attention back to me. "How's the swimming?"

"Dante's a good teacher," I said.

"Dante's good at a lot of things. But he's not very good at cleaning his room. Cleaning a room is too closely related to the word *work*."

Dante shot him a look. "Is that a hint?"

"You're quick, Dante. You must get that from your mother."

"Don't be a wiseass, Dad."

"What was that word you just used?"

"Does that word offend you?"

"It's not the word. Maybe it's the attitude."

Dante rolled his eyes and sat on his father's chair. He took off his tennis shoes.

"Don't get too comfortable." He pointed up. "There's a pig sty up there that has your name on it."

It made me smile, the way they got along, the easy and affectionate way they talked to each other as if love between a father and a son was simple and uncomplicated. My mom and I, sometimes the thing we had between us was easy and uncomplicated. Sometimes. But me and my dad, we didn't have that. I wondered what that would be like, to walk into a room and kiss my father.

We went upstairs and Dante showed me his room. It was a big room with a high ceiling and wood floors and lots of old windows to let in the light. There was stuff everywhere. Clothes spread all over the floor, a pile of old albums, books scattered around, legal pads with stuff written on them, Polaroid photographs, a couple of cameras, a guitar without any strings, sheet music, and a bulletin board cluttered with notes and pictures.

He put on some music. He had a record player. *A real record player from the sixties.* “It was my mom’s,” he said. “She was going to throw it away. Can you believe that?” He put on *Abbey Road*, his favorite album. “Vinyl,” he said. “Real vinyl. None of this cassette crap.”

“What’s wrong with cassettes?”

“I don’t trust them.”

I thought that was a really weird thing to say. Funny and weird. “Records scratch easily.”

“Not if you take care of them.”

I looked around his messy room. “I can see that you really like to take care of things.”

He didn’t get mad. He laughed.

He handed me a book. “Here,” he said. “You can read this while I clean my room.”

“Maybe I should just, you know, leave you—” I stopped. My eyes searched the messy room. “It’s a little scary in here.”

He smiled. “Don’t,” he said. “Don’t leave. I hate cleaning my room.”

“Maybe if you didn’t have so many things.”

“It’s just stuff,” he said.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t have stuff.

“If you stay, it won’t be so bad.”

Somehow, I felt out of place—but—“Okay,” I said. “Should I help?”

“No. It’s my job.” He said that with a kind of resignation. “As my mom would say, ‘It’s your responsibility, Dante.’ Responsibility is my mother’s favorite word. She doesn’t think my father pushes me hard enough. Of course he doesn’t. I mean, what does she expect? Dad’s not a pusher. She married the guy. Doesn’t she know what kind of guy he is?”

“Do you always analyze your parents?”

“They analyze us, don’t they?”

“That’s their job, Dante.”

“Tell me you don’t analyze your mom and dad.”

“Guess I do. Doesn’t do me any good. I haven’t figured them out yet.”

“Well, me, I figured my dad out—not my mom. My mom is the biggest mystery in the world. I mean, she’s predictable when it comes to parenting. But really, she’s inscrutable.”

“Inscrutable.” I knew when I went home, I would have to look up the word.

Dante looked at me like it was my turn to say something.

“I figured my mom out, mostly,” I said. “My dad. He’s inscrutable too.” I felt like such a fraud, using that word. Maybe that was the thing about me. I wasn’t a real boy. I was a fraud.

He handed me a book of poetry. “Read this,” he said. I’d never

read a book of poems before and wasn't even sure I knew *how* to read a book of poems. I looked at him blankly.

"Poetry," he said. "It won't kill you."

"What if it does? Boy Dies of Boredom While Reading Poetry."

He tried not to laugh, but he wasn't good at controlling all the laughter that lived inside of him. He shook his head and started gathering all the clothes on the floor.

He pointed at his chair. "Just throw that stuff on the floor and have a seat."

I picked up a pile of art books and a sketch pad and set it on the floor. "What's this?"

"A sketch pad."

"Can I see?"

He shook his head. "I don't like to show it to anyone."

That was interesting—that he had secrets.

He pointed to the poetry book. "Really, it won't kill you."

All afternoon, Dante cleaned. And I read that book of poems by a poet named William Carlos Williams. I'd never heard of him, but I'd never heard of anybody. And I actually understood some of it. Not all of it—but some. And I didn't hate it. That surprised me. It was interesting, not stupid or silly or sappy or overly intellectual—not any of those things that I thought poetry was. Some poems were easier than others. Some were inscrutable. I was thinking that maybe I *did* know the meaning of that word.

I got to thinking that poems were like people. Some people you got right off the bat. Some people you just didn't get—and never would get.

I was impressed by the fact that Dante could be so systematic in the way he organized everything in his room. When we'd walked in, the place had been all chaos. But when he finished, everything was in its place.

Dante's world had order.

He'd organized all his books on a shelf and on his desk. "I keep the books I'm going to read next on my desk," he said. A desk. A real desk. When I had to write something, I used the kitchen table.

He grabbed the book of poems away from me and went looking for a poem. The poem was titled "Death." He was so perfect in his newly organized room, the western sun streaming in, his face in the light and the book in his hand as if it was meant to be there, in his hands, and *only* in his hands. I liked his voice as he read the poem as if he had written it:

*He's dead
the dog won't have to
sleep on the potatoes
anymore to keep them
from freezing*

*he's dead
the old bastard—*

When Dante read the word "bastard" he smiled. I knew he loved saying it because it was a word he was not allowed to use, a word that was banned. But here in his room, he could read that word and make it his.

All afternoon, I sat in that large comfortable chair in Dante's