

*The End of Summer*

*Do you remember  
the summer of the rain . . .  
You must let everything fall that wants to fall.  
—Karen Fiser*

*One*

I REMEMBER THE CAR SWERVING AROUND THE CORNER and Dante standing in the middle of the street holding a bird with a broken wing. I remember the slippery streets after the hail storm. I remember screaming his name. *Dante!*

I woke up in a hospital room.

Both of my legs were in a cast.

So was my left arm. Everything seemed really far away and my whole body hurt and I kept thinking *what happened?* I had a dull headache. *What happened? What happened?* Even my fingers hurt. I swear they did. I felt like a soccer ball after a game. Shit. I must have groaned or something, because all of a sudden my mom and dad were standing right beside my bed. My mom was crying.

"Don't cry," I said. My throat was really dry and I didn't sound like me. I sounded like someone else.

She bit her lip and reached over and combed my hair with her fingers.

I just looked at her. "Just don't cry, okay?"

"I was afraid you'd never wake up." She just sobbed into my father's shoulder.

Part of me was beginning to register everything. Another part of me just wanted to be somewhere else. Maybe none of this was really happening. But it was happening. It was. It didn't seem real. Except that I was in some serious pain. And that *was* real. It was the most real thing I had ever known.

"It hurts," I said.

That's when my mom just shut off her tears and became herself again. I was glad. I hated to see her weak and crying and falling apart. I wondered if that's the way she felt when my brother was taken away to prison. She pushed a button on my IV—then put it in my hand. "If you're in a lot of pain, you can push this every fifteen minutes."

"What is it?"

"Morphine."

"At long last I get to do drugs."

She ignored my joke. "I'll get the nurse." My mom, she was always moving into action. I liked that about her.

I looked around the room and wondered why I'd woken up. I kept thinking that if I could only get back to sleep, then it wouldn't hurt anymore. I preferred my bad dreams to the pain.

I looked at my dad. "It's okay," I said. "Everything's okay." I didn't really believe what I was saying.

My father was wearing a serious smile. "Ari, Ari," he said. "You're the bravest boy in the world."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm the guy who's afraid of his own dreams, Dad. Remember?"

I loved his smile. Why couldn't he just smile all the time?

I wanted to ask him what happened. But I was afraid. I don't know. . . . My throat was dry and I just couldn't talk, and then it all came back to me and the image of Dante holding a wounded bird flashed in my head. I couldn't catch my breath and I was afraid, and I thought that maybe Dante was dead, and then there was all this panic living inside of me. I could feel this awful thing going on in my heart. "Dante?" I heard his name in my mouth.

The nurse was standing next to me. She had a nice voice. "I'm going to check your blood pressure," she said. I just lay there and let her do what she wanted. I didn't care. She smiled. "How's your pain?"

"My pain is fine," I whispered.

She laughed. "You gave us a good scare, young man."

"I like scaring people," I whispered.

My mother shook her head.

"I like the morphine," I said. I closed my eyes. "Dante?"

"He's fine," my mother said.

I opened my eyes.

I heard my father's voice. "He's scared. He's really scared."

"But he's okay?"

"Yes. He's okay. He's been waiting for you to wake up." My mother and father looked at each other. I heard my mother's voice.

"He's here."

He was alive. Dante. I felt myself breathe. "What happened to the bird he was holding?"

My father reached over and squeezed my hand. "Crazy boys," he

whispered. "Crazy, crazy boys." I watched him as he left the room.

My mother just kept staring at me.

"Where did Dad go?"

"He went to get Dante. He hasn't left. He's been here for the last thirty-six hours—waiting for you to—"

"Thirty-six hours?"

"You had surgery."

"Surgery?"

"They had to repair your bones."

"Okay."

"You'll have scars."

"Okay."

"You were awake for a little while after the surgery."

"I don't remember."

"You were in pain. They gave you something. Then you were out again."

"I don't remember."

"The doctor said you probably wouldn't."

"Did I say anything?"

"You just moaned. You asked for Dante. He wouldn't leave. He's a very stubborn young man."

That made me smile. "Yeah, well, he wins all our arguments. Just like the ones I have with you."

"I love you," she whispered. "Do you know how much I love you?"

It was nice the way she said that. She hadn't said that to me in a long time.

"Love you more." When I was a boy, I used to say that to her.

I thought she was going to cry again. But she didn't. Well, there were tears, but no real crying. She handed me a glass of water and I drank a little bit from a straw. "Your legs," she said. "The car ran over your legs."

"It wasn't the driver's fault," I said.

She nodded. "You had a very, very fine surgeon. All the breaks are below the knees. God—" She stopped. "They thought you might lose your legs—" She stopped and wiped the tears from her face. "I'm never going to let you out of the house, ever again."

"Fascist," I whispered.

She kissed me. "You sweet, beautiful kid."

"I'm not that sweet, Mom."

"Don't argue with me."

"Okay," I said. "I'm sweet."

She started crying again.

"It's okay," I said. "Everything's okay."

Dante and my dad walked into the room.

We looked at each other and smiled. He had some stitches above his left eye and the left side of his face was all scraped up. He had two black eyes and he was wearing a cast on his right arm. "Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"We sort of match," he said.

"I got you beat," I whispered.

"Finally, you get to win an argument."

"Yeah, finally," I said. "You look like shit."

He was standing right next to me. "So do you."

We just looked at each other. "You sound tired," he said.

"Yeah."

"I'm glad you woke up."

"Yeah, I woke up. But it hurts less when I sleep."

"You saved my life, Ari."

"Dante's hero. Just what I always wanted to be."

"Don't do that, Ari. Don't make fun. You almost got yourself killed."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

He started crying. Dante and his tears. Dante and his tears. "You pushed me. You pushed me and you saved my life."

"Looks like I pushed you and beat the crap out of your face."

"I've got character now," he said.

"It was that damned bird," I said. "We can blame it all on the bird.

The whole thing."

"I'm done with birds."

"No you're not."

He started crying again.

"Knock it off," I said. "My mom's been crying, and now you're crying—and even Dad looks like he wants to cry. Rules. I have rules.

No crying."

"Okay," he said, "No more crying. Boys don't cry."

"Boys don't cry," I said. "Tears make me really tired."

Dante laughed. And then he got really serious. "You took a dive like you were in a swimming pool."

"We don't have to talk about this."

He just kept talking. "You dove at me, like, I don't know, like some kind of football player diving at the guy with the ball, and you pushed me out of the way. It all happened so fast and yet, you just, I don't know, you just knew what to do. Only you could have gotten yourself killed." I watched the tears falling from his face. "And all because I'm an idiot, standing in the middle of the road trying to save a stupid bird."

"You're breaking the no-crying rule again," I said. "And birds aren't stupid."

"I almost got you killed."

"You didn't do anything. You were just being you."

"No more birds for me."

"I like birds," I said.

"I've given them up. You saved my life."

"I told you. I didn't do it on purpose."

That made everybody laugh. God, I was tired. And it hurt so much and I remember Dante squeezing my hand and saying over and over, "I'm sorry I'm sorry Ari Ari Ari forgive me forgive me."

I guess the aftereffects of the surgery and the morphine made me feel a little high.

I remember humming. "La Bamba." I know that Dante and my mom and dad were still in the room, but I couldn't stay awake.

I remember Dante squeezing my hand. And I remember thinking, *Forgive you? For what, Dante? What is there to forgive?*

I don't know why, but there was rain in my dreams.

Dante and I were barefoot. The rain wouldn't stop.

And I was afraid.

Two

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I WAS IN THE HOSPITAL. A few days. Four days. Maybe five. Six. Hell, I don't know. It felt like forever.

They ran tests. That's what they do in hospitals. They were checking to make sure I had no other internal injuries. Especially brain injuries. I had a neurologist come in and see me. I didn't like him. He had dark hair and really deep green eyes that didn't like looking at people. He didn't seem to care. Either that or he cared too much. But the thing was, he wasn't very good with people. He didn't talk to me very much. He took a lot of notes.

I learned that nurses liked to make small talk and were in love with taking your vitals. That's what they did. They gave you a pill to help you sleep, then they woke you up all night. Shit. I wanted to sleep. I wanted to sleep and wake to see that my casts were gone. That's what I told one of the nurses. "Can't you just put me to sleep and wake me up when they take my casts off?"

"Silly boy," the nurse said.

Yeah. Silly boy.

I remember this one thing: My room was full of flowers. Flowers from all my mom's church-lady friends. Flowers from Dante's

mother and father. Flowers from my sisters. Flowers from the neighbors. Flowers from my mother's garden. Flowers. Shit. I never had an opinion about flowers until then. I decided I didn't like them.

I sort of liked my surgeon. He was all about sports injuries. He was kind of young and I could tell he was a jock, you know this big gringo with big hands and long fingers and I wondered about that. He had the hands of a pianist. I remember thinking that. But I didn't know shit about pianists' hands or surgeons' hands and I remember dreaming them. His hands. In my dream, he healed Dante's bird and set it free into the summer sky. It was a nice dream. I didn't have those very often.

Dr. Charles. That was his name. He knew what he was doing. A good guy. Yeah, that's what I thought. He answered all my questions. And I had lots of them.

"Do I have pins in my legs?"

"Yes."

"Permanently?"

"Yes."

"And you won't have to go in again?"

"Hope not."

"Big talker, huh, Doc?"

He laughed. "You're a tough guy, huh?"

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

"Well, I think you *are* tough. I think you're tough as hell."

"Yeah?"

"I've been around."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really, Aristotle. Can I tell you something?"

"Call me Ari."

"Ari." He smiled. "I'm surprised at how well you held up during the operation. And I'm surprised how well you're doing right now. It's amazing really."

"It's luck and genes," I said. "The genes I got from my mom and dad. And my luck, well, I don't where that came from. God, maybe."

"You a religious guy?"

"Not really. That would be my mom."

"Yeah, well, moms and God generally get along pretty well."

"Guess so," I said. "When am I going to stop feeling like crap?"

"In no time."

"No time? Am I going to be hurting and itching for eight weeks?"

"It'll get better."

"Sure. And how come, if my legs were broken *below* the knee, my casts are *above* the knee?"

"I just want to keep you still for two or three weeks. I don't want you to be bending. Might hurt yourself again. Tough guys, they push themselves. After a few weeks, I'll change your casts. Then you'll be able to bend your legs."

"Shit."

"Shit?"

"A few weeks?"

"We'll give it three weeks."

"Three weeks without bending my legs?"

"It's not such a long time."

"It's summer."

"And then I'll get you to a physical therapist."

I took a breath. "Shit. And this?" I said, aiming my arm cast at him. I was getting really depressed.

"That fracture wasn't so bad. It'll be off in a month."

"A month? Shit."

"You like that word, don't you?"

"I'd prefer to use other words."

He smiled. "Shit will do just fine."

I wanted to cry. I did. Mostly I was mad and frustrated and I knew he was going to tell me that I needed to be patient. And that's exactly what he said.

"You just need to be patient. You'll be good as new. You're young. You're strong. You have great, healthy bones. I have every reason to believe that you're going to heal very nicely."

Very nicely. Patient. Shit.

He checked the feeling in my toes, had me breathe, had me follow his fingers with my left eye, then my right eye. "You know," he said, "that's a helluva thing you did for your friend, Dante."

"Look, I wish people would stop talking about that."

He looked at me. He had this look on his face. "You could have wound up a paraplegic. Or worse."

"Worse?"

"Young man, you could have been killed."

"Killed. Okay. "People keep saying that. Look, Doc, I'm alive."

"You don't much like being a hero, do you?"

"I told Dante I didn't do it on purpose. Everyone thought that was funny. It wasn't a joke. I don't even remember diving toward him. It wasn't as if I said to myself, *I'm going to save my friend, Dante.*"

It wasn't like that. It was just a reflex, you know, like when someone hits your funny bone below the knee. Your leg just jerks. That's how it was. It just happened."

"Just a reflex? It just happened?"

"Exactly."

"And you're responsible for none of it?"

"It was just one of those things."

"Just one of those things?"

"Yeah."

"I have a different theory."

"Of course you do—you're an adult."

He laughed. "What do you have against adults?"

"They too have many ideas about who we are. Or who we should be."

"That's our job."

"Nice," I said.

"Nice," he said. "Listen, son, I know you don't think of yourself as being brave or courageous or any of those things. Of course you don't."

"I'm just a regular guy."

"Yeah, that's how you see yourself. But, you pushed your friend out of the way of an oncoming car. You did that, Ari, and you didn't think about yourself or what would happen to you. You did that because that's who you are. I'd think about that if I were you."

"What for?"

"Just think about it."

"I'm not sure I want to do all that thinking."

"Okay. Just so you know, Ari, I think you're a very rare young man. That's what I think."

"I told you, Doc, it was just a reflex."

He grinned at me and put his hand on my shoulder. "I know your kind, Ari. I'm on to you." I don't know exactly what he meant by that. But he was smiling.

Right after that conversation with Dr. Charles, Dante's mom and dad came to visit. Mr. Quintana came right up to me and kissed me on the cheek. Just like it was this normal thing to do. I guess for him it *was* normal. And really, I thought that the gesture was kind of nice, you know, sweet, but it made me a little bit uncomfortable. It was something I wasn't used to. And he kept thanking me over and over and over. I wanted to tell him to knock it off. But, I just let him go on and on because I knew how much he loved his Dante and he was so happy and I was happy that he was happy. So it was okay.

I wanted to change the subject. I mean, I didn't have a lot to talk about. I felt like crap. But they were there to see me and I could talk and, you know, I could process things even though my mind was still a little foggy. So I said, "So you'll be in Chicago for a year?"

"Yes," he said. "Dante hasn't forgiven me yet."

I sort of just looked at him.

"He's still mad. He says he wasn't consulted."

That made me smile.

"He doesn't want to miss swimming for a year. He told me he could live with you for a year."

That surprised me. Dante kept more secrets than I thought. I closed my eyes.



"Are you okay, Ari?"

"The itching makes me crazy sometimes. So I just close my eyes."  
He had this really kind look on his face.

I didn't tell him that my new thing was trying to imagine what my brother looked like every time I couldn't stand the sensation in my legs. "Anyway, it's good to talk," I said. "It keeps my mind off things." I opened my eyes. "So Dante's mad at you."

"Well, I told him there was no way I was going to leave him behind for a year."

I pictured Dante giving his father a look. "Dante's stubborn."

I heard Mrs. Quintana's voice. "He takes after me."

That made me smile. I knew it was true.

"You know what I think?" she said. "I think Dante's going to miss you. I think that's the real reason he doesn't want to leave."

"I'll miss him too," I said. I was sorry I'd said that. It was true, okay, but I didn't have to say it.

His father looked at me. "Dante doesn't have a lot of friends."

"I always thought everybody liked him."

"That's true. Everybody likes Dante. But he's always been something of a loner. He doesn't seem to go along with the crowd. He's always been like that." He smiled at me. "Like you."

"Maybe so," I said.

"You're the best friend he's ever had. I think you should know that."

I didn't want to know that. I didn't know *why* I didn't want to know that. I smiled at him. He was a good man. And he was talking to me. To me. To Ari. And even though I didn't particularly want to have this conversation, I knew I just had to go with it. There weren't that many good people in the world.

"You know, I'm kind of a boring guy when you think about it. Don't know what Dante sees." I couldn't believe I'd said that to them.

Mrs. Quintana had been standing further away. But she came up and stood right next to her husband. "Why do you think that, Ari?"

"What?"

"Why do you think you're boring?"

*God*, I thought, *the therapist has shown up*. I just shrugged. I closed my eyes. Okay, I knew when I opened my eyes, they would still be there. Dante and I were cursed with parents who cared. Why couldn't they just leave us alone? What ever happened to parents who were too busy or too selfish or just didn't give a shit about what their sons did?

I decided to open my eyes again.

I knew Mr. Quintana was going to say something else. I could just feel it. But maybe he sensed something about me. I don't know. He didn't say anything else.

We started talking about Chicago. I was glad we weren't talking about me or Dante or what happened. Mr. Quintana said the university had found them a small place. Mrs. Quintana was taking an eight-month leave from her practice. So really they wouldn't be gone a whole year. Just a school year. Not such a long time.

I don't remember everything that the Quintanas talked about. They were trying so hard, and a part of me was happy they were there but another part of me just didn't give a damn. And, of course, the conversation changed back to me and Dante. Mrs. Quintana said she was going to take Dante to a counselor. "He feels so bad," she said. She said maybe it would be a good idea if I went to see a

counselor too. Yeah, the therapist thing to say. "I'm worried about the both of you," she said.

"You should have coffee with my mother," I said. "You can worry together."

Mr. Quintana thought that was funny, but really I didn't say it to be funny.

Mrs. Quintana grinned at me. "Aristotle Mendoza, you're not the least bit boring."

After a while, I was just really tired and stopped concentrating.

I don't know why I couldn't stand the gratitude in Mr. Quintana's eyes when he said good-bye. But it was Mrs. Quintana who really got to me. Unlike her husband, she wasn't the kind of woman who let people see what she really felt. Not that she wasn't nice and decent and all of that. Of course she was. It was just that when Dante said that his mother was inscrutable, I knew exactly what he was saying.

Before she left, Mrs. Quintana took my face between her two hands, looked right into my eyes, and whispered, "Aristotle Mendoza, I will love you forever." Her voice was soft and sure and fierce and there weren't any tears in her eyes. Her words were serene and sober and she looked right at me because she wanted me to know that she meant every word of what she'd said to me.

This is what I understood: a woman like Mrs. Quintana didn't use the word "love" very often. When she said that word, she meant it. And one more thing I understood: Dante's mother loved him more than he would ever know. I didn't know what to do with that piece of information. So I just kept it inside. That's what I did with everything. Kept it inside.

*Three*

I GOT A PHONE CALL FROM DANTE. "SORRY, I HAVEN'T gone to see you," he said.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm not really in the mood to talk to people."

"Me neither," he said. "Did my mom and dad tire you out?"

"No. They're nice."

"My mom says I have to go to a counselor."

"Yeah, she said something like that."

"Are you gonna go?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Your mom and my mom, they talked."

"Bet they did. So are you gonna go?"

"When Mom thinks something is a good idea, there's no escape. It's best to go along quietly."

That made me laugh. I wanted to ask him what he'd tell the counselor. But I don't think I really wanted to know. "How's your face?" I said.

"I like staring at it."

"You're really weird. Maybe it is a good idea for you to see a counselor."

I liked hearing him laugh. It made things seem normal. A part of me thought things would never be normal again.

"Does it still hurt a lot, Ari?"

"I don't know. It's as if my legs own me. I can't think about anything else. I just want to yank the casts off and, shit, I don't know."

"It's all my fault." I hated that thing in his voice.

"Listen," I said. "Can we have some rules here?"

"Rules? More rules. You mean like the no-crying rule?"

"Exactly."

"Did they take you off the morphine?"

"Yes."

"You're just in a bad mood."

"This isn't about my mood. It's about rules. I don't know what the big deal is—you love rules."

"I hate rules. I like to break them mostly."

"No, Dante, you like to make your own rules. So long as the rules are yours, you like them."

"Oh, so now you're analyzing me?"

"See, you don't have to go to a counselor. You have me."

"I'll tell my mom."

"Let me know what she says." I think we were both smiling.  
"Look, Dante, I just want to say that we have to have some rules here."

"Post-op rules?"

"You can call them that if you want."

"Okay, so what are the rules?"

"Rule number one: We won't talk about the accident. Not ever."

Rule number two: Stop saying thank you. Rule number three: This whole thing is not your fault. Rule number four: Let's just move on."

"I'm not sure I like the rules, Ari."

"Take it up with your counselor. But those are the rules."

"You sound like you're mad."

"I'm not mad."

I could tell Dante was thinking. He knew I was serious. "Okay," he said. "We won't ever talk about the accident. It's a stupid rule, but okay. And can I just say 'I'm sorry' one more time? And can I say 'thank you' one more time?"

"You just did. No more, okay?"

"Are you rolling your eyes?"

"Yes."

"Okay, no more."

That afternoon, he took the bus and came to visit me. He looked, well, not so good. He tried to pretend it didn't hurt him to look at me but he could never hide anything that he felt. "Don't feel sorry for me," I said. "The doctor said I was going to heal very nicely."

"Very nicely?"

"That's exactly what he said. So give me eight to ten or twelve weeks, and I'm going to be myself again. Not that being myself is such a great thing."

Dante laughed. Then he looked at me. "Are you going to initiate a no-laughing rule?"

"Laughing is always good. Laughing works."

"Good," he said. He sat down and took out some books from his

backpack. "I brought you reading material. *The Grapes of Wrath* and *War and Peace*."

"Great," I said.

He gave me a look. "I could have brought you more flowers."

"I hate flowers."

"Somehow I guessed that." He grinned at me.

I stared at the books. "They're fucking long," I said.

"That's the point."

"Guess I have time."

"Exactly."

"You've read them?"

"Course I have."

"Course you have."

He slid the books onto the stand next to my bed.

I shook my head. Yeah. Time. Shit.

He took out his sketch pad.

"You going to sketch me in my casts?"

"Nope. I just thought that maybe you'd want to look at some of my sketches."

"Okay," I said.

"Don't get too excited."

"It's not that. The pain comes and goes."

"Does it hurt right now?"

"Yes."

"Are you taking anything?"

"I'm trying not to. I hate the way whatever the hell they give me makes me feel." I pushed the button on the bed, so I could sit up. I

wanted to say "I hate this" but I didn't. I wanted to scream.

Dante handed me the sketch pad.

I started to open it.

"You can look at it after I leave."

I guess I was holding a question on my face.

"You have rules. I have rules too."

It was good to laugh. I wanted to laugh and laugh and laugh until I laughed myself into becoming someone else. The really great thing about laughing was that it made me forget about the strange and awful feeling in my legs. Even if it was only for a minute.

"Tell me about the people on the bus," I said.

He smiled. "There was a man on the bus who told me about the aliens in Roswell. He said that . . ." I don't know that I really listened to the story. I guess it was enough just to hear the sound of Dante's voice. It was like listening to a song. I kept thinking about the bird with the broken wing. Nobody told me what happened to the bird. And I couldn't even ask because I would be breaking my own rule about not talking about the accident. Dante kept telling the story about the man on the bus and the aliens in Roswell and how some had escaped to El Paso and were planning on taking over the transportation system.

As I watched him, the thought came into my head that I hated him.

He read me some poems. They were nice I guess. I wasn't in the mood.

When he finally left, I stared at his sketch pad. He'd never let anybody look at his sketches. And now he was showing them to me. To me. Ari.

I knew he was only letting me see his work because he was grateful.

I hated all that gratitude.

Dante felt he owed me something. I didn't want that. Not that.

I took his sketch pad in my hands and flung it across the room.

*Four*

IT WAS JUST MY LUCK THAT MY MOTHER WAS WALKING into the room as Dante's sketch pad hit the wall.

"You want to tell me what that was about?"

I shook my head.

My mother picked up the sketch pad. She sat down. She was going to open it.

"Don't do that," I said

"What?"

"Don't look at it."

"Why?"

"Dante doesn't like people to look at his sketches."

"Only you?"

"I guess so."

"Then why'd you throw it across the room?"

"I don't know."

"I know you don't want to talk about this, Ari, but I think—"

"I don't want to know what you think, Mom. I just don't want to talk."

"It's not good for you to keep everything inside. I know this is

hard. And the next two or three months or so are going to be very difficult. Keeping everything bottled up inside you isn't going to help you heal."

"Well, maybe you'll have to take me to see some counselor and have me talk about my difficulties."

"I know sarcasm when I hear it. And I don't think a counselor would be such a bad idea."

"You and Mrs. Quintana making backroom deals?"

"You're a wise guy."

I closed my eyes and opened them. "I'll make a deal with you, Mom." I could almost taste the anger on my tongue. I swear. "You talk about my brother and I'll talk about what I feel."

I saw the look on her face. She looked surprised and hurt. And angry.

"Your brother has nothing to do with any of this."

"You think you and Dad are the only ones who can keep things on the inside? Dad keeps a whole war inside of him. I can keep things on the inside too."

"One thing has nothing to do with the other."

"That's not how I see it. You go to a counselor. Dad goes to a counselor. And maybe after that, I'll go to a counselor."

"I'm going to have a cup of coffee," she said.

"Take your time." I closed my eyes. I guess that was going to be my new thing. I couldn't exactly storm away in anger. I'd just have to close my eyes and shut out the universe.

*Five*

MY DAD VISITED ME EVERY EVENING.

I wanted him to go away.

He tried to talk to me but it wasn't working. He pretty much just sat there. That made me crazy. I got this idea into my head. "Dante left two books," I said. "Which one do you want to read? I'll read the other."

He chose *War and Peace*.

*The Grapes of Wrath* was fine with me.

It wasn't so bad, me and my father sitting in a hospital room.

Reading.

My legs itched like crazy.

Sometimes, I would just breathe.

Reading helped.

Sometimes I knew my father was studying me.

He asked me if I was still having dreams.

"Yes," I said. "Now I'm looking for my legs."

"You'll find them," he said.

My mom never brought up the conversation we'd had about my brother. She just pretended it hadn't happened. I'm not sure how I

felt about that. The good thing was, she wasn't pushing me to talk. But, you know, she just hung out, trying to make sure I was comfortable. *I wasn't comfortable.* Who in the hell could be comfortable with two leg casts? I needed help doing everything. And I was tired of bedpans. And I was tired of taking rides in a wheelchair. My best friend, the wheelchair. And my best friend, my mom. She was making me crazy. "Mom, you're hovering. You're going to make me say the 'f' word. You really are."

"Don't you dare say that word in front of me."

"I swear I'm going to, Mom, if you don't stop."

"What is this wise guy role you've been playing?"

"It's not a role, Mom. I'm not in a play." I was desperate. "Mom, my legs hurt and when they don't hurt, they itch. They've taken the morphine away—"

"Which is a good thing," my mother interrupted.

"Yeah, okay, Mom. We can't have a little addict running around, now can we?" As if I could run around. "Shit. Mom, I just want to be alone. Is that okay with you? That I just want to be alone?"

"Okay," she said.

She gave me more space after that.

Dante never came back to visit. He'd call twice a day just to say hi. He'd gotten sick. The flu. I felt bad for him. He sounded terrible. He said he had dreams. I told him I had dreams too. One day he called and said, "I want to say something to you, Ari."

"Okay," I said.

And then he didn't say anything.

"What?" I said.

"Never mind," he said. "It doesn't matter."

I thought it probably mattered a lot. "Okay," I said.

"I wish we could swim again."

"Me too," I said.

I was glad he called. But I was also glad he couldn't come to see me. I don't know why. For some reason I thought: *My life will be different now.* And I kept repeating that to myself. I wondered what it would have been like to lose my legs. And in a sense, I had lost them. Not forever. But for a while.

I tried using crutches. It just wasn't going to happen. Not that the nurses and my mom didn't warn me. I guess I just had to see for myself. It was just impossible with both my legs completely straight and my left arm in a cast.

It was hard to do everything. The worst thing for me was that I had to use a bedpan. I guess you could say that I found it humiliating. That was the word. I couldn't even really take a shower—and I didn't really have the use of both hands. But the good thing was that I could use all my fingers. That was something I guess.

I got to practice using a wheelchair with my legs out. I named the wheelchair Fidel.

Dr. Charles came to visit me one last time.

"Have you thought about what I told you?"

"Yup," I said.

"And?"

"And I think you made a really good decision by becoming a surgeon. You would have made a lousy therapist."

"So you've always been a wiseass, huh?"

"Always."

"Well, you can go home and be a wiseass there. How does that sound?"

I wanted to hug him. I was happy. I was happy for about ten seconds. And then I started to feel really anxious.

I gave my mom a lecture. "When we get home, you're not allowed to hover."

"What is this about making all these rules, Ari?"

"No hovering. That's all."

"You'll need help," she said.

"But I'll need to be left alone too."

She smiled at me. "Big Brother is watching you."

I smiled back at her.

Even when I wanted to hate my mother, I loved her. I wondered if it was normal for fifteen-year-old boys to love their mothers. Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't.

I remember getting into the car. I had to stretch out in the backseat. It was a pain in the ass to get me in. It was a good thing my father was strong. Everything was so damned hard and my parents were so afraid of hurting me.

No one said anything in the car.

As I stared out, I looked for birds.

I wanted to close my eyes and let the silence swallow me whole.

Six

THE MORNING AFTER I CAME HOME, MY MOM WASHED my hair. "You have such beautiful hair," she said.

"I think I'll grow it long," I said. Like I had a choice. A trip to a barber shop would have been a nightmare.

She gave me a sponge bath.

I closed my eyes and sat still for her.

She shaved me.

When she left the room, I broke down and sobbed. I had never been this sad. *I have never been this sad. I have never been this sad.*

My heart hurt even more than my legs.

I know my mom heard me. She had the decency to let me cry alone.

I stared out the window most of the day. I practiced pushing myself on the wheelchair through the house. My mom kept rearranging things to make it easier.

We smiled at each other a lot.

"You can watch television," she said.

"Brain rot," I said. "I have a book."

"Do you like it?"



"Yeah. It's kind of hard. Not the words. But, you know, what it's about. I guess Mexicans aren't the only poor people in the world."

We looked at each other. We didn't really smile. But we were smiling at each other on the inside.

My sisters came over for dinner. My nephews and nieces signed my cast. I think I smiled a lot and everyone was talking and laughing and it all seemed so normal. And I was glad for my mom and dad because I think it was me who was making the house sad.

When my sisters left, I asked my dad if we could sit on the front porch.

I sat on Fidel. My mother and father sat on their outdoor rocking chairs.

We drank coffee.

My mother and father held hands. I wondered what that was like, to hold someone's hand. I bet you could sometimes find all of the mysteries of the universe in someone's hand.

## Seven

IT WAS A RAINY SUMMER. EVERY AFTERNOON, THE clouds would gather like a flock of crows, and it would rain. I fell in love with the thunder. I finished reading the *Grapes of Wrath*. Then I finished reading *War and Peace*. I decided I wanted to read all the books by Ernest Hemingway. My father decided he would read everything that I read. Maybe that was our way of talking.

Dante came over every day.

Mostly Dante would talk and I would listen. He decided that he should read *The Sun Also Rises* to me aloud. I wasn't going to argue with him. I was never going to out-stubborn Dante Quintana. So every day he would read a chapter of the book. And then we would talk about it.

"It's a sad book," I said.

"Yeah. That's why you like it."

"Yeah," I said. "That's exactly right."

He never asked me anything about what I thought of his sketches. I was glad about that. I had placed his sketchbook under my bed and refused to look at it. I think I was punishing Dante. He had given me a piece of himself that he had never given to another human being.

And I hadn't even bothered to look at it. Why was I doing that?

One day he blurted out that he'd finally gone to see a counselor.

I was hoping he wouldn't tell me anything about his counseling session. He didn't. I was glad about that. And then I was sort of mad he didn't. Okay, so I was moody. And inconsistent. Yeah, that's what I was.

Dante kept looking at me.

"What?"

"Are you going to go?"

"Where?"

"To see a counselor, you idiot."

"No."

"No?"

I looked at my legs.

I could see he wanted to say "I'm sorry" again. But he didn't.

"It helped," he said. "Going to the counselor. It wasn't so bad. It really did help."

"Are you going back?"

"Maybe."

I nodded. "Talking doesn't help everybody."

Dante smiled. "Not that you'd know."

I smiled back. "Yeah. Not that I'd know."

## *Eight*

I DON'T KNOW HOW IT HAPPENED, BUT ONE MORNING Dante came over and decided he'd be the one to give me a sponge bath. "Is it okay?" he said.

"Well, it's kind of my mom's job," I said.

"She said it was okay," he said.

"You asked her?"

"Yeah."

"Oh," I said. "Still, it's really her job."

"Your dad? He's never bathed you?"

"No."

"Shaved you?"

"No. I don't want him to."

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

He was quiet. "I won't hurt you."

*You've already hurt me.* That's what I wanted to say. Those were the words that entered my head. Those were the words I wanted to slap him with. The words were mean. I was mean.

"Let me," he said.

Instead of telling him to go screw himself, I said okay.

I'd learned to make myself perfectly passive when my mother bathed and shaved me. I would shut my eyes and think about the characters in the book I was reading. Somehow that got me through.

I closed my eyes.

I felt Dante's hands on my shoulders, the warm water, the soap, the washcloth.

Dante's hands were bigger than my mother's. And softer. He was slow, methodical, careful. He made me feel as fragile as porcelain.

I never once opened my eyes.

We didn't say a word.

I felt his hands on my bare chest. On my back.

I let him shave me.

When he was done, I opened my eyes. Tears were falling down his face. I should have expected that. I wanted to yell at him. I wanted to tell him that it was me who should be crying.

Dante had this look on his face. He looked like an angel. And all I wanted to do was put my fist through his jaw. I couldn't stand my own cruelty.

*Nine*

THREE WEEKS AND TWO DAYS AFTER THE ACCIDENT, I went to the doctor's office to get new casts and x-rays. My father took the day off. On the way to the doctor's office, my dad was very talkative—which was very weird. "August thirtieth," my dad said.

Okay, so that was my birthday.

"I thought maybe you'd like a car."

A car. Shit. "Yeah," I said. "I don't drive."

"You can learn."

"You said you didn't want me driving."

"I never said that. It was your mom who said that."

I couldn't see my mom's face from the backseat. And I couldn't exactly lean over. "And what does my mom think?"

"You mean your mom, the fascist?"

"Yeah, her," I said.

We all busted out laughing.

"So, what do you say, Ari?"

My dad sounded like a boy. "I think I'd like, you know, one of those low-rider cars."

My mother didn't skip a beat. "Over my dead body."

I lost it. I think I probably laughed for five minutes straight. My father joined in the fun. "Okay," I said finally. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"I'd like an old pickup truck."

My mother and father exchanged glances.

"We can make that happen," my mother said.

"I only have two questions. The first question is this: Are you getting me a car because you feel bad that I'm an invalid?"

My mother was ready for that one. "No. You'll be in invalid for another three or four weeks. Then you'll do some therapy. Then you'll be fine. And you won't be invalid. You'll just return to being a pain in the ass."

My mother never cussed. This was serious business.

"What was your second question?"

"Which of the two of you are going to give me driving lessons?"

They both answered at the same time. "I am."

I figured I'd let them fight it out.

Ten

I HATED LIVING IN THE SMALL AND CLAUSTROPHOBIC atmosphere of my house. It didn't feel like home anymore. I felt like an unwanted guest. I hated being waited on all the time. I hated that my parents were so patient with me. I did. That's the truth. They didn't do anything wrong. They were just trying to help me. But I hated them. And I hated Dante too.

And I hated myself for hating them. So there it was, my own vicious cycle. My own private universe of hate.

I thought it would never be over.

I thought my life would never get better. But it *did* get better with my new casts. I could bend my knees. I used Fidel for another week. Then my arm cast came off and I could use my crutches. I asked my dad to put Fidel in the basement so I wouldn't have to look at that stupid wheelchair ever again.

With the full use of my hands, I could bathe myself. I took out my journal and this is what I wrote: *I TOOK A SHOWER!*

I was actually almost happy. Me, Ari, almost happy.

"Your smile is back." That's what Dante said.

"Smiles are like that. They come and go."

My arm was sore. The physical therapist gave me some

exercises. Look at me, I can move my arm. Look at me.

I woke up one day, made my way to the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror. *Who are you?* I made my way to the kitchen. My mom was there, drinking a cup of coffee and looking over her lesson plans for the new school year.

"Planning for the future, Mom?"

"I like to be prepared."

I sat myself down across from her. "You're a good girl scout."

"You hate that about me, don't you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"You hated that whole thing, that whole scout thing."

"Dad made me go."

"You ready to go back to school?"

I held up my crutches. "Yeah, I get to wear shorts every day."

She poured me a cup of coffee and combed my hair with her fingers. "You want a haircut?"

"No. I like it."

She smiled. "I like it too."

We drank coffee together, me and my mom. We didn't talk a lot. Mostly I watched her look through her folders. The morning light always came through the kitchen. And just then, she looked young. I thought she was really beautiful. She *was* beautiful. I envied her. She had always known exactly who she was.

I wanted to ask her, *Mom, when will I know who I am?* But I didn't.

Me and my crutches walked back into my room and took out my journal. I'd been avoiding writing in it. I think I was afraid all my anger would spill out on the pages. And I just didn't want to look at

all that rage. It was a different kind of pain. A pain I couldn't stand. I tried not to think. I just started writing:

- *School starts in five days. Junior year. Guess I'll have to go to school on crutches. Everyone will notice me. Shit.*

- *I see myself driving down a desert road in a pickup, no one else around. I'm listening to Los Lobos. I see myself lying on the bed of the pickup truck, staring up at all the stars. No light pollution.*

- *Physical therapy will be coming up soon. Doctor says swimming will be very good. Swimming will make me think of Dante. Shit.*

- *When I'm well enough, I'm going to start lifting weights. Dad has his old weights in the basement.*

- *Dante's leaving in a week. I'm glad. I need a break from him. I'm sick of him coming over every day just because he feels bad. I don't know if we will ever be friends again.*

- *I want a dog. I want to walk him every day.*

- *Walking every day! I am in love with that thought.*

- *I don't know who I am.*

*- What I really want for my birthday: for someone to talk about my brother. I want to see his picture on one of the walls of our house.*

*- Somehow I'd hoped that this would be the summer that I would discover that I was alive. The world my mom and dad said was out there waiting for me. That world doesn't actually exist.*

Dante came over that evening. We sat on the steps of the front porch.

He stretched out his arm, the one that had been broken in the accident.

I stretched out *my* arm, the one that had been broken in the accident.

"All better," he said.

We both smiled.

"When something gets broken, it can be fixed." He stretched out his arm again. "Good as new."

"Maybe not good as new," I said. "But good anyway."

His face had healed. In the evening light, he was perfect again.

"I went swimming today," he said.

"How was it?"

"I love swimming."

"I know," I said.

"I love swimming," he said again. He was quiet for a little while. And then he said, "I love swimming—*and you.*"

I didn't say anything.

"Swimming and you, Ari. Those are the things I love the most."

"You shouldn't say that," I said.

"It's true."

"I didn't say it wasn't true. I just said you shouldn't say it."

"Why not?"

"Dante, I don't—"

"You don't have to say anything. I know that we're different. We're not the same."

"No, we're not the same."

I knew what he was saying and I wished to God he was someone else, someone who didn't have to say things out loud. I just kept nodding.

"Do you hate me?"

I don't know what happened just then. Since the accident, I'd been mad at everyone, hated everyone, hated Dante, hated Mom and Dad, hated myself. Everyone. But right then, I knew I didn't really hate everyone. Not really. I didn't hate Dante at all. I didn't know how to be his friend. I didn't know how to be anybody's friend. But that didn't mean I hated him. "No," I said. "I don't hate you, Dante."

We just sat there, not saying anything.

"Will we be friends? When I come back from Chicago?"

"Yes," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Do you promise?"

I looked into his perfect face. "I promise."

He smiled. He wasn't crying.

## Eleven

DANTE AND HIS PARENTS CAME OVER TO OUR HOUSE the day before they left for Chicago. Our moms cooked together. It didn't surprise me they got along so well. They were alike in some ways. It *did* surprise me how well Mr. Quintana and my dad got along. They sat in the living room and drank beer and talked about politics. I mean, I guess they more or less agreed about things.

Dante and I hung out on the front porch.

For some reason, we were both into front porches.

We weren't really talking very much. I think we didn't really know what to say to each other. And then I got this idea into my head. I was playing with my crutches. "Your sketch pad is under my bed. Will you go get it for me?"

Dante hesitated. But then he nodded.

He disappeared into the house and I waited.

When he came back, he handed me the sketchbook.

"I have a confession to make," I said.

"What?"

"I haven't looked at it."

He didn't say anything.

"Can we look at it together?" I said.

He didn't say anything, so I just opened up the sketchbook. The first sketch was a self-portrait. He was reading a book. The second sketch was of his father who was also reading a book. And then there was another self-portrait. Just his own face.

"You look sad in this one."

"Maybe I was sad that day."

"Are you sad now?"

He didn't answer the question.

I flipped the page and stared at a sketch of me. I didn't say anything. There were five or six sketches he'd done of me the day he'd come over. I studied them carefully. There was nothing careless about his sketches. Nothing careless at all. They were exact and deliberate and full of all the things he felt. And yet they seemed to be so spontaneous.

Dante didn't say a word as I looked over his sketches.

"They're honest," I said.

"Honest?"

"Honest and true. You're going to be a great artist someday."

"Someday," he said. "Listen, you don't have to keep the sketchbook."

"You gave it to me. It's mine."

That's all we said. Then we just sat there.

We didn't really say good-bye that night. Not really. Mr. Quintana kissed me on the cheek. That was his thing. Mrs. Quintana placed her hand on my chin and lifted my head up. She looked into my

eyes as if she wanted to remind me of what she'd said to me in the hospital.

Dante hugged me.

I hugged him back.

"See you in a few months," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"I'll write," he said.

I knew he would.

I wasn't so sure I'd write back.

Me and my mom and dad sat out on the front porch after they'd left. It started to rain and we just sat. Sat and watched the rain in silence. I kept seeing Dante standing in the rain holding a bird with a broken wing. I couldn't tell if he was smiling or not. What if he'd lost his smile?

I bit my lip so I wouldn't cry.

"I love the rain," my mother whispered.

*I love it too. I love it too.*

I felt like I was the saddest boy in the universe. Summer had come and gone. Summer had come and gone. And the world was ending.

## *Letters on a Page*

*There are some words I'll never learn to spell.*