

Aristotle
and
Dante
Discover
the
Secrets
of the
Universe

BENJAMIN ALIRE SÁENZ

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One

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

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

I was fifteen.

I was bored.

I was miserable.

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

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

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

"La Bamba." I could cope with that.

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

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

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

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

“I’m thinking about it,” I said.

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

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

“What is it about boys and sleep?”

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

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

“Just like your Patsy Cline.”

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

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

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

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

She gave me a funny look.

“I’m fifteen.”

“I know how old you are.”

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

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

“So what’s the big meeting about?”

“We’re reorganizing the food bank.”

“Food bank?”

“Everyone should eat.”

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

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess so.”

“Maybe you can help us out?”

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

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

“I’m going to join a gang.”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m Mexican. Isn’t that what we do?”

“*Not* funny.”

“Not funny,” I said. Okay, not funny.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She looked at my T-shirt.

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

“Didn’t you wear that yesterday?”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s Carlos Santana.”

“I know who it is,” she said.

“Dad gave it to me on my birthday.”

“As I recall you didn’t seem all that thrilled when you opened your father’s gift.”

“I was hoping for something else.”

“Something else?”

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

“He’s not that complicated, Ari.”

“He doesn’t talk.”

“Sometimes when people talk, they don’t always tell the truth.”

“Guess so,” I said. “Anyway, I’m really into this T-shirt now.”

“I can see that.” She was smiling.

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

“I was there. I remember. It’s old and ratty.”

“I’m sentimental.”

“Sure you are.”

“Mom, it’s summer.”

“Yes,” she said, “it *is* summer.”

“Different rules,” I said.

“Different rules,” she repeated.

I loved the different rules of summer. My mother endured them. She reached over and combed my hair with her fingers. “Promise me you won’t wear it tomorrow.”

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

“Maybe I’ll let you wash it yourself.” She smiled at me. “Don’t drown.”

I smiled back. “If I do, don’t give my dog away.”

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

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

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

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

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