

I felt alone, but not in a bad way. I really liked being alone. Maybe I liked it too much. Maybe my father was like that too.

I thought of Dante and wondered about him.

And it seemed to me that Dante's face was a map of the world. A world without any darkness.

Wow, a world without darkness. How beautiful was that?

Sparrows Falling from the Sky

*When I was a boy, I used to wake up thinking
that the world was ending.*

One

THE MORNING AFTER WE BURIED THE SPARROW, I woke up on fire with a fever.

My muscles ached, my throat hurt, my head throbbed almost like a heart. I kept staring at my hands, almost believing they belonged to someone else. When I tried to get up, I had no balance, no equilibrium, and the room spun around and around. I tried to take a step, but my legs weren't strong enough to carry my weight. I fell back on the bed, my clock radio crashing to the floor.

My mother appeared in my room and for some reason she didn't seem real. "Mom? Mom? Is that you?" I think I was yelling.

She was holding a question in her eyes. "Yes," she said. She seemed so serious.

"I fell," I said.

She said something—but I couldn't translate what she was saying. Everything was so strange and I thought maybe I was dreaming, but her hand on my arm felt like a real touch. "You're burning up," she said.

I felt her hands on my face.

I kept wondering where I was, so I asked her. "Where are we?"

She held me for a moment. "Shhh."

The world was so silent. There was a barrier between me and the world, and I thought for a moment that the world had never wanted me and now it was taking the opportunity to get rid of me.

I looked up and saw my mom standing in front of me, holding out two aspirin, a glass of water.

I sat up and reached for the pills and put them in my mouth. When I held the glass, I could see my hands trembling.

She put a thermometer under my tongue.

She studied the time on her watch, then pulled the thermometer out of my mouth.

"A hundred and four," she said. "We've got to break that fever." She shook her head. "It's all those germs at the pool."

The world seemed closer for an instant. "It's just a cold," I whispered. But it seemed like someone else was talking.

"I think you have the flu."

But it's summer. The words were on my tongue but I couldn't say them. I couldn't stop shivering. She placed another blanket over me.

Everything was spinning but when I closed my eyes, the room was motionless and dark.

And then the dreams came.

Birds were falling from the sky. Sparrows. Millions and millions of sparrows. They were falling like rain and they were hitting me as they fell and I had their blood all over me and I couldn't find a place to protect myself. Their beaks were breaking my skin like arrows. And Buddy Holly's plane was falling from the sky and I could hear Waylon Jennings singing "La Bamba." I could hear Dante

crying—and when I turned around to see where he was, I saw that he was holding Richie Valens's limp body in his arms. And then the plane came falling down on us. All I saw was the shadow and the earth on fire.

And then the sky disappeared.

I must have been screaming, because my mom and dad were in the room. I was trembling and everything was soaked in my sweat. And then I realized that I was crying and I couldn't make myself stop.

My dad picked me up and rocked me in the chair. I felt small and weak and I wanted to hold him back but I couldn't because there wasn't any strength in my arms, and I wanted to ask him if he had held me like this when I was a boy because I didn't remember and why didn't I remember. I started to think that maybe I was still dreaming, but my mother was changing the sheets on my bed so I knew that everything was real. Except me.

I think I was mumbling. My father held me tighter and whispered something, but not even his arms or his whispers could keep me from trembling. My mom dried my sweaty body with a towel and she and my dad changed me into a clean T-shirt and clean underwear. And then I said the strangest thing, "Don't throw my T-shirt away. Dad gave it to me." I knew I was crying, but I didn't know why because I wasn't the kind of guy who cried, and I thought that maybe it was someone else who was crying.

I could hear my father whisper, "Shhhh. It's okay." He laid me back down on the bed and my mother sat next to me and made me drink some water and take more aspirin.

I saw the look on my dad's face and I knew he was worried. And I was sad that I had made him worry. I wondered if he had really held me and I wanted to tell him that I didn't hate him, it was just that I didn't understand him, didn't understand who he was and I wanted to, I wanted so much to understand. My mother said something to my father in Spanish and he nodded. I was too tired to care about words in any language.

The world was so quiet.

I fell asleep—and the dreams came again. It was raining outside and there was thunder and lightning all around me. And I could see myself as I ran in the rain. I was looking for Dante and I was yelling because he was lost, "Dante! Come back! Come back!" And then I wasn't looking for Dante anymore, I was looking for my dad and I was yelling for him, "Dad! Dad! Where did you go? Where did you go?"

When I woke again, I was soaked in my own sweat again.

My dad was sitting on my rocking chair, studying me.

My mom walked into the room. She looked at my father—then at me.

"I didn't mean to scare you." I couldn't make myself talk above a whisper.

My mother smiled and I thought she must have been really pretty when she was a girl. She helped me sit up. "*Amor*, you're soaked. Why don't you take a nice shower?"

"I had nightmares."

I leaned my head on her shoulder. I wanted the three of us to stay that way forever.

My dad helped me to the shower. I felt weak and washed out and when the warm water hit my body, I thought of my dreams . . . Dante, my dad. And I wondered what my dad looked like when he was my age. My mother had told me he was beautiful. I wonder if he'd been as beautiful as Dante. And I wondered why I thought that.

When I went back to bed, my mom had changed the sheets again. "Your fever's gone," she said. She gave me another glass of water. I didn't want it but I drank all of it. I didn't know how thirsty I'd been, and I asked her for more water.

My father was still there, sitting on my rocking chair.

We studied each other for a moment as I lay in bed.

"You were looking for me," he said.

I looked at him.

"In your dream. You were looking for me."

"I'm always looking for you," I whispered.

Two

THE NEXT MORNING, WHEN I WOKE, I THOUGHT I HAD died. I knew it wasn't true—but the thought was there. Maybe a part of you died when you were sick. I don't know.

My mom's solution to my predicament was to make me drink gallons of water—one painful glass at a time.

I finally went on strike and refused to drink anymore. "My bladder's turned into a water balloon that's about to explode."

"That's good," she said, "You're flushing your system out."

"I'm done flushing," I said.

The water wasn't the only thing I had to deal with. I had to deal with her chicken soup. Her chicken soup became my enemy.

The first bowl was incredible. I had never been that hungry. Not ever. She mostly gave me broth.

The soup returned the next day for lunch. That was okay too, because now I got all the chicken and the vegetables in the soup with warm corn tortillas and my mother's *sopa de arroz*. But the soup came back in the form of an afternoon snack. And for dinner.

I was sick of water and chicken soup. I was sick of being sick. After four days in bed, I finally decided that it was time to move on.

I made an announcement to my mother. "I'm well."

"You're not," my mother said.

"I'm being held hostage." That's the first thing I said to my father when he came home from work.

He grinned at me.

"I'm fine now, Dad. I am."

"You still look a little pale."

"I need some sun."

"Give it one more day," he said. "Then you can go out into the world and cause all the trouble you want."

"Okay," I said. "But no more chicken soup."

"That's between you and your mother."

He started to leave my room. He hesitated for a moment. He had his back to me. "Have you had any more bad dreams?"

"I always have bad dreams," I said.

"Even when you're not sick?"

"Yeah."

He stood at my doorway. He turned around and faced me. "Are you always lost?"

"In most of them, yeah."

"And are you always trying to find me?"

"Mostly I think I'm trying to find me, Dad." It was strange to talk to him about something real. But it scared me too. I wanted to keep talking, but I didn't know exactly how to say what I was holding inside me. I looked down at the floor. Then I looked up at him and shrugged like *no big deal*.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry I'm so far away."

"It's okay," I said.

"No," he said. "No, it's not." I think he was going to say something else, but he changed his mind. He turned and walked out of the room.

I kept staring down at the floor. And then I heard my father's voice in the room again. "I have bad dreams too, Ari."

I wanted to ask him if his dreams were about the war or about my brother. I wanted to ask him if he woke up as scared as me.

All I did was smile at him. He'd told me something about himself. I was happy.

Three

I WAS ALLOWED TO WATCH TELEVISION. BUT I DISCOVERED something about myself. I didn't really like television. I didn't like it at all. I switched the TV off and found myself watching my mother as she sat at the kitchen table, looking over some of her old lesson plans.

"Mom?"

She looked up at me. I tried to imagine my mother standing in front of her class. I wondered what the guys thought of her. I wondered how they saw her. I wondered if they liked her. Hated her? Respected her? I wondered if they knew she was a mother. I wondered if that mattered to them.

"What are you thinking?"

"You like teaching?"

"Yes," she said.

"Even when your students don't care?"

"I'll tell you a secret. I'm not responsible for whether my students care or don't care. That care has to come from them—not me."

"Where does that leave you?"

"No matter what, Ari, my job is to care."

"Even when they don't?"

"Even when they don't."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

"Even if you teach kids like me, who think life is boring?"

"That's the way it is when you're fifteen."

"Just a phase," I said.

"Just a phase." She laughed.

"You like fifteen-year-olds?"

"Are you asking me if I like you, or are you asking me if I like my students?"

"Both, I guess."

"I adore you, Ari, you know I do."

"Yeah, but you adore your students, too."

"Are you jealous?"

"Can I go outside?" I could avoid questions as skillfully as she could.

"You can go out tomorrow."

"I think you're being a fascist."

"That's a big word, Ari."

"Thanks to you, I know all about the different forms of government. Mussolini was a fascist. Franco was a fascist. And Dad says Reagan is a fascist."

"Don't take your father's jokes too literally, Ari. All he's saying is that he thinks President Reagan is too heavy-handed."

"I know what he's saying, Mom. Just like *you* know what *I'm* saying."

"Well, it's good to know that you think your mother is more than a form of government."

"You kind of are," I said.

"I get your point, Ari. You're still not going outside."

There were days when I wished I had it in me to rebel against my mother's rules.

"I just want to get out of here. I'm bored out of my skull."

She got up from where she was sitting. She placed her hands on my face. "*Hijo de mi vida*," she said, "I'm sorry that you think I'm too strict on you. But I have my reasons. When you're older—"

"You always say that. I'm fifteen. How old do I have to be? How old, Mom, before you think I'm smart enough to get it? I'm not a little boy."

She took my hand and kissed it. "You are to me," she whispered. There were tears running down her cheeks. There was something I wasn't getting. First Dante. Then me. And now my mom. Tears all over the damned place. Maybe tears were something you caught. Like the flu.

"It's okay, Mom," I whispered. I smiled at her. I think I was hoping for a full explanation for her tears, but I was going to have to work to get it. "Are you okay?" I said.

"Yes," she said, "I'm okay."

"I don't think you are."

"I'm trying hard not to worry about you."

"Why do you worry? I just had the flu."

"That's not what I mean."

"What?"

"What do you do when you leave the house?"

"Stuff."

"You don't have any friends." She started to place her hand over her mouth, then stopped herself.

I wanted to hate her for that accusation. "I don't want any."

She looked at me, almost as if I were a stranger.

"And how can I have friends if you don't let me go outside?"

I got one of her looks.

"I *do* have friends, Mom. I have school friends. And Dante. He's my friend."

"Yes," she said. "Dante."

"Yes," I said. "Dante."

"I'm glad for Dante," she said.

I nodded. "I'm okay, Mom. I'm just not the kind of guy—" I didn't know what I was trying to say. "I'm just different." I didn't even know what I meant.

"You know what I think?"

I didn't want to know what she thought. I didn't. But I was going to hear it anyway. "Sure," I said.

She ignored the attitude.

"I don't think you know how loved you are."

"I *do* know."

She started to say something, but she changed her mind. "Ari, I just want you to be happy."

I wanted to tell her that happy was hard for me. But I think she already knew that. "Well," I said, "I'm at that phase where I'm supposed to be miserable."

That made her laugh.

We were okay.

"You think it would be all right if Dante came over?"

Four

DANTE ANSWERED THE PHONE ON THE SECOND RING.

"You haven't been going to the pool." He sounded mad.

"I've been in bed. I caught the flu. Mostly I've been sleeping, having really bad dreams, and eating chicken soup."

"Fever?"

"Yeah."

"Achy bones?"

"Yeah."

"Night sweats?"

"Yeah."

"Bad stuff," he said. "What were your dreams about?"

"I can't talk about them."

That seemed okay with him.

Fifteen minutes later, he showed up at my front door. I heard the doorbell. I could hear him talking to my mother. Dante never had any trouble starting up conversations. He was probably telling my mom his life story.

I heard him walking down the hall in his bare feet. And then there he was, standing at the doorway to my room, wearing a T-shirt

that was so worn you could almost see through it, and a ratty pair of jeans with holes in them.

"Hi," he said. He was carrying a book of poems, a sketch pad, and some charcoal pencils.

"You forgot your shoes," I said.

"I donated them to the poor."

"Guess the jeans are next."

"Yeah." We both laughed.

He studied me. "You look a little pale."

"I still look more Mexican than you do."

"Everybody looks more Mexican than I do. Pick it up with the people who handed me their genes." There was something in his voice. The whole Mexican thing bothered him.

"Okay, okay." I said. "Okay, okay" always meant it was time to change the subject. "So you brought your sketch pad."

"Yeah."

"Are you going to show me your drawings?"

"Nope. I'm going to sketch you."

"What if I don't want to be sketched?"

"How am I going to be an artist if I can't practice?"

"Don't artists' models get paid?"

"Only the ones that are good-looking."

"So I'm not good-looking?"

Dante smiled. "Don't be an asshole." He seemed embarrassed. But not as embarrassed as I was.

I could feel myself turning red. Even guys with dark skin like me could blush. "So you're really going to be an artist?"

"Absolutely." He looked right at me. "You don't believe me?"

"I need evidence."

He sat in my rocking chair. He studied me. "You still look sick."

"Thanks."

"Maybe it's your dreams."

"Maybe." I didn't want to talk about my dreams.

"When I was a boy, I used to wake up thinking that the world was ending. I'd get up and look in the mirror and my eyes were sad."

"You mean like mine."

"Yeah."

"My eyes are always sad."

"The world isn't ending, Ari."

"Don't be an asshole. Of course it's not ending."

"Then don't be sad."

"Sad, sad, sad," I said.

"Sad, sad, sad," he said.

We were both smiling, trying to hold in our laughter—but we just couldn't do it. I was happy that he'd come over. Being sick made me feel fragile, like I might break. I didn't like feeling like that. Laughing made me feel better.

"I want to draw you."

"Can I stop you?"

"You're the one who said you needed evidence."

He tossed me the book of poems he'd brought along. "Read it. You read. I'll draw." Then he got real quiet. His eyes started searching everything in the room: me, the bed, the blankets, the pillows, the light. I felt nervous and awkward and self-conscious

and uncomfortable. And Dante's eyes on me, well, I didn't know if I liked that or didn't like that. I just knew I felt naked. But there was something happening between Dante and his drawing pad that made me feel invisible. And that made me relax.

"Make me look good," I said.

"Read," he said. "Just read."

It didn't take long for me to forget Dante was drawing me. And I just read. I read and I read and I read. Sometimes I would glance over at him, but he was lost in his work. I returned to the book of poems. I read a line and tried to understand it: "from what we cannot hold the stars are made." It was a beautiful thing to say, but I didn't know what it meant. I fell asleep thinking what the line might mean.

When I woke, Dante was gone.

He hadn't left any of the sketches that he'd done of me. But he did leave a sketch of my rocking chair. It was perfect. A rocking chair against the bare walls of my room. He'd captured the afternoon light streaming into the room, the way the shadows fell on the chair and gave it depth and made it appear as if it was something more than an inanimate object. There was something sad and solitary about the sketch and I wondered if that's the way he saw the world or if that's the way he saw *my* world.

I stared at the sketch for a long time. It scared me. Because there was something true about it.

I wondered where he'd learned to draw. I was suddenly jealous of him. He could swim, he could draw, he could talk to people. He read poetry and he liked himself. I wondered how that felt, to really like yourself. And I wondered why some people didn't like

themselves and others did. Maybe that's just the way it was.

I looked at his drawing, then looked at my chair. That's when I saw the note he'd left.

Ari,

I hope you like the sketch of your chair. I miss you at the pool. The lifeguards are jerks.

Dante

After dinner, I picked up the phone and called him.

"Why did you leave?"

"You needed to rest."

"I'm sorry I fell asleep."

Then neither one of us said anything.

"I liked the sketch," I said.

"Why?"

"Because it looks just like my chair."

"Is that the only reason?"

"It holds something," I said.

"What?"

"Emotion."

"Tell me," Dante said.

"It's sad. It's sad and it's lonely."

"Like you," he said.

I hated that he saw who I was. "I'm not sad all the time," I said.

"I know," he said.

"Will you show me the others?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"For the same reason you can't tell me about your dreams."

Five

THE FLU DIDN'T SEEM TO WANT TO LET ME GO.

That night, the dreams came again. My brother. He was on the other side of the river. He was in Juárez and I was in El Paso and we could see each other. And I yelled, "Bernardo, come over!" and he shook his head. And then I thought he didn't understand, so I yelled at him in Spanish. "*Vente pa'aca, Bernardo!*" I thought that if I only knew the right words or spoke them in the right language, then he would cross the river. And come home. If only I knew the right words. If only I spoke the right language. And then my dad was there. He and my brother stared at each other and I couldn't stand the look on their faces, because it seemed like there was the hurt of all the sons and all the fathers of the world. And the hurt was so deep that it was way beyond tears and so their faces were dry. And then the dream changed and my brother and father were gone. I was standing in the same place where my father had been standing, on the Juárez side, and Dante was standing across from me. And he was shirtless and shoeless and I wanted to swim toward him but I couldn't move. And then he said something to me in English and I couldn't understand him. And I said something to him in Spanish, and he couldn't understand me.

And I was so alone.

And then all the light was gone and Dante disappeared into the darkness.

I woke up and I felt lost.

I didn't know where I was.

The fever was back. I thought that maybe nothing would ever be the same. But I knew it was just the fever. I fell asleep again. The sparrows were falling from the sky. And it was me who was killing them.

Six

DANTE CAME OVER TO VISIT. I KNEW I WASN'T A LOT of fun. He knew it too. It didn't seem to matter.

"Do you want to talk?"

"No," I said.

"Do you want me to go?"

"No," I said.

He read poems to me. I thought about the sparrows falling from the sky. As I listened to Dante's voice, I wondered what my brother would sound like. I wondered if he'd ever read a poem. My mind was full and crowded—falling sparrows, my brother's ghost, Dante's voice.

Dante finished reading a poem, then went looking for another.

"Aren't you afraid of catching what I have?" I said.

"No."

"You're not afraid?"

"No."

"You're not afraid of anything."

"I'm afraid of lots of things, Ari."

I could have asked *What? What are you afraid of?* I don't think he would have told me.

Seven

THE FEVER WAS GONE.

But the dreams stayed.

My father was in them. And my brother. And Dante. In my dreams. And sometimes my mother, too. I had this image stuck in my mind. I was four and I was walking down the street, holding my brother's hand. I wondered if it was a memory or a dream. Or a hope.

I lay around and thought about things. All the ordinary problems and mysteries of my life that mattered only to me. Not that thinking about things made me feel better. I decided that my junior year at Austin High School was going to suck. Dante went to Cathedral because they had a swim team. My mom and dad had wanted to send me to school there, but I'd refused. I didn't want to go to an all-boy Catholic school. I'd insisted to myself and to my parents that all the boys there were rich. My mom argued that they gave scholarships to smart boys. I argued back that I wasn't smart enough to get a scholarship. My mom argued back that they could afford to send me there. "I hate those boys!" I'd begged my father not to send me there.

I never said anything to Dante about hating Cathedral boys. He didn't have to know.

I thought about my mom's accusation. "You don't have any friends."

I thought of my chair and how really it was a portrait of me.

I was a chair. I felt sadder than I'd ever felt.

I knew I wasn't a boy anymore. But I still felt like a boy. Sort of. But there were other things I was starting to feel. Man things, I guess. Man loneliness was much bigger than boy loneliness. And I didn't want to be treated like a boy anymore. I didn't want to live in my parents' world and I didn't have a world of my own. In a strange way, my friendship with Dante had made me feel even more alone.

Maybe it was because Dante seemed to make himself fit everywhere he went. And me, I always felt that I didn't belong anywhere. I didn't even belong in my own body—*especially* in my own body. I was changing into someone I didn't know. The change hurt but I didn't know why it hurt. And nothing about my own emotions made any sense.

When I was younger, I'd had this idea that I wanted to keep a journal. I sort of wrote things down in this little leather book I bought, filled with blank pages. But I was never disciplined about the whole thing. The journal turned into a random thing with random thoughts and nothing more.

When I was in the sixth grade, my parents gave me a baseball glove and a typewriter for my birthday. I was on a team so the glove made sense. But a typewriter? What was it about me that made them think of getting me a typewriter? I pretended to like it. But I wasn't a good pretender.

Just because I didn't talk about things didn't make me a good actor.

The funny thing was, I learned how to type. At last, a skill. The

the name of the world's most famous philosopher. I hated that. Everyone expected something from me. Something I just couldn't give.

So I renamed myself Ari.

If I switched the letter, my name was Air.

I thought it might be a great thing to be the air.

I could be something and nothing at the same time. I could be necessary and also invisible. Everyone would need me and no one would be able to see me.

Eight

MY MOM INTERRUPTED MY THOUGHTS—IF THAT'S what they were. "Dante's on the phone."

I walked past the kitchen and noticed my mom was cleaning out all her cabinets. Whatever summer meant, for Mom it meant work.

I threw myself on the couch in the living room and grabbed the phone.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he said. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. I'm still not feeling great. My mom's taking me to the doctor this afternoon."

"I was hoping we could go swimming."

"Shit," I said, "I can't. I just, you know—"

"Yeah, I know. So you're just hanging out?"

"Yeah."

"Are you reading something, Ari?"

"No. I'm thinking."

"About what?"

"Stuff."

"Stuff?"

"You know, Dante, things."

"Like what, Ari?"

"You know, like how my two sisters and my brother are so much older than me and how that makes me feel."

"How old are they, your sisters and brother?"

"My sisters are twins. They're not identical, but they look alike. They're twenty-seven. My mom had them when she was eighteen."

"Wow," he said. "Twenty-seven."

"Yeah, wow."

"I'm fifteen and I have three nieces and four nephews."

"I think that's really cool, Ari."

"Trust me, Dante, it's not that cool. They don't even call me Uncle Ari."

"So how old is your brother?"

"He's twenty-five."

"I always wanted a brother."

"Yeah, well, I might as well not have one."

"Why?"

"We don't talk about him. It's like he's dead."

"Why?"

"He's in prison, Dante." I'd never told anyone about my brother. I'd never said a word about him to another human being. I felt bad for talking about him.

Dante didn't say anything.

"Can we not talk about him?" I said.

"Why?"

"It makes me feel bad."

"Ari, you didn't do anything."

"I don't want to talk about him, okay, Dante?"

"Okay. But you know, Ari, you have this really interesting life."

"Not really," I said.

"Yes, really," he said. "At least you have siblings. Me, I only have a mother and a father."

"What about cousins?"

"They don't like me. They think I'm—well, they think I'm a little different. They're really Mexican, you know. And I'm sort of, well, what did you call me?"

"A *pocho*."

"That's exactly what I am. My Spanish isn't great."

"You can learn it," I said.

"Learning it at school is different than learning it at home or on the street. And it's really hard because most of my cousins are on my mom's side—and they're really poor. My mom's the youngest and she really fought her family so she could go to school. Her father didn't think a girl should go to college. So my mom said, 'Screw it, I'm going anyway.'"

"I can't picture your mom saying, 'screw it.'"

"Well, she probably didn't say that—but she found a way. She was really smart and she worked her way through college and then she got some kind of fellowship to go to graduate school at Berkeley. And that's where she met my dad. I was born somewhere in there. They had their studies. My mom was turning herself into a psychologist. My dad was turning himself into an English professor. I mean, my dad's parents were born in Mexico. They live in a small

little house in East LA and they speak no English and own a little restaurant. It's like my mom and dad created a whole new world for themselves. I live in their new world. But they understand the old world, the world they came from—and I don't. I don't belong anywhere. That's the problem."

"You do," I said. "You belong everywhere you go. That's just how you are."

"You've never seen me around my cousins. I feel like a freak."

I knew what it was like to feel like that. "I know," I said. "I feel like a freak too."

"Well, at least you're a real Mexican."

"What do I know about Mexico, Dante?"

The quiet over the phone was strange. "Do you think it will always be this way?"

"What?"

"I mean, when do we start feeling like the world belongs to us?"

I wanted to tell him that the world would never belong to us. "I don't know," I said. "Tomorrow."

Nine

I WENT INTO THE KITCHEN AND WATCHED MY MOM AS she cleaned out her cabinets.

"What were you and Dante talking about?"

"Stuff."

I wanted to ask her about my brother. But I knew I wasn't going to ask. "He was telling me about his mom and dad, about how they met at graduate school at Berkeley. How he was born there. He said he remembered his parents reading books and studying all the time."

My mom smiled. "Just like me and you," she said.

"I don't remember."

"I was finishing my bachelor's degree when your father was at war. It helped me take my mind off things. I worried all the time. My mom and my aunts helped me take care of your sisters and your brother while I went to school and studied. And when your father came back, we had you." She smiled at me and did that combing-my-hair-with-her-fingers thing.

"Your father got on with the post office and I kept going to school. I had you and I had school. And your father was safe."

"Was it hard?"

"I was happy. And you were such a good baby. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. We bought this house. It needed work, but it was ours. And I was doing what I had always wanted to do."

"You always wanted to be a teacher?"

"Always. When I was growing up, we didn't have anything, but my mom understood how much school meant to me. She cried when I told her I was going to marry your father."

"She didn't like him?"

"No, it wasn't that. She just wanted me to keep going to school. I promised her that I would. It took me a while but I kept my promise."

That was the first time that I really saw my mother as a person. A person who was so much more than just my mother. It was strange to think of her that way. I wanted to ask her about my father, but I didn't know how. "Was he different? When he came back from the war?"

"Yes."

"How was he different?"

"There's a wound somewhere inside of him, Ari."

"But what is it? The hurt? What is it?"

"I don't know."

"How can you not know, Mom?"

"Because it's his. It's just his, Ari."

I understood that she had just accepted my father's private wound. "Will it ever heal?"

"I don't think so."

"Mom? Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything."

"Is it hard to love him?"

"No." She didn't even hesitate.

"Do you understand him?"

"Not always. But Ari, I don't always have to understand the people I love."

"Well, maybe I do."

"It's hard for you, isn't it?"

"I don't know him, Mom."

"I know you're going to get mad at me when I say this, Ari, but I'm going to say it anyway. I think someday you *will* understand."

"Yeah," I said. "Someday."

Someday, I would understand my father. Someday he would tell me who he was. Someday. I hated that word.

Ten

I LIKED WHEN MY MOM TOLD ME ABOUT HOW SHE FELT about things. She seemed to be able to do that. Not that we talked that much, but sometimes we did and it was good and I felt like I knew her. And I didn't feel like I knew a lot of people. When she talked to me, she was different than when she was being my mother. When she was being my mother, she had a lot of ideas about who I should be. And I hated that, fought her on that, didn't want her input.

I didn't think it was my job to accept what everyone said I was and who I should be. *Maybe if you weren't so quiet, Ari . . . Maybe if you could just be more disciplined . . .* Yeah, everyone had suggestions as to what was wrong with me and what I should become. Especially my older sisters.

Because I was the youngest.

Because I was the surprise.

Because I was born too late.

Because my older brother was in prison and maybe my mother and father blamed themselves. If only they'd said something, done something. They weren't going to make that mistake again. So I

was stuck with my family's guilt—a guilt that not even my mother would talk about. She sometimes mentioned my brother in passing. But she never said his name.

So now I was the only son. And I felt the weight of a son in a Mexican family. Even though I didn't want it. But that was the way it was.

It made me mad that I'd felt like I'd betrayed my family by mentioning my brother to Dante. It didn't feel good. There were so many ghosts in our house—the ghost of my brother, the ghosts of my father's war, the ghosts of my sister's voices. And I thought that maybe there were ghosts inside of me that I hadn't even met yet. They were there. Lying in wait.

I picked up my old journal and thumbed through the pages. I found an entry that I'd written a week after I turned fifteen:

I don't like being fifteen.

I didn't like being fourteen.

I didn't like being thirteen.

I didn't like being twelve.

I didn't like being eleven.

Ten was good. I liked being ten. I don't know why but I had a very good year when I was in the fifth grade.

The fifth grade was very good. Mrs. Pedregon was a great teacher and for some reason, everyone seemed to like me. A good year. An excellent year. Fifth grade. But now, at fifteen, well, things are a little awkward. My voice is doing funny things and I keep running into things. My mom says my reflexes are trying to keep up with the fact that I'm growing so much.

I don't much care for this growing thing.

My body's doing things I can't control and I just don't like it.

All of a sudden, I have hair all over the place. Hair under my arms and hair on my legs and hair around my—well—hair between my legs. Okay, I'm not liking it. I even got hair growing on my toes. What's that about?

And my feet keep getting bigger and bigger. What's with the big feet? When I was ten, I was kinda small and I wasn't worried about hair. The only thing I was worried about was trying to speak perfect English. I made up my mind that year—when I was ten—that I wasn't going to sound like another Mexican. I was going to be an American. And when I talked I was going to sound like one.

So what if I don't look exactly like an American.

What does an American look like, anyway?

Does an American have big hands and big feet and hair around his—well, hair between his legs?

Reading my own words embarrassed the hell out me. I mean, what a *pendejo*. I had to be the world's biggest loser, writing about hair, and stuff about my body. No wonder I stopped keeping a journal. It was like keeping a record of my own stupidity. Why would I want to do that? Why would I want to remind myself what an asshole I was?

I don't know why I didn't throw the journal across the room. I kept thumbing through it randomly. And then I found a section about my brother.

There are no pictures of my brother in our house.

There are pictures of my two older sisters on their wedding days. There are pictures of my mother in her first communion dress. There are pictures of my father when he was in Vietnam. There are pictures of me as a baby, me on the first day of school, me holding a first place trophy with my little league teammates.

There are pictures of my three nieces and four nephews.

There are pictures of my grandparents, who are all dead.

All over the house, there are pictures.

But there are no pictures of my brother.

Because he's in prison.

No one in my house talks about him.

It's like being dead.

It's worse than being dead. At least the dead get talked about and you get to hear stories about them. People smile when they tell those stories. And they even laugh. Even the dog we used to have gets talked about.

Even Charlie, the dead dog, gets a story.

My brother doesn't get any stories.

He has been erased from our family history. It doesn't seem right. My brother is more than a word written on a chalkboard. I mean I have to write an essay on Alexander Hamilton and I even know what he looks like.

I'd rather write an essay on my brother.

I don't think anyone at school would be interested in reading that essay.

I wondered if I would ever have the courage to ask my parents to tell about my brother. I asked my older sisters once. Cecilia and Sylvia both shot me a look. "Don't ever bring him up."

I remember thinking that if they'd had a gun, she'd have shot me.

I caught myself whispering over and over again, "my brother is in prison, my brother is in prison, my brother is in prison." I wanted to feel those words in my mouth as I spoke them aloud. Words could be like food—they felt like something in your mouth. They tasted like something. "My brother is in prison." Those words tasted bitter.

But the worst part was that those words were living inside me. And they were leaking out of me. Words were not things you could control. Not always.

I didn't know what was happening to me. Everything was chaos and I was scared. I felt like Dante's room before he'd put everything in order. Order. That was what I needed. So I took my journal and started writing:

These are the things that are happening in my life (in no particular order):

- I got the flu and I feel terrible and I also feel terrible inside.

-I have always felt terrible inside. The reasons for this keep changing.

- I told my father I always had bad dreams. And that was true. I'd never told anyone that before. Not even myself. I only knew it was true when I said it.

- I hated my mom for a minute or two because she told me I didn't have any friends.

- I want to know about my brother. If I knew more about him, would I hate him?

- My father held me in his arms when I had a fever and I wanted him to hold me in his arms forever.

- The problem is not that I don't love my mother and father. The problem is that I don't know how to love them.

- Dante is the first friend I've ever had. That scares me.

- I think that if Dante really knew me, he wouldn't like me.

Eleven

WE HAD TO WAIT OVER TWO HOURS AT THE DOCTOR'S office. But my mom and I came prepared. I brought the book of poems Dante had brought over, the book of poems by William Carlos Williams—and Mom, she brought a novel she was reading, *Bless Me, Ultima*.

I was sitting across from her in the waiting room and I knew that sometimes, she was studying me. I felt her eyes on me. "I didn't know you liked poetry."

"It's Dante's book. His father has poetry books all over the house."

"It's a wonderful thing, what his father does."

"You mean being a professor?"

"Yes. How wonderful."

"I guess so," I said.

"When I went to the university, I never had one Mexican-American professor. Not one." There was a look on her face, almost anger.

I knew so little about her. About what she'd been through—about what it felt like to be her. I'd never cared, not really. I was starting to care, starting to wonder. Starting to wonder about everything.

"You like poetry, Ari?"

"Yeah. I guess I do."

"Maybe you'll be a writer," she said. "A poet."

It sounded like such a beautiful thing when she said it. Too beautiful for me.

Twelve

THERE WAS NOTHING WRONG WITH ME. THAT'S WHAT the doctor said. Just recovering normally from a severe flu. An afternoon wasted. Except I'd seen rage appear on my mother's face for an instant. That was something I would have to think about.

Just when she was becoming less of a mystery, she became more of one.

I finally got to leave the house.

I met Dante at the swimming pool, but I got winded easily. Mostly, I watched Dante swim.

It looked like it was going to rain. They always came this time of year, the rains. I heard the distant thunder. As we were walking toward Dante's house, it began to rain. And then it began to pour.

I looked at Dante. "I won't run if you don't."

"I won't run."

So we walked in the rain. I wanted to walk faster, but instead I slowed down. I looked at Dante. "Can you take it?"

He smiled.

Slowly, we made our way to his house. In the rain. Soaked.

Dante's father made us change into dry clothing when we got to

his house, and gave us a lecture. "I already know that Dante doesn't have an ounce of common sense. But, Ari, I thought you were a little more responsible."

Dante couldn't help but interrupt. "Fat chance, Dad."

"He just got over a flu, Dante."

"I'm okay now," I said. "I like the rain." I looked down at the floor. "I'm sorry."

He put his hand on my chin and lifted it up. He looked at me. "Summer boys," he said.

I liked the way he looked at me. I thought he was the kindest man in the world. Maybe everybody was kind. Maybe even my father. But Mr. Quintana was brave. He didn't care if the whole world knew he was kind. Dante was just like him.

I asked Dante if his father ever got mad.

"He doesn't get mad very often. Hardly at all. But when he *does* get mad, I try to stay out of his way."

"What does he get mad at?"

"I threw out all his papers once."

"You did that?"

"He wasn't paying any attention to me."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve."

"So you made him mad on purpose."

"Something like that."

Out of nowhere I started coughing. We gave each other a panicked look. "Hot tea," Dante said.

I nodded. Good idea.

We sat, drinking our tea and watching the rain fall on his front porch. The sky was almost black and then it started hailing. It was so beautiful and scary, I wondered about the science of storms and how sometimes it seemed that a storm wanted to break the world and how the world refused to break.

I was staring at the hail when Dante tapped me on the shoulder. "We need to have a conversation."

"A conversation?"

"A talk."

"We talk every day."

"Yeah, but. I mean a talk."

"About what?"

"About, you know, what we're like. Our parents. Stuff like that."

"Did anybody ever tell you that you weren't normal?"

"Is that something I should aspire to?"

"You're not. You're not normal." I shook my head. "Where did you come from?"

"My parents had sex one night."

I could almost imagine his parents having sex—which was a little weird. "How do you know it was night?"

"Good point."

We busted out laughing.

"Okay," he said. "This is serious."

"Is this like a game?"

"Yes."

"I'll play."

"What's your favorite color?"

"Blue."

"Red. Favorite car?"

"Don't like cars."

"Me neither. Favorite song?"

"Don't have one. Yours?"

"The Long and Winding Road."

"The Long and Winding Road?"

"The Beatles, Ari."

"Don't know it."

"Great song, Ari."

"Boring game, Dante. Are we interviewing each other?"

"Something like that."

"What position am I applying for?"

"Best friend."

"I thought I already had the job."

"Don't be so sure, you arrogant son of a bitch." He reached over and punched me. Not hard. But not soft either.

That made me laugh. "Nice mouth."

"Sometimes don't you just want to stand up and yell out all the cuss words you've learned?"

"Every day."

"Every day? You're worse than me." He looked at the hail. "It's like pissed off snow," he said.

That made me laugh.

Dante shook his head. "We're too nice, you know that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Our parents turned us into nice boys. I hate that."

"I don't think I'm so nice."

"Are you in a gang?"

"No."

"Do you do drugs?"

"No."

"Do you drink?"

"I'd like to."

"Me too. But that wasn't the question."

"No, I don't drink."

"Do you have sex?"

"Sex?"

"Sex, Ari."

"No, never had sex, Dante. But I'd like to."

"Me too. See what I mean? We're nice."

"Nice," I said. "Shit."

"Shit," he said.

And then we busted out laughing.

All afternoon, Dante shot questions at me. I answered them. When it stopped hailing and raining, the hot day had suddenly turned cool. The whole world seemed to be quiet and calm and I wanted to be the world and feel like that.

Dante got up from the step of the porch and stood on the sidewalk. He held up his arms toward the heavens. "It's all so damned beautiful," he said. He turned around. "Let's go for a walk."

"Our tennis shoes," I said.

"Dad put them in the dryer. Who cares?"

"Yeah, who cares?"

I knew I had done that before, walked barefoot on a wet sidewalk, knew I had felt the breeze against my face. But it didn't feel like I'd ever done that. It felt like this was happening for the first time.

Dante was saying something but I wasn't really listening. I was staring at the sky, the dark clouds, listening to the distant thunder.

I looked at Dante, the breeze alive in his long, dark hair.

"We're leaving for a year," he said.

I was suddenly sad. No, not exactly sad. It felt like someone had punched me. "Leaving?"

"Yeah."

"Why? I mean, when?"

"My dad's going to be a visiting professor for a year at the University of Chicago. I think they're interested in hiring him."

"That's great," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

I'd been happy, and then, just like that, I was sad. I couldn't stand it, how sad I was. I didn't look at him. I just looked up at the sky.

"That's really great. So when are you leaving?"

"At the end of August."

Six weeks. I smiled. "That's great."

"You keep saying 'that's great.'"

"Well, it is."

"Yeah, it is."

"Aren't you sad, that I'm leaving?"

"Why would I be sad?"

He smiled and then, I don't know, there was this look on his face

and it was so hard to tell what he was thinking or feeling, which was strange because Dante's face was a book that the whole world could read.

"Look," he said. He pointed at a bird in the middle of the street that was trying to fly. I could tell that one of his wings was broken.

"He's going to die," I whispered.

"We can save it."

Dante walked into the middle of the street and tried to pick up the bird. I watched him as he picked up the frightened bird. That's the last thing I remember before the car swerved around the corner.

Dante! Dante! I knew the screams were coming from inside me. *Dante!*

I remember thinking that it was all a dream. All of it. It was just another bad dream. I kept thinking that the world was ending. I thought about the sparrows falling from the sky.

Dante!