

# Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN ALIRE SÁENZ

Benjamin Alire Sáenz was the fourth of seven children, and grew up on a small farm in New Mexico. After graduating high school, he spent the next two decades studying and earning a variety of different degrees, including in philosophy, theology, English, and creative writing. He spent several years as a priest in the early 1980s, but ultimately left the order. Sáenz began to study writing in 1985, and started publishing books of poetry in 1992. His first novel, *Carry Me Like Water*, received rave reviews and won the 1996 Southwest Book Award. After coming out as gay in the late 2000s and seeking a divorce from his wife of 15 years, Sáenz began writing about the LGBT experience in his novels. These novels, including *Aristotle and Dante*, have been some of his most critically successful works.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The late 1980s were busy years for both gay rights and AIDS activism, something that would've greatly affected the lives of gay teens like Ari and Dante. In 1987, when the novel begins, the Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights took place. Police estimate that almost half a million people marched. At this event, Cleve Jones's NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt (a community art project memorializing the lives of people who died of AIDS) was displayed for the first time. Illinois (where Dante spends a school year) was the first U.S. state to decriminalize homosexuality in 1962, while Texas, where Dante and Ari spend most of the novel, didn't follow suit until 2003 when forced to do so to comply with the Supreme Court's ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas*. Gay marriage, meanwhile, didn't become legal on a national level until 2015, when people Ari and Dante's age would've been almost 50 years old.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Sáenz's young adult novels tackle issues of Mexican American identity, sexuality, or both, and many of his protagonists are also precocious intellectuals like Ari and Dante. These include *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life* and *Last Night I Sang to the Monster*. Other novels that delve into the intersection of cultural identity and sexuality include *Tell Me Again How A Crush Should Feel* by Sarah Farizan, *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai, and *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi. Aristotle and Dante also joins the growing genre of LGBTQ teen lit, which includes novels like Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Nick Burd's *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*, and *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe
- **When Written:** 2010-2011
- **Where Written:** El Paso, Texas
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel, Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** El Paso, Texas, 1987-1988
- **Climax:** At the Mendoza family meeting, Ari admits that he's gay and loves Dante.
- **Antagonist:** Julian Enriquez and his cronies, homophobia
- **Point of View:** First person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Cursing is Fun.** Ari's interest in foul language certainly isn't accidental: Sáenz has written in his blog that he adores cursing and thinks it helps him escape from the adult world and connect with the child inside of him.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Fifteen-year-old Ari wakes up on the first day of summer vacation feeling miserable. In order to escape Mom's church friends, Ari goes to the pool. On the walk there, he thinks about how Vietnam changed Dad, and how Dad won't talk about Vietnam or Ari's older brother, Bernardo, who's in prison. Ari doesn't know what crime Bernardo committed. At the pool, Ari doesn't know how to swim and hates the sexist lifeguards. A skinny and squeaky boy named Dante offers to teach Ari to swim. They become friends instantly. After a few swimming lessons, Dante introduces Ari to his parents. Mr. Quintana is happy, open, and inquisitive, but Dante says that Mrs. Quintana is "inscrutable." Ari doesn't know what the word means, but he thinks that Dad is inscrutable too. Dante cleans his room while Ari reads poetry, which Ari is surprised to enjoy. A few days later, Dante introduces himself to Mom and Dad, and gives Dad a book of Mexican art. Ari learns that Dad studied art before he went to Vietnam. Ari and Dante discuss that they're budding intellectuals, and Dante says he's trying to not be ashamed. Ari tells the reader that he's ashamed, too, but only Dante knows why.

Ari and Dante discuss Mexican nicknames, and Dante shares that he doesn't think he's Mexican enough. Dante spends the summer waging war on shoes, and as an excuse to destroy his, he invents a game in which he and Ari throw their shoes as far

as they can in the street. One afternoon, Dante sees three boys shooting **birds** with BB guns. In a rage, he threatens the boys. Dante cries and Ari helps him bury the bird, feeling horrible because he's not sad.

The next morning, Ari wakes up with the flu. Dad rocks and comforts him when Ari has bad dreams. As Ari recovers, Dad admits that he has bad dreams, too, and apologizes for being so distant. Dante comes over to draw Ari. It intrigues Ari when Dante refuses to let him look at the sketchpad. That night, Ari has bad dreams about not being able to reach Bernardo and Dante, and others about killing birds. His fever returns and Ari begins to feel older and lonelier than ever. He resurrects his childhood journal and talks with Dante more about whether or not they're Mexican enough. Following this conversation, Ari and Mom talk a little about Mom's education and the pain of the war that Dad carries with him everywhere. She tells Ari that someday, he'll understand. Later, Ari finds an entry in his journal in which he laments that getting older isn't fun and another about how nobody talks about Bernardo. Feeling afraid, Ari writes that if Dante knew who he really was, Dante wouldn't like him.

Mom lets Ari visit Dante. The boys sit outside to watch a **rainstorm**. They discuss that they're good boys, but they want to be bad. Dante suggests they take a walk and tells Ari that he's moving to Chicago for a year. Then, he sees an injured bird in the middle of the street. He picks it up as a car comes around the corner. Ari screams for Dante and wakes up in the hospital with casts on both legs and one arm. Ari tries to make jokes, asks for Dante, and asks what happened to the bird. Mom explains that Ari saved Dante and that the car ran over Ari's legs. Dante arrives and tearfully thanks Ari, but Ari tries to insist that he didn't save Dante on purpose. Throughout Ari's hospital stay, he insists constantly that saving Dante was instinct. He hates Mr. and Mrs. Quintana's gratitude, though he appreciates it when Dante brings him books. Dante also leaves Ari his sketchbook, but Ari throws it across the room in a fit of rage. When Mom reprimands Ari and asks him to talk to her, he says that he'll talk when she talks about Bernardo. Finally, Ari gets to go home. He watches birds out the windows of the car.

Ari is confined to a wheelchair while his legs heal, which he hates. He feels helpless and sad when Mom bathes him. Ari and Dante discuss the merits of seeing a counselor and one day, Dante asks to give Ari a sponge bath. Ari agrees, but feels angry and cruel when he sees Dante crying. When Ari gets his leg casts changed and his arm cast off, Mom and Dad agree to buy him a pickup truck for his birthday, but this is the only bright spot—Ari feels angry at everyone and everything. He wants to know who he is, and writes in his journal that for his birthday, he wants someone to talk about Bernardo. That night, Dante tells Ari that he loves him. Ari realizes he doesn't hate anyone and assures Dante that they'll still be friends when Dante gets back. The night before the Quintanas leave, they have dinner at

Ari's house and Ari and Dante look through Dante's sketchpad. Ari feels extremely sad.

Ari's friends at school, Gina and Susie, don't believe him when he says that he saved a guy named Dante and broke his legs. This delights him. On the second day of school, a pretty girl named Ileana writes her name on Ari's casts, and Ari is transfixed by her. He gets a red pickup truck for his birthday and sits in it every morning. One night, he dreams that he hits Dante with his truck because he is looking at Ileana. Dante writes several letters per week about parties and experimenting with drugs. Dante has his first kiss with a girl named Emma, and Ari wonders what it'd be like to kiss Ileana. Ari's bad dreams persist. He decides that he's going to kiss Ileana and vows to figure out what Bernardo did.

Dante writes about the art he sees at the Art Institute of Chicago as Ari pursues Ileana. When he gets his casts off, he takes a walk and a stray dog follows him home. He names her Legs, and writes to Dante about her and about his driving lessons with Dad. In his journal, Ari writes about all the things he's doing, including his new job at the Charcoaler. He feels like he's falling in love with Ileana and begins to realize that he's not silent like Dad: on the inside, he's verbal like Dante. Ari finally gets his license and drives out to the desert to celebrate. A while later, when Mom and Dad are at a wedding, Ari buys beer, gets drunk in the driveway, and thinks about Bernardo. Right before Christmas, he discovers a folder labeled with Bernardo's name. He wants to open it, but also wants Mom to give it to him. For Christmas, Dante gives Ari miniature tennis shoes for his rearview mirror and Ari gives Dante an art book. Surprisingly, Mom lets Ari go to a New Year's party, where Ileana kisses Ari. Dante writes to Ari about masturbating, which Ari finds embarrassing and disturbing. Ileana breaks things off with Ari—her boyfriend is in a street gang. She gets pregnant and drops out of school.

In a letter, Dante confesses that he'd rather kiss boys than girls, but he's afraid to tell his dad—he knows he'll disappoint him. On the last day of school, Gina and Susie take Ari out to the desert so he can drink. The next morning, Ari and Mom argue about whether Ari is a good person and if he's ever going to stop beating up on himself or stop making jokes about being stereotypically Mexican. Mom insists that Ari is in transition. Dante and his family return to El Paso, and he meets up with Ari while Ari and Legs are running. Ari reunites with the Quintanas, and observes that Mrs. Quintana looks more beautiful than ever. That evening, Ari drives to the Quintanas' house in his truck and lets Mr. Quintana take it for a spin. While his parents are gone, Dante and Ari lay ground rules for the summer: Dante can't kiss Ari, and Ari can't abandon Dante when people tease him for hanging out with a gay guy. They drive out to the desert and there, Dante says that his mom is pregnant. He hopes it's a boy who likes girls. Dante cries and says that he has to come out to his parents, but he feels like he's disappointing

everyone. A few nights later, Dante suggests they try kissing, in case Ari does like kissing boys. Ari agrees to the kiss, but insists that he doesn't like it.

The boys ignore each other for a few days. A few weeks later, Ari dwells on Bernardo and invites Dante to get drunk with him. Mom is visiting Aunt Ophelia and when he realizes he's home alone with Dad, Ari angrily thinks through the conversation he'd like to have with Dad. In it, he accuses Dad of being silent about Bernardo. Dante helps Ari out to the desert and there, Ari collapses and cries. The next day, Ari is enraged to discover that Gina and Susie came across Dante at the drugstore where Dante works and now know about the accident. They make up the next day when they take joints out to the desert and run naked in the rain while their dads bowl. Dante admits that a coworker named Daniel likes him.

Dad wakes Ari up to go to Tucson—Aunt Ophelia had a stroke and is dying. In the car, Dad and Ari talk. Dad says that Ari lived with Ophelia during Bernardo's trial for nine months because Mom had a breakdown. Dad gets out to cry and Ari stands with him. Ophelia dies before Ari and Dad arrive. None of their extended family attends the funeral and Mom explains that it's because Ophelia was gay, something that both Mom and Dad say didn't bother them. Mom agrees to show Ari pictures of Bernardo when they get home.

The morning after Ari and his parents get home, Ari goes to pick up Legs from the Quintanas' house. Mr. Quintana tells Ari that a group of boys jumped Dante when they found him kissing another boy. Dante is in the hospital, and Mr. Quintana is distraught that Dante never told him about his sexuality. He asks Ari to call him Sam. Ari doesn't know what to do. He visits Dante, where Sam and Mrs. Quintana affirm that Ari will always be Dante's friend. Then, Ari tracks down Daniel and one of the boys who beat Dante, Julian. He breaks Julian's nose. When Ari arrives home covered in blood, he tells his parents why he beat Julian, and says that Dante didn't run when the boys jumped him. Mom gives Bernardo's file to Ari. Over the next few days, Dad answers Ari's questions and Ari visits Dante. Ari tells the Quintanas that he's not going to pay for Julian's hospital bill if Julian isn't going to pay for Dante's.

Ari tells Dante what happened to Bernardo: when he was 15, he picked up a prostitute who turned out to be a transgender woman. Enraged, Bernardo killed her and then another man in prison. They discuss Ari's choice to beat up Julian, and Dante assures Ari that he's not like Bernardo. Dante also admits that he imagines he's kissing Ari when he kisses Daniel. A few days later, when Ari tries to visit Dante, he leaves when he learns that Daniel is already there. Ari and Dante argue about this and Ari ignores Dante for a few days. After a few days, Mom talks to Ari about Bernardo and Ari punches the wall. Mom pulls out wine and beer and calls a family meeting. Dad tells Ari about a haunting experience in Vietnam and then tells Ari that he needs to face that he's in love with Dante. Ari cries and admits that

he's ashamed of his sexuality. Mom tells Ari to not hate himself and Dad reminds Ari that when the boys beat Dante, Dante didn't run.

Ari calls Dante. They go bowling with Dad and Sam, and then drive out to the desert. There, Ari admits that he lied about their kiss—he *did* like kissing Dante. They kiss and then look at the stars. Ari wonders how he could've ever been ashamed of loving Dante.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza** – The novel's protagonist. Over the course of the novel, Ari grows from age 15 to almost 17. While he develops in a number of important ways, a few things remain the same: he desperately wants to figure out the titular “secrets of the universe,” and also thinks that being a teen in the throes of puberty is tragic. Ari believes that his development will be tied to figuring out Dad, a non-communicative Vietnam War vet, and discovering what happened to his brother, Bernardo, who's in prison for a mysterious crime. When Ari meets Dante at the local pool, Dante introduces Ari, who's quiet like Dad, to the possibility that he'll only be able to make these changes by becoming more open and vulnerable—and, most importantly, by communicating with others. This becomes increasingly important as Ari grows angrier and angrier, especially after he saves Dante from a speeding car and Ari's legs are run over. Ari insists that he saved Dante out of instinct, something that allows him to ignore his romantic love for Dante—which everyone but Ari himself can see. After the accident, Ari begins to lean more heavily on his physical strength and on doing things that make him seem more Mexican, such as asking for a 1957 pickup truck for his birthday. Despite his belief that he must remain silent around other people, Ari resurrects his childhood journal and in it, begins to pour out some of his insecurities and his desire to communicate better and know more about himself and his family. During his and Dante's second summer, Ari's dangerous and unhealthy silence reaches a head and as Dad begins to talk to Ari, Ari begins to open up. Ari's journey culminates when he breaks a boy's nose in retaliation for beating up Dante for being gay and when, in the aftermath, Dad encourages Ari to be brave and stop running from the truth. Because of this, Ari is able to confess his love to Dante, and this makes him feel free for the first time.

**Dante Quintana** – Ari's best friend. When they meet, Dante is skinny, squeaky, and a bit wheezy, but he grows into a tall and handsome young man over the course of the novel. He loves swimming and is, according to Mr. Quintana, an intellectual—he loves novels, poetry, and philosophy, and is an aspiring artist. Dante is open, affectionate, and communicative, qualities that both intrigue and scare Ari. Ari takes offense to Dante's

willingness to cry, though he's intrigued by Dante's compassion and his desire to protect and rescue **birds**. This results in, most notably, Dante walking into the street to rescue a bird with a broken wing and almost getting hit by a car, though Ari saves him from certain death. Throughout their friendship, Dante encourages Ari to communicate more and better and introduces him to a number of novels and volumes of poetry. During Dante's year in Chicago, he experiments with marijuana and alcohol and with kissing girls, though he ultimately discovers he is attracted to boys instead. Dante doesn't fit the mold of "proper" masculinity, especially for a Mexican man—and Dante is especially bothered by his lack of ties to Mexican culture and the fact that he doesn't speak much Spanish. All of this is heightened even more by the fact that Dante struggles with shame about being gay, especially when this aspect of his identity becomes too obvious to ignore. He adores his parents and is distraught about the fact that if he marries another man, he won't be able to give his parents grandchildren—and because of this, he keeps his sexuality a secret until, after four boys beat him for kissing a boy named Daniel, Mr. and Mrs. Quintana find out. His shame about his own sexuality means that when his mom gets pregnant, he fixates on wanting a little brother who's straight so that his parents will have one "good" son. Though Ari refuses to accept it, Dante has loved him from the moment they met and confesses his love at several points throughout the novel. Dante is thrilled when Ari finally admits that he's also gay and loves him back.

**Dad** – Ari's dad. He's a Vietnam War veteran and works as a mailman. Dad is a quiet and reserved person, which frustrates Ari—Ari desperately wants to know something about who Dad is on the inside. He knows that Dad had horrific experiences in the war and came home changed, that he has bad dreams, and that he also refuses to talk about Ari's older brother Bernardo. All of these things make Ari think that Dad is selfish, unwilling to communicate, and doesn't need to communicate to make it through the world. It's equally confusing when Ari notices that his parents clearly love each other deeply and that Mom doesn't need to understand all of Dad in order to love him. This view of Dad begins to shift as Ari learns more about Dad's past. He discovers that Dad studied art before he went to Vietnam, and once Dad starts teaching Ari to drive, Ari begins to see that Dad is happy and lighthearted when he's smoking and driving around. It does seem that despite his silence, Dad wants to connect with Ari and feels bad about not doing so. He tries early on to remedy this by reading all the books that Ari reads after Ari's accident, which helps them begin to connect. Ari and Dad don't fully connect until their road trip to Tucson to be there for Aunt Ophelia in her last days. Dad admits that he doesn't speak about Bernardo because when Bernardo was sentenced, Mom experienced a mental breakdown and he's afraid of hurting her or throwing her back into that dark time by bringing him up. He also begins to share some of what

happened to him in Vietnam. Seeing Dad's pain when he talks about this allows Ari to understand that Dad's suffering truly is real and close to the surface, even more than a decade later. The closeness that Ari and Dad develop allows Ari to finally feel understood when Dad encourages Ari to accept his sexuality and confess his love for Dante.

**Mom** – Ari's mom. She's a high school government teacher and though Ari finds her annoying at times, he adores her. They have a more open relationship simply because Mom is more communicative than Dad is; she shares information about her life and about Dad with Ari, which makes him feel loved. However, Mom also has ideas about how Ari should be and act, which often ends in fights or standoffs. This most often has to do with Mom's anxiety over the fact that Ari has no friends until he meets Dante, a fear that persists while Dante is gone in Chicago and means that Mom allows Ari to go to parties that Ari doesn't think he should be allowed to attend. Mom worked very hard for her education as a young woman and desperately wants Ari to become educated and hold a more intellectual job. She also encourages Ari to understand that being educated and American doesn't make either of them less Mexican. Though Mom adores Dad, she refuses to mediate Dad and Ari's relationship too much, and consistently tells Ari that there will come a time when he'll understand Dad better. She is willing to say that the war changed Dad, but she insists that she doesn't need to fully understand what happened in Vietnam to love him. Following her sister Aunt Ophelia's death, Ari learns that Mom is much more complicated than he gave her credit for. While Ari previously took offense to the fact that she refused to mention his brother, Bernardo, Dad shares that Mom suffered a mental breakdown when Bernardo was sentenced, and is still mentally fragile when it comes to Bernardo. Ari also learns that Mom is very pro-LGBT, as she was the only one who kept contact with Aunt Ophelia after the family found out she was a lesbian. Her fear that Ari is going to end up in prison like Bernardo leads her to facilitate a conversation between Ari and Dad, in which Dad encourages Ari to accept his sexuality and both parents assure Ari that they'll always love him.

**Sam Quintana** – Dante's dad. Ari refers to him as Mr. Quintana for most of the novel. Mr. Quintana is an English professor and like Dante, he's bright, open, and affectionate. Though Ari thinks that Mr. Quintana is certainly a dad (in that he has authority), he's not scary and is generally easy to talk to. He laughs a lot, is a self-professed bad driver, and cares deeply for both Dante and Ari, especially after the accident in which Ari breaks both of his legs. After the accident, Ari begins to chafe under Mr. Quintana's affection, as it feels like a burden and like Mr. Quintana only cares for Ari because Ari saved Dante—something that Mr. Quintana shows through his actions isn't true. After a school year as a visiting professor in Chicago, Mr. Quintana and his family return to El Paso for Dante's sake. Though Mr. Quintana suspected that Dante was

gay, he doesn't have to fully confront this fact until four boys beat Dante for kissing another boy. He's distraught to learn that Dante was worried about disappointing him and so never came out to him, and he insists that he doesn't care about having grandchildren. At this point, he asks Ari to start calling him Sam and the two begin to relate more as equals. Sam and Dad develop a friendship over the course of the novel's second summer, which helps Dad learn how to open up to Ari.

**Mrs. Quintana** – Dante's mom. She's a therapist, and according to Dante, she's "inscrutable"—that is, she's not as openly emotional or communicative as Mr. Quintana or Dante are. Dante thus finds it hard to read her. Despite this, she's still a loyal and loving mother and wife. Following the Ari's accident, Ari understands that Mrs. Quintana isn't inscrutable necessarily; rather, she's careful and judicious with her words, says what she means, and loves Dante more than anything. Despite these positive aspects, being a therapist also means that Dante and Ari find her annoying and far too knowledgeable about what they're feeling but might like to keep private. She also seems to have a sixth sense and is very suspicious, so she's well aware that Dante has experimented with drugs despite him never having told her. While Ari finds Mrs. Quintana intriguing from the moment he meets her, when she returns from Chicago, she seems younger and prettier than ever. This is because she's pregnant. She assures both Dante and Ari that she'll love them no matter what when it finally comes out that Dante is gay, and that Ari might be, too.

**Bernardo Mendoza** – Ari's older brother who has been in prison for the last decade. Mom, Dad, Cecelia, and Sylvia don't talk about Bernardo except occasionally in passing, so Ari has no real sense of who Bernardo is or what he did to end up in prison. All Ari knows is that Bernardo was always angry and it got him in trouble, and Ari understands that he lives in Bernardo's shadow—Mom and Dad are afraid of Ari ending up in the same situation. Because of this secrecy, Ari only mentions Bernardo by name a few times in the novel and usually refers to him only as "my brother." He desperately wants to know about Bernardo, and after Aunt Ophelia's death, Mom agrees to give Ari Bernardo's folder, which contains court documents, newspaper clippings, and photographs. This information reveals that when Bernardo was 15, he picked up a prostitute who turned out to be a transgender woman, and he killed her. Later, in prison, Bernardo killed someone else. Despite this violent streak, Bernardo loved Ari, who was four years old at the time, and didn't want Ari to remember the trial.

**Aunt Ophelia** – Ari's aunt who lives in Tucson. She never appears in person in the novel, but Ari fondly remembers staying with her when he was four years old, and she's his favorite aunt. At the beginning of the novel, Ari loves Ophelia but is incurious about her, why she's estranged from the rest of the extended family, and why he stayed with her as a kid. After she has a stroke, he learns the truth: Ophelia was a lesbian, so

the rest of the family (except for Ari's parents) cut her off. Both Ari and Dad describe Ophelia as a kind and decent woman who could make a person feel like the center of the universe. She leaves Ari her house in her will.

**Gina Navarro** – One of Ari's classmates. It's possible that she has a crush on Ari, but this is never substantiated and is just a suspicion of Ari's. She hangs out often with Susie Byrd. Both Gina and Susie are annoying to Ari, as they want to know about his accident and hang out with him often, but it takes him almost a year to understand that the girls do this because they care about him and not just to be obnoxious. They regularly visit him at work at the Charcoaler and invite him to parties. Ari recognizes that he feels comfortable around them in a way that he doesn't with other boys.

**Susie Byrd** – One of Ari's classmates. She hangs out often with Gina Navarro. Both Gina and Susie are annoying to Ari, as they want to know about his accident and hang out with him often, but it takes him almost a year to understand that the girls do this because they care about him and not just to be obnoxious. Susie is more introspective than Gina is, and she cries often, which annoys Ari. Ari recognizes that he feels comfortable around them in a way that he doesn't with other boys.

**Julian Enriquez** – A nasty and homophobic classmate of Ari's. Ari has known Julian since they were kids who played sports together, and he's never liked him. Julian is one of four teen boys who attack Daniel and Dante when they find them kissing. The beating is severe enough to put Dante in the intensive care unit. Ari successfully seeks Julian out and breaks his nose in retaliation, and he gets out of paying for Julian's ER visit by threatening to out him to the cops.

**Legs** – A mutt that Ari adopts on the day he gets his casts off and can walk again after the accident. Though Mom isn't thrilled to have a dog around and insists she needs to stay outside, Legs begins sleeping on Ari's bed immediately, and soon ingratiates herself with the rest of Ari's family and the Quintana family. She's an extremely happy and loving dog, something that both delights and perplexes Ari. Ari takes her on daily morning runs.

**Ileana** – A girl a few years older than Ari. He has a crush on her and eventually manages to kiss her at a party. Both Susie and Gina tell Ari that Ileana is just playing with him, and to a degree, they're right: she eventually confesses that her older boyfriend is in a street gang. When Ileana stops coming to school, Ari discovers that she got pregnant, got married, and dropped out.

**Dr. Charles** – Ari's surgeon. He's relatively young and looks like a former jock. Dr. Charles doesn't buy that Ari saved Dante out of instinct, but he doesn't press Ari especially hard to get anything more about Ari's reasoning. He says that there's more to Ari than Ari is letting on, though it's unclear if he suspects that he is gay, or if he simply recognizes that Ari is kinder and more compassionate than Ari is comfortable admitting.

**Daniel** – A gay boy in El Paso who is Dante’s kissing partner. He and Dante meet at the drugstore where they both work. Though Dante insists to Ari that Daniel is attractive and nice, Ari finds Daniel a despicable and cowardly person—he ran when Julian and his cronies tried to attack him and Dante, and he didn’t try to visit Dante in the hospital or make sure he was okay. Dante eventually comes to agree with Ari.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Charlie Escobedo** – One of Ari’s classmates whom Ari used to like, but in the present, is very interested in experimenting with drugs. He and Ari have a distant friendship, but they stop hanging out when Ari refuses to try heroin with him and Charlie uses a homophobic slur.

**Franny** – Aunt Ophelia’s long-term partner. Ari remembers her fondly from when he stayed with Aunt Ophelia as a child. Mom confesses that Franny died of cancer several years before the start of the novel, and that she never told Ari about it.

**Mr. Rodriguez** – The owner of the body shop in El Paso where Julian works. He knows Dad and so knows Ari too, and he’s very displeased when Ari seeks out Julian and beats him up.

**Mr. Blocker** – Ari’s junior year English teacher. He’s a new teacher, so he’s bright and idealistic, and he likes making his students write.

**Cecelia** – Ari’s older sister; Sylvia’s twin. Cecelia and Sylvia are twelve years older than Ari, and treat him more like a child than a sibling.

**Sylvia** – Ari’s older sister; Cecelia’s twin. Sylvia and Cecelia are twelve years older than Ari, and treat him more like a child than a sibling.

**Emma** – A girl in Chicago who is Dante’s first kiss.

their story.” As the boys grow up, however, they gradually begin to figure out who they are as men, as second-generation Mexican Americans, and ultimately, as young gay people in a homophobic world. As a whole, the novel suggests that this process of discovering one’s identity is anxiety-inducing in the best of circumstances, but is even more fraught when young people come up against conflicting and at times, harmful ideas about what it means to be a proper man.

Both Ari and Dante (but Dante in particular) struggle immensely with what it means to be Mexican—especially when neither of them speak Spanish well or have been to Mexico. To a degree, both boys want to be more Mexican than they think they are. Being Mexican is something they’re proud of, but it’s also not something to which that they feel especially connected—when Dante laments not knowing Spanish well and Ari points out that he could learn it, Dante insists that learning Spanish in school in the U.S. isn’t at all the same as learning Spanish as a native speaker, either in Mexico or in a predominately Spanish-speaking community in the states. Being Mexican, Dante suggests through this, means possessing certain skills that a person needs to learn beginning in infancy—it’s not something he or Ari can learn as teens or adults.

On the other hand, Ari and Dante, as well as their families, make it clear that not all aspects of the Mexican identity are worthy of aspiration. Ari regularly gives Mom grief by suggesting he get a job mowing lawns, which when Mom expresses exasperation and displeasure, Ari deems “too stereotypically Mexican.” Mom—and for that matter, Dante’s whole family (his dad is a college professor and his mom is a therapist)—wants her son to receive an education and do something more intellectual than manual labor. Importantly, Mom, a schoolteacher, snaps at Ari that having received a college education doesn’t make her or Mr. Quintana less Mexican—but as far as Ari and Dante are concerned, she’s not actually entirely correct. While Mom grew up in a Spanish-speaking community and has deep connections to Mexican culture, customs, and language while living and working in an American and English-speaking world, putting Ari in an American school where instruction is in English keeps him from comfortably bridging the cultural divide in the same way.

Ari and Dante begin to butt up against a similar kind of tension with their Mexican identities as they both begin to figure out their sexuality. The boys understand that as the only or de facto oldest son in their families (Ari’s older brother is in prison), they have a responsibility to their culture and to their parents to grow up, get married, and provide their parents grandchildren in the future. This is something that distresses Dante in particular—in anguish, he confesses to Ari that if he marries another man, he won’t be able to fulfill this expectation and will surely disappoint his parents. While Ari is able to far more successfully toe the line and look properly masculine and



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### IDENTITY, ETHNICITY, AND MASCULINITY

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* follows two teenage boys, Aristotle “Ari”

and his best friend Dante, as they grow up over the course of two years in late-1980s El Paso, Texas. When the boys first meet at the local pool, they’re 15 and in many ways, have no idea who they are—Ari even suggests that until a person turns 18, their parents and teachers are the ones who get to “write

Mexican by working out, getting a red 1957 pickup truck, and looking big and angry, Dante is unable to fit into this role with the same success as his friend. Even before coming out, Dante is much more sensitive than what Ari suggests is proper for a Mexican man. Coming out as gay and kissing boys in public means that Dante effectively gives up any ability he may have to hide and, ultimately, keep himself safe.

The horrific beating that Dante suffers at the hands of four peers who catch him and another boy kissing in an alley speaks to the very real danger of not living up to these expectations. Not being able to make his parents happy with grandchildren pales in comparison to the fact that Dante and other gay teens like him find themselves in situations where other people (who embody the very identities they cannot) are motivated to hurt them or even kill them for their sexuality. With this, the novel implies that these idealized identities might not be worth aspiring to at all—they are, in a variety of ways, the very things that keep Ari and Dante from being fully comfortable with who they actually are.

While these dangers certainly don't disappear at the end of the novel, Ari's choice to accept that he's also gay and has been in love with Dante since the moment they met suggests that coming to terms with one's identity can nevertheless be a healing and transformative experience. Ari comes to understand that while he may still be in the process of figuring out how to connect with his Mexican identity, his love for Dante and their parents' support for their relationship is enough to help him escape the intense shame he feels and, finally, begin to feel more at home in the world.



### SILENCE AND TRAUMA VS. COMMUNICATION

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* presents two opposing visions of how

people can relate to others: Ari and his family are overwhelmingly silent and ignore past trauma, such as Dad's experiences in the Vietnam War and the reason why Ari's older brother, Bernardo, is in prison. Dante and his family, on the other hand, are open, communicative, and affectionate with each other and with others. Especially as Ari begins to connect with Dad and figure out what happened to Bernardo, the novel goes to great lengths to show that remaining silent about something can be just as traumatizing as experiencing something traumatic firsthand, while speaking and attempting to connect with others is possibly not a foolproof way to guard against trauma, but is certainly more effective than silence.

When it comes to trauma, Aristotle and Dante clearly show that trauma is as much something that happens in an instant (as when the car hits Ari) as it is something that's passed down through generations. While Ari, who was born after Dad's return from Vietnam, has no memories of his dad before the

war or his return, he nevertheless suffers, too, from his dad's trauma. Dad's silence and unwillingness to speak to Ari about anything, especially the war, makes Ari feel even more alone and put-upon. Mom tells Ari that Dad carries the war inside him, something that Ari sees happening to him too—he may not remember the war, but he lives day in and day out with another person's trauma of the war. Especially given Ari's belief that Dad should be more available to him to teach him about how to be a man in the world and guide him toward adulthood, Dad's silence is especially offensive to Ari. Dad's secrecy about the war means that he's not just depriving Ari of a relationship, he's also inadvertently teaching Ari that the only way to deal with trauma is through silence.

In Dad's defense, he's not the only one in the family who uses silence and withdrawal to cope with their trauma. In addition to Dad's silence about the Vietnam War, Ari's primary conflict with his parents has to do with the silence and the mystery surrounding Bernardo, Ari's older brother, who ended up in prison when Ari was four. Ari sees that his parents and sisters act as though Bernardo is dead or doesn't exist to them—indeed, the reader doesn't even learn Bernardo's name until much later in the novel, reinforcing the sense of secrecy and silence around the topic. Similarly to the way that Ari feels that he has to live with the trauma of Dad's experience with the war, Ari feels as though he also has to suffer because of what's happening to his brother. All Ari knows for much of the novel is that Bernardo was an angry boy who got too violent one time—and so Ari feels the pressure to not be violent or step out of line. He feels that it is his obligation to take on the traditional role of the oldest male sibling in his family—all without knowing exactly what it is he's supposed to be avoiding in the first place. This is made even more difficult by the fact that Ari is angry; he's a teenage boy under a lot of pressure that he doesn't fully understand. Because of this, when bad things do happen to him, he feels he has no choice but to lash out at others whether they deserve it or not—and in this way, he perpetuates the cycle of silence, violence, and trauma because he feels he has no choice but to do so and no way to remedy the silence in his own home.

Dante, and the Quintana family as a whole, present a very different view of how to interact with others. Dante himself often cries, and his whole family is open and physically affectionate with each other. The novel suggests that this way of existing is healthier in many ways, if scary for someone like Ari—though he's somewhat jealous and wonders what it'd be like to kiss his dad in greeting, Dante's insistence that Ari talk is still wildly uncomfortable for Ari. This makes it very clear that relearning how to healthily deal with silence and ultimately break it is a difficult project—indeed, it takes Ari two years, until the very end of the novel, to break his own silence about his sexuality and confess his love to Dante, something that makes him feel freer and happier than he ever has.

As Ari grows up and as his family becomes closer to Dante's,

Ari's family gradually begins to borrow some of the Quintana family's willingness to communicate openly. Dad begins to open up about his experience in the war and also tells Ari about what Bernardo did, and importantly for Ari, his parents let him in on the fact that his beloved Aunt Ophelia (who dies suddenly of a stroke) was a lesbian, and so was shunned by everyone in the extended family aside from Mom and Dad. This is important information for Ari as he begins to come to terms with his sexuality. This openness that Ari begins to cultivate with his parents gives him the courage and willingness to be truthful with Dante about his feelings and begin to let go of his anger, making the case that the only way to recover from one's own trauma or that of one's family is to begin to talk about it openly and truthfully.



### FAMILY AND COMING OF AGE

When the reader meets Ari, he shares that one of his deepest desires is to know his father, Dad. Dad, a Vietnam War veteran, came back from the war emotionally scarred and Ari, who was born in the year after Dad's return, has only ever known his father as silent and closed-off. Through Ari's journey to get to know his dad and through the novel's other explorations of family, the novel shows that coming of age is as much a matter of discovering one's own identity and becoming an adult as it of learning to humanize one's parents, siblings, and ultimately, other previously unknowable adults.

At the beginning of the novel, Ari feels as though he's alone and afloat in his family. He's the youngest child by more than a decade; his twin sisters are 12 years older and his brother, Bernardo, is 11 years older. For a number of reasons, this age gap makes Ari feel alone and like an afterthought—his sisters treat him like a child, not a peer, and Bernardo is in prison and the family refuses to mention his name. Ari simply wants to know something about the family into which he was born. He has no idea why his brother is in prison, and he has no idea what scarred Dad so deeply in Vietnam. Though Mom talks to Ari, he finds most of what she says either irritating or unhelpful, as he knows that she's not going to mention his brother or speak for Dad about Vietnam. However, part of what Ari wants has to do with figuring out who he is as an individual—something that Ari believes is tied intrinsically to figuring out what's going on with his family. Importantly, Ari notes in the novel's first few pages that Mom, a high school teacher, doesn't believe that teenagers are real people—they're still developing—but to Ari, the adults in his life are barely real either. This suggests that for an adolescent like Ari, part of figuring out how to effectively and maturely function in the world is going to be coming to the realization that other people have rich internal lives, just like he does.

Once Ari meets Dante, he has the opportunity to get a close look at a family that functions differently from his own. Dante's

dad, Mr. Quintana, is openly affectionate with his son and his wife, while Mrs. Quintana is, in Dante's words, "inscrutable"—the opposite state of what Ari sees at home, and something that begins to expand his view of what family can look like. As the boys continue to grow and change over the course of the novel, Ari becomes very close with Dante's parents—Mrs. Quintana in particular treats Ari like a second son. Particularly after Dante's family returns from Chicago, Ari becomes increasingly intrigued by Mrs. Quintana, now pregnant and seemingly happier and more beautiful than ever. Over the course of this second summer, Dad and Mr. Quintana begin to spend time together unmediated by their sons and this, in turn, helps Ari begin to look at both of them as fully-fledged individuals. Through this, as well as through Ari's driving lessons with Dad, Dad begins to connect more with his son and as a result, starts to look more human. Being able to see these adults as humans, who have friendships and sexual relationships, in turn helps Ari come of age—finally, he has proof that his dad does more than sit in his chair and read when he's not at work.

This process of coming of age through humanizing adults culminates when Ari's parents sit him down for a "family meeting" after Ari breaks a boy's nose in retaliation for the boy beating up Dante and putting him in intensive care. For this conversation, Mom encourages Ari to drink a beer—something Ari has been doing secretly for a year, but that feels inappropriate in front of his parents—and both Mom and Dad level with Ari as though all three are truly adults. Ari's willingness to finally accept his sexuality and his love for Dante represents not just his final coming of age moment of the novel, but Ari's willingness to put his fears of disappointing his parents aside and take them at their word when they say that they'll still love him despite his sexuality. Though Ari still has one more year before he's truly an adult in the eyes of the law, the novel ends with him well on the way to adulthood—happy, open with his sexuality, and understanding that his parents and other adults are complicated and complex people, just like he is.



### INTELLECTUALISM AND EMOTION VS. PHYSICAL STRENGTH

One of the reasons why Ari and Dante become friends so quickly is that, though Ari doesn't know it at first, they're both intellectuals. Dante is interested in art, literature, and poetry, and he encourages Ari to develop his taste for the written word in particular throughout their friendship. Though Ari follows Dante's example and genuinely enjoys writing, reading, and thinking—he is, after all, interested in figuring out the titular secrets of the universe—Ari leans much more heavily on his strength. At times, allows his strength and his anger to keep him from enjoying or engaging with intellectual pursuits. As Ari and Dante's friendship develops and becomes more complicated, Ari comes to discover that his

strength doesn't actually have to exist entirely in opposition to his budding intellectualism or his emotions—but if it does, the consequences can be unfulfilling at best and disastrous at worst.

While Ari suggests in his narration that he's always enjoyed reading and has been something of a writer since he was in elementary school, that part of who he is begins to fade. Now, in the novel's present, Ari is 15 years old and has focused on building up his physical strength rather than his emotional capacity or intellect. Writing in particular represents an embarrassing willingness to speak the truth, something that Ari feels unable to do for a variety of reasons, including the secrecy surrounding his brother and Ari's unwillingness to face up to his own sexuality. In Ari's understanding, Dante's intellectualism is linked to a number of his other qualities, specifically his kindness, his sensitivity, and eventually, his sexuality. Dante begins to show Ari that Ari can do both: he can join Dante in discovering poetry and novels, as well as discussing philosophical questions about the world, while also being a strong, active boy. This begins to show that these two ideas aren't actually as opposed as Ari might have thought they were at first glance.

The relationship between intellectualism and physical strength begins to look more like a dichotomy when, at the end of Ari and Dante's first summer, Ari dives in front of a speeding car to save Dante and the car runs over Ari's legs in the process.

Notably, Ari insists that he saved Dante out of instinct, not because it was the right thing to do, because he loved Dante, or any other easily accessible reason. Insisting that he acted out of instinct shows Ari refusing point-blank to critically consider his actions, his motivations, or even the sense of diving in front of a moving car in the first place, and because of this, Ari turns even more fully to his strength.

Ari does this by instituting several rules with Dante, most notably that they're never going to talk about the accident. Instituting this rule is one way for Ari to try to gain some power and control while he's otherwise powerless (his injuries mean that he's confined to a wheelchair and can't even bathe himself for weeks), but it's also a coping mechanism that allows him to ignore his emotions. However, even as Ari shuts himself off emotionally, he still accepts Dante's offers of classic novels and poetry—an interest that continues through the next school year as Ari's English teacher, Mr. Blocker, has a habit of making students write. Ari enjoys this and even begins keeping a journal again like he did as a kid. The journal, however, betrays how uncomfortable Ari is with his emotions and with his interest in anything that isn't lifting weights in the basement and running with his dog, Legs.

The tension between Ari's unthinking strength and his emotions comes to a head when he discovers that four boys found Dante kissing another boy in an alley. While the other boy ran, Dante stood his ground and was beaten up to the point

of being hospitalized. Ari, in a rage, tracks down Dante's kissing partner, Daniel, and then Julian, one of the boys who beat him, and breaks Julian's nose to get revenge for his friend, showing the violent consequences of relying on one's physical strength to solve problems rather than approaching situations with calm rationality. In the aftermath of this, Ari remains unwilling to tap into his emotions. He insists to Mr. Quintana and Mrs. Quintana that "it was a loyalty thing" and has nothing to do with the fact that he's in love with Dante—something that everyone but Ari himself can see. However, Ari still escapes a lot of the trouble he could have gotten in by breaking Julian's nose, which stands as a grudging acknowledgement that violence like this, when undertaken in service of a friend, has its place.

Ultimately, once Ari is willing to accept his sexuality and that he's in love with Dante, it becomes clear that his anger, violence, and focus on physicality were nothing more than crutches to keep him from experiencing the full range of his emotions. With this, the novel suggests that while physical strength might not be intrinsically harmful or dangerous on its own, it can become just that when it acts as a stand-in for emotions—while academic pursuits, novels, and philosophy have the power to lead an individual in the direction of greater emotional enlightenment.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### BIRDS

For Ari and Dante, birds represent their childhood innocence and fleeting sense of wonder as they grow up. During their first summer especially, Dante is fascinated by birds. He consistently rescues them when he finds them hurt or, once, when he finds boys shooting at them with pellet guns, and he sees them as a symbol for the unknown potential he wants to protect in himself and the world around him. However, the way that Dante goes about rescuing the birds—often, it puts him in danger of violence or, in the case of the accident, in the path of a speeding car—reinforces how young and innocent Dante is. Ari's fascination with *Dante's* interest, meanwhile, represents Ari's own innocence and sense of wonder. Following the accident, the birds and the innocence they represent begin to look less positive, indicating that both Ari and Dante are growing up and gaining experience—they will never again look at birds the same way, as at this point, they began to symbolize their innocence lost after the accident.



### RAIN

Broadly, rain and rainstorms throughout the novel

bring about clarity, knowledge, and understanding for all the characters. In this sense, it often represents the end of innocence and naïveté. Sometimes, this is violent and horrible, as when Ari dives in front of the car to save Dante after a rainstorm. Other times, it's significantly more lighthearted, as when Ari and Dante run naked around the truck in the desert during a sudden rainstorm. Specifically, Mrs. Quintana's regular refrain to Ari—"remember the rainstorm"—suggests that she sees the storm in which Ari was injured as the symbolic end of the boys' childhoods and the beginning of their lives as experienced adults.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* published in 2014.

### Part One, Chapter Three Quotes

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

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

**Related Characters:** Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza (speaker), Dad, Mom

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 14

#### Explanation and Analysis

Ari tells the reader about why he feels sad for himself, and in particular that he feels sad because Dad, a Vietnam War veteran, was traumatized by the war. This sets up clearly the idea that trauma is something that can be passed down through the generations if it's not dealt with or talked about, which the novel makes clear by showing that Ari doesn't know anything about the war—he just knows that it's sad and hurts Dad.

When Ari also takes issue with being 15, it shows that being a teenager is also an anxiety-inducing and hard time, much as adults may idolize adolescence. In Ari's case in particular, being an adolescent means that he's dealing with new emotions, specifically unchecked and confusing anger, which in turn makes it even more difficult to deal with the things

he doesn't understand—doing so makes Ari feel bad too. With this, the novel shows how Ari not only takes on his dad's trauma; he then goes on to mimic Dad's silence and in doing so, begins the cycle of silence and trauma anew.

### Part One, Chapter Four Quotes

☝☝ Boys. I watched them. Studied them.

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

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

**Related Characters:** Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 22

#### Explanation and Analysis

At the pool, Ari tells the reader how much he dislikes guys in general, and the misogynistic lifeguards in particular. While it's possible that Ari feels like he can't be himself around other guys because of his discomfort with his sexuality (something that he's repressing at this point), it shows regardless that being a teenager is a lonely experience for Ari. This is because, gay or not, Ari doesn't feel as though he fits neatly into how Mexican and traditionally masculine men should feel, think, and act—his distaste for the way that the lifeguards talk about girls at the pool may, again, be linked to his sexuality and his own disinterest in women, but it also shows that he is more mature than other young men his age, as he is able to respect women as people rather than treat them like objects.

### Part One, Chapter Five Quotes

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

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker), Dad, Mom, Sam Quintana, Dante Quintana

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

When Ari meets Mr. Quintana, he enjoys the affectionate way that Dante and Mr. Quintana behave with each other. This begins to show Ari that there are other ways of interacting with parents that aren't as dysfunctional as the way in which Ari interacts with Dad, opening up the possibility that he may want to improve his relationship with his own parents in the future. The very fact that Ari finds Dante and Mr. Quintana's relationship to be nice suggests that on some level, Ari realizes that Dante is in a much better position and has a much more positive relationship with his father than Ari and his dad do—communication and openness may be uncomfortable, but they're also better and healthier in the long run. Wondering what it'd be like to kiss Dad in greeting suggests that Ari would like to move in this direction, which offers hope that as the novel progresses, Ari will become more like Dante and strive for more openness with Dad.

## Part One, Chapter Seven Quotes

☝☝ “My dad says it's all right if people make fun of you. You know what he said to me? He said, ‘Dante, you're an intellectual. That's who you are. Don't be ashamed of that.’”

I noticed his smile was a little sad. Maybe everyone was a little sad. Maybe so.

“Ari, I'm trying not to be ashamed.”

I knew what it was like to be ashamed. Only, Dante knew why. And I didn't.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza, Dante Quintana (speaker), Sam Quintana

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 35

### Explanation and Analysis

Dante tells Ari that according to his dad, they should take pride in their intellectualism and not try to hide it. When Ari notes Dante's sadness and wonders if everyone is a bit sad, it shows that as he grows and develops, he's beginning to think more about the people around him and who they are

on the inside. With this, Ari starts to understand that he isn't just a single, lone person—he shares experiences and emotions with all of humanity. While Ari's experiences may be unique, the fact that he feels sad and ashamed isn't.

The shame is an indicator that Ari (as the narrator) understands that he's gay and is letting the reader in on the secret before Ari (as the actual character in the narrative) has figured it out. The fact that Ari is ashamed but doesn't know why speaks to the mental gymnastics that Ari is engaging in, in order to not have to consider the possibility that he's gay. Dante, on the other hand, is already thinking about this and knows that he's not straight—thus, Dante is later able to come to terms with his sexuality much more easily than Ari is, showing again that there's a lot to gain from openly engaging with hard truths like this rather than burying them.

## Part One, Chapter Eleven Quotes

☝☝ “We're not really Mexicans. Do we live in Mexico?”

“But that's where our grandparents came from.”

“Okay, okay. But do we actually know anything about Mexico?”

“We speak Spanish.”

“Not that good.”

“Speak for yourself, Dante. You're such a *pocho*.”

“What's a *pocho*?”

“A half-assed Mexican.”

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza, Dante Quintana (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 44-45

### Explanation and Analysis

One summer day, Ari and Dante argue about whether or not they're real enough Mexicans. Dante insists that they're not because they're not in Mexico and don't speak Spanish well. This shows that Dante feels disconnected from his Mexican heritage, and further, sees that being Mexican is something connected to language and locale. The fact that Dante isn't familiar with the word *pocho* proves his point—he's not familiar enough with the language to know when Ari is insulting him in Spanish. However, the existence of such a term suggests that Dante isn't actually alone in feeling caught between two worlds. Rather, there are many others who, if they're open about it, have the opportunity to redefine what it means to be Mexican American.

## Part Two, Chapter Two Quotes

☝☝ 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.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza, Dad (speaker), Bernardo Mendoza

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 66

### Explanation and Analysis

When Ari continues to have bad dreams in conjunction with the flu, Dad admits that he has bad dreams too—which makes Ari feel close to Dad in a new way. With this, the novel shows first that, as Ari grows up and becomes more mature, he is becoming increasingly interested in other people and especially in how he fits into his family. This is why he's so curious about whether Dad thinks about Bernardo, and wondering if Dad is as scared as he is shows that Ari suspects that they may have more in common than Ari previously thought.

For Ari, Dad's willingness to give him this small insight into his inner world represents a major step in the right direction. If Dad is willing to talk to Ari about his dreams and about Vietnam, Ari believes that in turn, he'll be able to piece together who he is and how he fits into his family and eventually, into the adult world. Breaking the cycle of silence within the Mendoza family, then, has the potential to repair not only the bonds between Ari and his parents, but to allow him to better make sense of his identity and his place in the world.

## Part Two, Chapter Eight Quotes

☝☝ "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."

**Related Characters:** Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza, Dante Quintana (speaker), Mrs. Quintana, Sam Quintana

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 87-88

### Explanation and Analysis

Dante tells Ari about how he feels as though his parents can be both Mexican and English-speaking Americans, while Dante does not feel the same way because of how he was raised. In this passage, Dante shows that he believes being Mexican is tied to language and locale. Because Mr. and Mrs. Quintana were born to people who were themselves born in Mexico and then grew up speaking Spanish, they're far more connected to Mexican culture. Dante, on the other hand, is far more American since he isn't fluent in Spanish and for that matter, has grown up in English-speaking communities. His parents' lifestyle—one that, he suggests, is far more intellectual and American than that of his grandparents—also separates him from the more difficult lifestyle he believes is intrinsic to the Mexican identity. The fact that Dante feels so lost about this at all shows that he believes that in order to come of age, he needs to figure out who he is as a Mexican person and, ideally, become more Mexican—though this is something that Dante doesn't believe he can do, given that he missed out on learning about the culture as a small kid.

## Part Two, Chapter Ten Quotes

☝☝ 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.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza (speaker), Bernardo Mendoza, Dad, Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 92-93

### Explanation and Analysis

Ari explains to the reader that after what happened to Bernardo, Mom and Dad go to great pains to micromanage Ari and make sure that he's not going to wind up in prison like Bernardo did. This shows again how trauma doesn't need to be experienced firsthand in order to be meaningful and awful—even though Ari barely remembers Bernardo and doesn't know anything about what Bernardo did, he still has to pay the price and behave in a certain way because Bernardo is in jail. Mom's unwillingness to talk about this,

meanwhile, suggests that she believes that silence is one way to deal with this trauma that saves her pain—which may be true on some level, but it’s impossible to ignore that it’s still clearly harming Ari emotionally to have to shoulder all this guilt and responsibility. The novel suggests, then, that silence may be an effective coping mechanism in the short term, but can be detrimental in the long term both for an individual and his or her family.

☛ *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.*

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 94

### Explanation and Analysis

Ari reads an entry in his journal that he wrote right after he turned 15, in which he talks about how great it was to be 10 and how much he doesn’t like being 15. This makes it very clear how unmoored Ari feels now that he’s in the throes of puberty—his body seems unfamiliar and out of control in every way, and it also seems questionable whether Ari has actually succeeded in meeting the goal he set at age 10 of being an American. For one, this is a nebulous goal—people who speak Spanish or with an accent can still be Americans—but for Ari, he implies that being an American means being less Mexican by necessity. This shows that part of Ari’s difficulties with his identity likely have to do with the fact that several years ago, he dedicated himself to being less Mexican—but in front of Dante at least, Ari looks very Mexican in a way that Dante doesn’t, and it’s something of which he’s proud. In short, Ari is starting to understand that one’s nationality isn’t a dichotomy, and that he can exist in between being Mexican and being American without compromising either part of his identity.

## Part Two, Chapter Eleven Quotes

☛ “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.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza, Mom (speaker), Sam Quintana

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 99

### Explanation and Analysis

At the doctor’s office, Mom angrily shares that she never had a Mexican American professor when she was in school, which makes Ari realize that he’s never thought much about who his mom actually is as a person. Ari’s willingness to recognize that he hasn’t thought about his mom like this before shows that he’s beginning to come of age and think of his mom as a fully-fledged human being, who had experiences that were both good and bad before she became Ari’s mother.

Because Ari is starting to think like this and wonder about other people, he also starts to realize that his experiences may be unique to him, but they’re not actually all that unique. Ari has said prior to this point that he didn’t know that a Mexican man could be a professor. This shows that despite the generational difference, Ari and Mom aren’t all that different, and that getting to know her better will be an important step in Ari’s journey learning more about himself, as well.

## Part Three, Chapter Two Quotes

☛ 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.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker), Dante Quintana, Mrs. Quintana

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 126

### Explanation and Analysis

Following Ari's accident, the Quintanas visit him in the hospital and Mrs. Quintana tells Ari that she'll always love him. This makes Ari extremely uncomfortable, as he's not communicative at this point, especially when it comes to emotions. The accident in general marks the point at which Ari truly begins to rely on his strength and ignore communication when it becomes difficult, hence his choice to "[keep] it inside" that Mrs. Quintana loves him and Dante. Because of the shame Ari feels—which he cannot identify the cause of, but which likely stems from his suppressed sexuality—he doesn't feel able to accept Mrs. Quintana's love or know what to do with the underlying feelings he clearly has for Dante. In this way, Ari continues to take after Dad and rely on silence rather than deal with his emotions in a healthy way.

## Part Three, Chapter Three Quotes

☝☝ 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.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza (speaker), Dante Quintana

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 131

### Explanation and Analysis

When Dante visits Ari in the hospital one day, Ari doesn't pay attention, and instead thinks about the bird that Dante was trying to save when Ari leapt in front of the car. In this moment, Ari seems to understand that his unwillingness to communicate with other people doesn't serve him. He wants to know about the bird, but it's more important to him to keep to his rules of silence than it is to find relief by talking about it. This suggests that if Ari continues to have these moments in which he recognizes that silence can be detrimental both to himself and his relationships, he'll be more willing to change his thoughts on the relative safety of staying silent versus being open and communicating with others. While silence may make things easier in the short

term, as it allows Ari to avoid talking about his emotions, communication eventually allows him long-term comfort after enduring the intense discomfort of being vulnerable.

## Part Three, Chapter Eight Quotes

☝☝ 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.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza (speaker), Dante Quintana

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 144

### Explanation and Analysis

After Dante gives Ari a sponge bath and cries, Ari feels inexplicably angry and like he hates Dante—and he can't stand that he feels this way. Ari's anger, while possibly more intense than that of some teens, isn't entirely abnormal. And fortunately for Ari, he generally chooses to not act on it in destructive or violent ways, which suggests that he's better at controlling his emotions than this fit of anger might initially point at. Importantly, Ari's emotions here are so strong because of how powerless he feels. While Dante giving him a sponge bath could be an intensely intimate moment, it instead makes Ari feel inadequate and helpless, which in turn makes him feel more vulnerable. Keeping all of this inside of him also means that Ari has no way to deal with these emotions and because of this, he perpetuates the cycle of trauma, silence, and violence (which he has internalized from his parents' own way of dealing with pain) for a while longer.

## Part Four, Chapter Nineteen Quotes

☝☝ Maybe my dad just didn't need words to get by in the world. I wasn't like that. Well, I *was* like that on the outside, pretending not to need words. But I *wasn't* like that on the inside.

I'd figured something out about myself: on the inside, I wasn't like my dad at all. On the inside I was more like Dante. That really scared me.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker), Dante Quintana, Dad

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 200

### Explanation and Analysis

Through Ari’s driving lessons with Dad, he begins to figure out the ways in which he’s like Dad and the ways he’s more like Dante. This represents a major turning point for Ari, as this is one of the first times he says in so many words that he craves communication, vulnerability, and openness like Dante exhibits regularly. The silence isn’t actually who Ari is; it’s a learned coping mechanism. This in turn reminds the reader that Ari has learned to be silent from Dad because Dad is silent, and the family as a whole doesn’t communicate openly about anything—Ari is thus forced to bear to his family’s past traumas because of this silence.

However, Ari’s recognition that he’d be better off being more communicative doesn’t mean that the prospect isn’t terrifying. Ari recognizes that Dante is far more vulnerable than he is because of the way he feels so deeply and interacts openly with others, which makes it clear that while Dante may have the healthier way of being, it’s not always the easiest or, for that matter, the safest.

## Part Four, Chapter Thirty Quotes

☝☝ *The thing is I love my dad. My mom too. And I keep wondering what they’re going to say when I tell them that someday I want to marry a boy. I wonder how that’s going to go over? I’m the only son. What’s going to happen with the grandchildren thing? I hate that I’m going to disappoint them, Ari. I know I’ve disappointed you too.*

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker), Mrs. Quintana, Sam Quintana

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 227

### Explanation and Analysis

In a letter, Dante writes about his fears surrounding telling Mr. Quintana that he’s gay. Dante shows here that he recognizes that as the oldest (and only) son in a Mexican family, tradition states that he must grow up, marry a woman, and have children so his parents can be happy and proud grandparents. Dante believes that because he won’t be able or willing to fall into line with this, he’s going to have no choice but to disappoint his parents.

Though it’s understandable that Dante would question how his parents will react to his sexuality, he also grossly underestimates how much his parents love him and want him to be happy. Importantly, Ari sees that Dante misses this—he discovered after the accident how much Mrs. Quintana in particular loves her son, and he understands then that Dante will never understand the depth of her love. Again, though Dante isn’t doing anything wrong by worrying about disappointing people, this does show that his capacity to be open and trusting does have limits.

## Part Five, Chapter One Quotes

☝☝ “You’re in high school, Ari. You’re not looking for a profession. You’re just looking for a way to earn some money. You’re in transition.”

“In transition? What kind of a Mexican mother are you?”

“I’m an educated woman. That doesn’t un-Mexicanize me, Ari.” She sounded a little angry. I loved her anger and wished I had more of it. Her anger was different than mine or my father’s. Her anger didn’t paralyze her.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza , Mom (speaker), Dad

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 237

### Explanation and Analysis

As Ari sarcastically jokes about how boring and stereotypically Mexican his job is, Mom points out that being educated and believing that Ari doesn’t have to flip burgers forever doesn’t make her less Mexican. With this, Mom continues Ari and Dante’s project of adding layers and possibilities to what it means to be Mexican American. Though it’s not Ari’s question per se, she implies here that Ari isn’t actually less Mexican because he’s in the process of earning an education and doesn’t have the knowledge of what it means to be Mexican in Mexico, a question that has plagued Ari and Dante for a year now.

With this in mind, Ari’s interpretation of Mom’s anger shows that he still is developing the sense that anger doesn’t have to be bottled up to be good or valid—and for that matter, it’s better to not let anger take over and consume him. Mom is able to talk through her anger and reprimand Ari without losing herself, something that, at this point, Ari still cannot do because he relies so much on keeping things to himself.

☝ Sometimes parents loved their sons so much that they made a romance out of their lives. They thought our youth could help us overcome everything. Maybe moms and dads forget about this one small fact: being on the verge of seventeen could be harsh and painful and confusing. Being on the verge of seventeen could really suck.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker), Dad, Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 239

### Explanation and Analysis

After Ari and Mom’s conversation about their hopes for his summer and specifically, when Ari suggests that he might fall in love this year, Ari thinks that parents seem to forget how difficult it is to be a teenager. While Ari is in a very different place than he was last year, it’s important to note that this sentiment is very similar to some of his previous sentiments about how being 15 is tragic and difficult. This makes it clear that coming of age and figuring out how to be a person in the world isn’t something that happens suddenly, at least between the ages of 15 and 16—instead, it’s something that happens gradually over time and, in Ari’s case, won’t be complete for a few years yet. This normalizes the emotional turmoil that Ari feels and suggests that once a person becomes an adult, they forget how difficult this time period can be—but that doesn’t make the turmoil any less painful for teens in the thick of it.

## Part Five, Chapter Three Quotes

☝ “We’ll play that game,” I said. “That game you made up to beat the hell out of your tennis shoes.”

“It was fun, wasn’t it?”

The way he said that. Like he knew we would never play that game again. We were too old now. We’d lost something and we both knew it.

**Related Characters:** Dante Quintana, Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 249

### Explanation and Analysis

A few days after Dante’s return, he and Ari discuss the game they once played with their shoes last summer. In this

moment, Ari realizes just how far he and Dante have come since last summer, when they were both effectively children who could delight in a game in which they throw their shoes around. Now, they’re too mature for such a game—but they’re still acutely aware that they’ve lost that innocence that they enjoyed the summer before. While part of this certainly has to do with the accident, the boys are also just getting older and growing into young adults. Rather than relying heavily on childish games like throwing shoes, they’re now becoming more intellectual, open, and adult. This shift in maturity during their time apart shows that both boys have been significantly impacted by Ari’s accident. Ari’s reflection that “we’d lost something and we both knew it” suggests that although they feel similarly traumatized, neither he nor Dante are comfortable discussing the accident and their underlying feelings for each other. Like his parents, Ari is still reliant on silence as a means of coping with difficult emotions, despite his obvious maturation.

## Part Five, Chapter Twelve Quotes

☝ “I’m sorry about last night,” I said. “It’s just that sometimes I have things running around inside me, these feelings. I don’t always know what to do with them. That probably doesn’t make any sense.”

“It sounds normal, Ari.”

“I don’t think I’m so normal.”

“Feeling things is normal.”

“Except I’m angry. And I don’t really know where all that anger comes from.”

“Maybe if we talked more.”

“Well, which one of us is good with words, Dad?”

**Related Characters:** Dad, Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker), Aunt Ophelia

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 280

### Explanation and Analysis

In the car to Tucson to see Aunt Ophelia, Ari tries to apologize for snapping at Dad and they admit that talking might help the situation. It’s especially important here that Dad is the one to suggest talking. This shows that while Dad may be the one who taught Ari to rely on silence, he also recognizes that there’s immense value in communicating openly about problems, especially for a teen like Ari who’s

so caught up in emotional turmoil. By turning it back on Dad and pointing out that Dad taught Ari to keep his emotions under wraps, Ari is able to punish Dad in a small way for not teaching him how to communicate in a healthier way. This is something that Ari must feel safe or comfortable in order to be able to do (he must trust, for example, that Dad won't explode on him or punish him), which suggests that this will start to pave the way for more open communication between Ari and Dad.

☝ I left him alone for a while. But then, I decided I wanted to be with him. I decided that maybe we left each other alone too much. Leaving each other alone was killing us.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker), Aunt Ophelia, Bernardo Mendoza, Mom, Dad

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 280

### Explanation and Analysis

Dad gets out of the car to cry during his and Ari's drive to Tucson. Though Ari leaves him alone for a minute, he decides that silence and loneliness are hurting them. This is a major turning point for Ari. In this moment, he recognizes that while it may be kind to let Dad save face and cry by himself, Dad is also dealing with troublesome emotions with no help or comfort, when it may be more meaningful or cathartic to cry or talk with another person. In doing so, he would likely be able to more effectively move on from what he's crying about. Ari's choice to step toward Dad shows that while he may not have the ability to stop Dad perpetuating the family's reliance on silence altogether, he does have some power to change how they interact going forward. Standing with Dad shows Dad that Ari wants to be more open and communicative in the future, something that also points to Ari's growing maturity.

## Part Six, Chapter One Quotes

☝ He looked tired but at that moment, as we sat at the kitchen table, there was something young about him. And I thought that maybe he was changing into someone else.

Everyone was always becoming someone else.

Sometimes, when you were older, you became someone younger. And me, I felt old. How can a guy who's about to turn seventeen feel old?

**Related Characters:** Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker), Dad

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 300

### Explanation and Analysis

After Ari and his parents get back from Tucson, Ari realizes that Dad is starting to look as though he's becoming younger in some ways. With this, Ari begins to realize that age really is just a number and doesn't have everything to do with how old or mature a person feels. People, as a general rule, are always changing, becoming more mature, and rediscovering youth—and notably, Dad is rediscovering some youth here as he begins to open up to Ari about their family history and about Bernardo in particular. Ari's thoughts about how old he feels makes it clear that he's not separate from this train of thought; he recognizes that he's also constantly in flux, even if it doesn't make sense that he feels so old. However, it's worth keeping in mind that Ari is still ignoring his sexuality and his love for Dante at this point, just as Dad used to ignore their family history. This leaves it open for Ari to start feeling younger and freer once he finally accepts these truths about himself.

## Part Six, Chapter Two Quotes

☝ “He was so happy that you were going to have another baby. And not just because he was going to be a big brother. And he said, ‘He has to be a boy and he has to like girls.’ That's what he said. So that you could have grandchildren. So that you could be happy.”

“I don't care about grandchildren. I care about Dante.”

**Related Characters:** Sam Quintana, Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza (speaker), Dante Quintana

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 202

### Explanation and Analysis

When Sam tells Ari that Dante is in the hospital and why, they discuss Dante's sexuality and how ashamed he was of being gay—specifically, Dante's fear that he was going to disappoint his parents because of this. Ari lays this out for Sam so that Sam can begin to see how the traditional Mexican identity that Dante was trying to emulate was,

more than anything, making Dante feel horrible about himself and about his life in the future. However, because Dante knows he can't do anything to change his own sexuality, he took it upon himself to try to shape his younger (and as yet unborn) sibling to be the kind of child he believes his parents want.

Sam, on the other hand, demonstrates here that his love for Dante is far stronger than his belief that Dante should fit into a certain box, no matter what that box is. With this, he shows Ari at least that families can come in all shapes and sizes and that it's far more important to love people for who they are than it is to fit a certain mold.

### Part Six, Chapter Four Quotes

☝☝ Sometimes, you do things and you do them not because you're thinking but because you're feeling. Because you're feeling too much. And you can't always control the things you do when you're feeling too much. Maybe the difference between being a boy and being a man is that boys couldn't control the awful things they sometimes felt. And men could. That afternoon, I was just a boy. Not even close to being a man. I was a boy. A boy who went crazy. Crazy, crazy.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza (speaker), Julian Enriquez, Daniel, Dante Quintana

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 311

#### Explanation and Analysis

Ari explains to the reader what he was thinking in the hours before he beats up Julian, one of the boys who jumped Dante. Ari's suspicion that what separates boys from men is how they deal with their negative emotions shows that he's truly growing up and now understands that part of being an adult is developing the emotional maturity to appropriately deal with his feelings. Even if Ari does act without thinking here, it's important that he makes this leap and understands that he's being immature and not acting appropriately by jumping straight to violence instead of taking the time to think more critically about the situation. This realization, though flawed, gives him a place from which to grow and develop, and an example of how not to act in the future.

### Part Six, Chapter Nine Quotes

☝☝ And loved my father too, for the careful way he spoke. I came to understand that my father was a careful man. To be careful with people and with words was a rare and beautiful thing.

**Related Characters:** Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza (speaker), Dad

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 324

#### Explanation and Analysis

As Dad tells Ari more about Bernardo, Ari realizes that Dad is careful, which is a good thing. This represents one of Ari's final coming-of-age moments as in his analysis of Dad, he shows that he no longer thinks that Dad is just silent and unfeeling. Instead, Ari understands that Dad is a deep and rich person who is actually just judicious with what he does and how he speaks, as he knows that he has the capacity to either cause pain or to help, depending on what he does. This gives Ari an example for how to be going forward, something that he's spent much of the novel craving (though he most often craves this from Bernardo, not Dad). Realizing that he can actually look up to Dad and how Dad behaves shows that Ari now understands that he and Dad can be more alike and that this is not a bad thing. Silence doesn't have to be bad, either, if it's used strategically to protect the emotions of others.

### Part Six, Chapter Eighteen Quotes

☝☝ "What am I going to do?"

My father's voice was soft. "Dante didn't run. I keep picturing him taking all those blows. But he didn't run."

"Okay," I said. For once in my life, I understood my father perfectly.

And *he* understood *me*.

**Related Characters:** Dad, Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza (speaker), Mom, Dante Quintana

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 350

#### Explanation and Analysis

During the family meeting, Dad tells Ari that he knows Ari is in love with Dante. To give Ari advice, he reminds Ari that

Dante doesn't run from things that hurt and scare him. This shows Ari first that Dad loves him and isn't disappointed or upset that he's gay, something that gives Ari the security to later go on and confess his love to Dante. This also allows Ari to feel close to Dad and supported by him, something that he's craved his entire life. The fact that Ari and Dad are connecting over such a personal and emotional matter

shows that communication, vulnerability, and openness can be very good things and can help people become closer to each other. Speaking about these difficult topics is a positive thing, and now Ari and Dad can continue to heal from their trauma without falling back on silence, and instead rely on openness and honesty to form a habit of healthy communication.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PART ONE, CHAPTER ONE

Ari falls asleep one summer night, hoping that things will be different when he wakes up in the morning. Unfortunately, nothing is different when he wakes up. He turns on his radio. The song “Alone” by Heart is playing. Ari doesn’t like the song and thinks that he’s 15, bored, and miserable. The DJ annoyingly plays the theme song from the Lone Ranger. Ari groans as the DJ announces the date—June 15, 1987—and then wishes Waylon Jennings a happy birthday. Ari feels better when the DJ talks about how Jennings survived the plane crash that killed Buddy Holly and Richie Valens. The DJ puts on “La Bamba” and Ari wonders what Valens was thinking when the plane crashed.

*It’s a bit of a stretch that Jennings “survived” the 1959 plane crash, as he luckily ended up not being on the plane in the first place. Framing it like this, however, allows Ari to feel like there might be some good in the world, a difficult prospect given how disaffected and unmoored he feels. Trying to think of what Valens felt drives home that Ari is empathetic and can connect to others, but at this point, he’s bogged down in his own misery and that of others.*



## PART ONE, CHAPTER TWO

Ari enters the kitchen, where Mom is making lunch for the women in her church group. They banter about Ari’s love of sleeping, and Ari mentions that he was just listening to “La Bamba.” Mom whispers that it’s sad that Richie Valens died, and Ari says it’s just like Patsy Cline, whom Mom loves. Ari points out that Richie Valens died young, but he did something with his life. Ari asks what he’s done, but Mom points out that Ari still has time. Ari insists that he has to “become a person” first, which puzzles Mom. She teaches high school, so Ari knows that she somewhat agrees with him that 15-year-olds have more developing to do before they’re real people.

*Richie Valens was only 17 when he died, not long after releasing “La Bamba,” an instant hit. For Ari, this suggests that he might not have as much time as Mom likes to think to make a difference in the world or figure out who he is—though it’s also worth keeping in mind that since Valens died as a teen, he might not have had everything figured out, anyway, even if he was the famous artist of a hit song.*



Ari asks Mom about her meeting. Mom explains that they’re reorganizing the local food bank and asks Ari to help. Ari agrees, even though he hates being volunteered and thinks that the whole problem with his life is that it’s someone else’s idea. Mom asks Ari what he’s going to do today. He deadpans that he’s going to join a gang because he’s Mexican, but Mom insists that’s not funny. Ari feels as though he has to leave the house. He hates Mom’s church group, not because they fawn over him, but because Mom has more friends than he does.

*This passage shows that Ari feels alone, unmoored, and possibly less connected to the positive aspects of his Mexican roots than he might like to be. The fact that Mom takes the gang joke seriously suggests that she’s doing her best to try to push Ari in the right direction, but it’s worth noting that as a loner, Ari may be more susceptible to the kind of community that a gang might be able to give him. For her, the gang joke might hit closer to home than he intends.*



Ari decides to go to the pool and thinks that the idea is at least his own. Mom glares at his tee shirt, a Carlos Santana shirt that Dad gave Ari for his birthday. Ari insists that it's his favorite shirt and when Mom points out that Ari wasn't excited to receive it, Ari says that it was an odd gift. He says that he doesn't understand Dad, but Mom insists that Dad isn't complicated. They discuss that Dad got the tee shirt at his first concert with Mom, and Mom agrees to let Ari wear it. Ari gently reminds her that it's summer and there are different rules at play. She jokes with him that he shouldn't drown, and Ari jokes back that if he does, Mom shouldn't give their nonexistent dog away.

Ari tells the reader that he and Mom get each other's sense of humor. She's a bit of a mystery, though Ari understands completely why Dad fell in love with her, though he doesn't understand why Mom fell in love with Dad. He remembers once when he was little and Dad wouldn't play with him, Ari angrily asked why Mom married him. Mom told Ari that Dad was beautiful. Ari wants to ask where the beauty went.

*The banter between Mom and Ari suggests that they have a relatively open relationship and are comfortable making jokes with each other. The way that he talks about Dad, however, indicates that Ari doesn't understand Dad or communicate well with him, as it seems as though nothing Dad does makes sense to Ari. This suggests that going forward, Ari is going to make it a priority to delve into Dad and try to figure out who he is, something that also suggests that Ari is exceptionally mature and caring for a 15-year-old.*



*Ari's desire to ask about Dad's lost beauty shows that Ari prioritizes openness and communication, yet the reader will learn that he's reluctant to admit this or act on it. With this, the novel sets Ari up to learn that communication is a good thing that he should openly pursue, not just secretly desire.*



## PART ONE, CHAPTER THREE

Ari feels like the last boy on earth until a pack of neighborhood boys rides by on bikes and taunts him about having so many friends. Ari waves and flips them off, so the boys circle him. Ari flips them off again, thinking that he's not afraid and has a temper. Ari points his middle finger at the boy's face like a gun and the boys all ride away. Ari explains that most boys don't mess with him and starts to feel sorry for himself. He does this often and thinks it has to do with being a pseudo-only child.

Ari's twin sisters, Cecelia and Sylvia, are 12 years older and always treated him like a pet. Ari's brother, Bernardo, is 11 years older and in prison, so nobody speaks about him. Ari thinks that not talking makes him lonely. He tells the reader that some time after Cecelia, Sylvia, and Bernardo were born, Dad fought in the Vietnam War and came home changed. Ari thinks that Dad has scars everywhere and has heard Mom say that the war will never be over for Dad. Once, Ari asked his Aunt Ophelia if that's true, and she said it was. She told Ari that this is because Dad has a conscience, but he won't talk about what happened. Ari thinks that being Dad's son is tragic, but sometimes he thinks that being 15 is the most tragic aspect of his life.

*That Ari mentions his temper and that other boys don't mess with him indicates that he relies heavily on elements of traditional masculinity to keep himself safe in the world. He's clearly very successful at this, given that he scares off a pack of boys without having to really do anything. This shows that being masculine in this way is an important part of his identity.*



*Again, Ari makes it clear here that he doesn't actually like silence or keeping secrets, even as he goes on to insist that he's not interested in talking about deep or important things. It's also worth noting that Ari struggles with all of this in part because he feels as though he has to bear the weight of trauma that didn't even happen to him, such as Dad's experience in Vietnam and Bernardo being in prison. This shows that family trauma can be passed down through generations via silence.*



## PART ONE, CHAPTER FOUR

At the pool, Ari has to take a shower before he can get in. He hates this rule and hates showering with other guys. When he finishes, he sits on the side of the shallow part and wonders what he's supposed to do when he can't swim. He knows he should learn, and is proud that he taught himself to float all by himself. Ari loves doing things by himself and is bad at asking for help, a trait he got from Dad. The lifeguards and swim instructors at the pool are awful, as they're only interested in girls' breasts, not in teaching guys to swim. Once, Ari heard a guard saying that girls are like leafy trees and that he'd like to rip the leaves off.

Ari explains that he has no interest in being around guys. They make him uncomfortable and he's not sure why, but he knows he doesn't belong. Ari finds it especially uncomfortable that he might turn out to be a jerk like the lifeguards. He thinks that Mom would say that the guys are just going through a phase, but Ari isn't sure. He wonders if life is just a series of phases like Mom says, but he also thinks it sounds like an excuse. Ari suspects that something is wrong with him, but he's not sure what. He thinks it's better to drown than ask one of the lifeguards to teach him to swim.

Ari floats along until he hears a squeaky voice offer to teach him to swim. Ari is suspicious; he thinks that this guy must also not have a life. The guy offers again, and Ari, thinking he likes his voice, points out that he talks funny. The guy replies that he's allergic to the air and introduces himself as Dante. Ari laughs and says that his name is Aristotle. Dante's eyes light up and he says that his dad is an English professor. Ari says that Dad is a mailman; he's named after his grandfather and his full name is Angel Aristotle. Both boys laugh, but Ari can't figure out why. Dante says that he used to go by Dan, but it felt dishonest.

Ari accepts Dante's offer of swimming lessons. Though Dante looks thin and fragile, he's a disciplined swimmer. Ari is amazed that Dante can be so kind and smart in such a mean world. They end up hanging out throughout the summer, reading comics together and arguing about whether they're literature. Dante doesn't think so; he takes literature seriously and loves [Heart of Darkness](#). Ari reads it because of Dante and says he hates it, but in truth, Ari loves the book. Dad notices Ari reading it once and says that he loves it too. Ari wants to ask if Dad read it before or after Vietnam, but he knows that Dad won't answer.

*While it's entirely possible that all of Ari's discomfort with the lifeguards and with their misogyny has to do with the fact that he himself isn't sexually or romantically interested in women, it also shows that he's compassionate and isn't willing to talk about women in such a way. This continues to make the case that Ari is more sensitive and emotionally intelligent than other young men his age; he's just not able to show that all the time.*



*In this passage, it becomes clearer that even though Ari hasn't identified it yet, he's butting up against the fact that he's gay and therefore isn't going through the exact same experiences as these (presumably) straight lifeguards. This shows how not being straight can be an isolating experience for a young person, something that's made worse by the other physical and emotional aspects of puberty.*



*It's telling that in Dante's first conversation with Ari, he makes the case that it's important to be truthful and respect what feels right to oneself (which he does by going by Dante instead of Dan). Their laughter is one of the first ways in which they begin to connect to each other and form a bond. Ari's inability to identify why they laugh is understandable for Ari, who wants reasons, but it suggests that relationships don't always make logical sense.*



*As far as Ari is concerned, the world isn't set up to take care of someone like Dante who's so open and nice. This offers more insight into why Ari does things like pretend he hates [Heart of Darkness](#)—he doesn't think there's a place in the world for honesty about things like this. This also shows that Ari, Dante, and possibly, Dad are all intellectuals and interested in these scholarly pursuits, but that being an intellectual isn't always something that's visible to others on the outside.*



Ari thinks that Dante reads for fun, but Ari reads because he's bored. Ari also thinks that he has a darker outlook on life than Dante does, but they always laugh together. They can't watch TV during the day, so they spend their days outside. One day, they decide to ride the bus and see what's out there. They discuss whether they'd run away if given the chance, but Dante admits that he loves his parents too much to run away. They make up stories about the other bus passengers.

Ari tells the reader that he's never been close to other people. He tried Boy Scouts, but he never felt like he was part of that world. Ari doesn't find guys interesting and is often disgusted by them; being around them makes him feel stupid and inadequate. Ari thinks back to the Boy Scouts. Dad made Ari try it for a year in an attempt to keep Ari out of gangs and prison, like Bernardo. Ari hated that he had to be good because his brother was bad, but he did Boy Scouts anyway. The only thing he liked was learning CPR. Ari gave the corresponding patch to Dad and then quit. Dad insisted that Ari was making a mistake. Ari angrily threatened to start smoking pot if Dad made him go back. Dad simply shrugged and said that it was Ari's choice.

Ari says that he hates that Dad doesn't give lectures or talk. He wants to know Dad, but he can't because Dad doesn't talk. Ari explains that he isn't popular. He hangs out with a few guys and two girls, Gina Navarro and Susie Byrd, who torment him. He thinks that things aren't so bad—nobody hates him, but nobody loves him either. He's invisible and liked it until Dante came into his life.

## PART ONE, CHAPTER FIVE

One day after swimming, Dante invites Ari to his house. Mr. Quintana is an English professor, something that Ari had no idea a Mexican American man could be. He's young, handsome, and bright like Dante. Dante kisses his dad on the cheek in greeting, and they joke about whether or not writing a book is work. Mr. Quintana jokes that Dante just doesn't like work, so Dante changes the subject. Ari greets Mr. Quintana and refuses the invitation to call him Sam. Mr. Quintana suggests that Dante could learn some respect from Ari and sends Dante upstairs to clean his room. Ari is struck by how they communicate and wonders what it would be like to kiss Dad in greeting.

*Making up stories about the other passengers on the bus reads as innocent and youthful, reinforcing that for this summer, Ari and Dante are still kids who can delight in these simple, imaginative pleasures. However, their interest in a dark, complex book like [Heart of Darkness](#) show that they're also becoming more mature and worldly.*



*The fact that Ari links Dad forcing him to do Boy Scouts with Bernardo being in prison makes it clear again that Mom and Dad are trying extra hard to make sure that Ari stays on the straight and narrow path, in an attempt to keep him from ending up like Bernardo. That Ari chafes under this setup shows that he'd like to be his own person, not just a foil to the problematic older brother he doesn't even know.*



*For Ari, invisibility helps him navigate a world that he doesn't think will accommodate him. His desire to understand Dad shows that Ari is compassionate and wants to know others on a deep level, but blaming it all on Dad points to Ari's lingering immaturity.*



*The way that Mr. Quintana and Dante interact with each other represents a stark contrast to how Ari interacts with Dad, which introduces Ari to the idea that not everyone engages with their parents like he does. The Quintanas thus become an example of a healthier way of communicating for Ari, which eventually helps him learn to apply some of what he sees to his own family. In doing so, he becomes more communicative and vulnerable.*



Dante's room is big and messy. He plays *Abbey Road* on a real record player and gives Ari a book to read while he cleans. Ari feels awkward staying, especially since Dante has so much stuff. He offers to help, but Dante says that it's his responsibility. They discuss whether or not they analyze their parents and Dante says that his mom is "inscrutable." Ari doesn't know what the word means, but he says that Dad is "inscrutable," too. He feels like a fraud and accepts Dante's book of poems. Dante points to a rocking chair for Ari to sit. Ari moves stuff out of it, including a sketchbook, and asks to look through it. Dante refuses, which intrigues Ari.

Ari reads poems by William Carlos Williams. He doesn't understand everything, but he likes what he does understand. Ari starts to think that he might know what "inscrutable" means and thinks that poems are a lot like people: some are easy to understand, and others will never be understood. Ari is impressed by how Dante organizes his room, and he's jealous that Dante has a real desk. When he's finished, Dante grabs the book of poetry and reads a poem out loud that contains the word "bastard." Ari knows that Dante isn't allowed to use the word, but that Dante enjoys using it in his own room. They spend the rest of the afternoon reading poems out loud. Ari thinks that Dante's voice feels real and that he feels real too. Later, Ari looks up *inscrutable*. He thinks that today, he learned two new words: *inscrutable* and *friend*.

## PART ONE, CHAPTER SIX

One afternoon, Dante stops at Ari's house to introduce himself to Mom and Dad. Ari explains that Dante taught him how to swim and notes that Mom and Dad look excited that Ari made a friend. Dante offers Dad a gift of a book of Mexican paintings. Dad smiles but insists he can't accept it. Very seriously, Dante says that his parents sent it, so Dad has to keep it. Dad smiles, something he does rarely. Ari notices that Dad treats the book like a treasure and thinks that he just doesn't understand his dad.

*Dante's use of "inscrutable" here shows just how intellectual Dante is, while Ari's ability to grasp the word's meaning (even if he's not entirely sure about it) speaks to his capacity to learn and follow Dante in these intellectual pursuits. However, feeling like a fraud suggests that Ari isn't comfortable with all of this. Rather, learning to be okay with his intellectual interests is something that Ari will have to learn as he grows up and comes of age.*



*When Ari makes this connection between understanding poems and people, it sets up the idea that Ari will start to be able to connect more with others as he becomes more comfortable with language—in part because language helps him articulate his emotions, especially the uncomfortable ones. This is reinforced as the boys read poems to each other and test the limits of acceptable language. Poetry is, in this situation, a way for them to experiment with adulthood and autonomy.*



*Dad's reaction to the book makes it clear that there's more to him than Ari thinks. Notably, the way that Ari talks about Dad suggests that he's not exactly setting himself up to learn more about him. Instead, Ari has decided that he's not going to understand Dad, so it's not worth trying. Ironically, this decision to give up and remain closed-off is the very thing that frustrates Ari about his dad. This suggests that Ari will have to get past this resistance toward vulnerability if he ever expects to understand Dad.*



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## PART ONE, CHAPTER SEVEN

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In Ari's room, Dante is shocked that there's "nothing" there and says that Ari's furniture, radio, and books don't count. He asks if Ari has hobbies and suggests that Ari will be a priest. Ari says that he doesn't believe in God enough to be a priest, which makes Dante laugh. Dante says it's good and smart to question and says that Ari is smart, no matter what he says to the contrary. Mr. Quintana told Dante that he's an intellectual and shouldn't be ashamed, but Ari notices that Dante looks a little sad. Dante says he's trying to not be ashamed. Ari understands what it's like to feel ashamed, but he tells the reader that only Dante knows *why* Ari is ashamed. Ari admits to the reader that he really likes Dante.

*Again, the way that Ari talks about his shame and directs it at the reader through the narration subtly lets the reader in on Ari's secret that he's gay, while making it clear that Ari's character in the novel isn't yet willing to accept this about himself. This shows that coming to terms with one's sexuality also has to do with finding the language to communicate that to oneself, something that Ari doesn't yet have but that he might gain if he continues to pursue his intellectual and emotional development through poetry and novels.*



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## PART ONE, CHAPTER EIGHT

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Ari watches Dad flip through the art book. He knows now that Dad studied art before Vietnam. One evening, Dad points out a mural to Ari. Ari dutifully looks at the painting, but he's more interested in looking at Dad's finger. He knows that the finger has pulled a trigger and touched Mom. Ari wants to ask questions, but he can't so he just nods. He's never thought of Dad as someone who's interested in art, just as an ex-Marine mailman who had one more son after Vietnam. Ari doesn't think that his birth was Dad's idea. He wants to ask questions, but he decides to collect clues to figure Dad out someday.

*Now, Ari understands that there's more to Dad than meets the eye and that, if he's patient, he might be able to figure out who Dad is. His choice to collect clues rather than try to talk to Dad, however, points to Ari's discomfort with open and direct communication. Ari still feels more comfortable watching and learning, which means that there's only so much he can understand in this more passive role.*



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## PART ONE, CHAPTER NINE

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After swimming one day, Ari and Dante stop at a convenience store. Dante buys Coke and peanuts, and Ari buys candy. Ari declines a sip of Dante's Coke and says he doesn't like it. They walk around and talk about nicknames. Dante says that Mexicans really like nicknames and that his aunts call Mrs. Quintana Chole. Ari asks if her name is Soledad, which Dante says proves his point—the name Soledad has a set nickname. They discuss that Ari's mom, Liliana, goes by Lilly, and Ari says that Soledad, which means solitude or lonely, is a beautiful name and fits Mrs. Quintana. Ari says that Dad is Santiago but goes by Jaime, which again proves Dante's point. Ari asks if it bothers Dante that he's Mexican. Dante says that he thinks that Mexicans don't like him.

*Dante's annoyance with nicknames, and specifically traditionally Mexican ones suggests that he's not comfortable in his Mexican identity. The fact that he doesn't understand why these nicknames crop up the way they do suggests that Dante might not have the cultural knowledge to just accept that this is the way things are or understand why nicknames work in this way. With this, the novel begins to show that Dante is missing important knowledge that will be hard for him to discover on his own as he becomes an adult.*



## PART ONE, CHAPTER TEN

One moonless night, Mr. Quintana and Mrs. Quintana take Ari and Dante to the desert to use Dante's new telescope. Dante and Mr. Quintana sing along horribly with the Beatles and Ari wonders what Dad would do if he kissed him on the cheek. In the desert, Ari thinks it's very dark and thinks about how much Dante knows about light pollution. He watches and drinks a Coke, even though he doesn't like it. Mrs. Quintana says that Dante has told her that Ari is very smart. Ari insists that he's not as smart as Dante, but Dante interrupts and says that smart people are "perfect shits." This offends Mrs. Quintana, and to make matters worse, Mr. Quintana tells Dante to curse only when he's not around his mom.

The argument ends when Dante spots something in the telescope. They take turns and when Ari looks, Dante explains what Ari is seeing. Ari doesn't listen; instead, he feels like the world is bigger and closer than he thought possible. It's beautiful, overwhelming, and makes Ari feel like he matters. Dante whispers that he's going to discover all the secrets of the universe. Ari asks what he's going to do with the secrets, and Dante says he's going to change the world. Ari believes him. That night, they sleep in Dante's backyard and listen to his parents talk inside, Mr. Quintana in English and Mrs. Quintana in Spanish. Ari says that his parents do that too. He and Dante look for stars, but there's too much light pollution.

## PART ONE, CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dante hates wearing shoes. He takes them off everywhere. Ari watches him take them off at Mass one Sunday; Dante points out that Jesus didn't wear shoes. At Ari's house, Dante takes his shoes off and leaves them on the porch, like the Japanese do. When Ari points out that they're Mexican, not Japanese, Dante says that they're not really Mexicans: they don't know anything about Mexico and speak poor Spanish. Ari calls Dante a *pocho*—a "half-assed Mexican." Dante doesn't know the term or deny it.

Ari enjoys Dante's war with shoes and asks one day why he doesn't like them. Dante says that he just hates shoes. Mrs. Quintana, however, forces Dante to wear them because he could get diseases or be mistaken for "another poor Mexican." Dante says that she often reminds him that he can afford shoes, but Dante tells her that *he* doesn't have a job so *he* can't afford shoes. Dante says that it's not about being poor or being Mexican; it's simply a matter of not liking shoes. He tells Ari that he believes wearing shoes is unnatural. Ari gives Dante a look and says that he's nuts, but he takes it back when Dante looks upset.

*Again, the fact that Ari dwells on what it'd be like to have a more open relationship with Dad speaks to his instinctive understanding that open communication is healthier and superior to the silence that permeates his family. His sense of wonder in regards to how much Dante knows about the natural world also reminds the reader of what a budding intellectual Ari is; he thinks that knowing things like this is good and presumably wants to emulate Dante, at least to some degree.*



*Getting to see the stars up close through a telescope feeds Ari's desire to know more about the world around him, and Ari and Dante's whispered conversation builds intimacy on a foundation of intellectualism and curiosity about the world. This situates curiosity, friendship, and intellectual pursuits as related ideas—if Ari can figure out how to combine all three as he moves through the world, coming of age and figuring out who he is will become increasingly easier.*



*When Dante doesn't know what pocho means, it actually proves his point—he doesn't know enough Spanish slang to get by, while Ari appears to have more of the language. Dante's desire to figure out where he fits in culturally indicates that this is something close to his heart and that he possibly feels uncomfortable with how non-Mexican he thinks he is.*



*What Dante says about Mrs. Quintana's pro-shoe argument shows that she desperately wants Dante to do better than her—and that he can do better, in part, by looking the part of a middle-class American teen. Because Dante is a generation removed from the shame that Mrs. Quintana might feel about coming from poverty, this argument doesn't seem at all reasonable to him.*



Dante tells Ari to take his shoes off and then makes up a game in which they have to see who can throw their shoes the farthest. It's systematic, and Dante even borrows Mr. Quintana's tape measure. Ari thinks this is silly, since they could just mark where the shoe lands with chalk, but Dante insists that they must know exactly what they're doing. He says that they measure distance when people throw javelins and insists that what they're doing is a real sport. Ari points out that they could get hit by a car, but they both agree that it's more fun to play in the street than the park. Ari agrees to play by Dante's rules.

The game evolves. Mr. Quintana comes outside and reprimands Dante for playing in the street and beating up on his shoes. Dante innocently explains that they're playing a version of the javelin, which makes Mr. Quintana laugh. He insists that they have to tell Mrs. Quintana and sends the boys to the park.

## PART ONE, CHAPTER TWELVE

One afternoon on Dante's front porch, Ari smiles when he notices Dante staring at his own feet. Dante wants to know what Ari is smiling about. Ari lies that it's nothing, which Dante sees through. Ari thinks that Dante believes that people need to *spea*k the truth, though Dante and Dad do both believe that people need to be truthful. Ari is like his dad and thinks that he can keep it private. Ari admits that he was smiling because Dante was looking at his own feet, and they discuss whether it's weird or bad to study one's own body. Dante asks if Ari likes dogs and then points out that dogs don't have to wear shoes. Dante says he'd like a dog from the shelter.

They hear a noise across the street and see three boys with BB guns and a **bird** that they shot. Dante shouts at them to stop, races to them, and demands that they give him the BB gun. They argue about whether the second amendment applies to BB guns and Dante threatens them. Ari backs him up and threatens to beat up the boys, fearing that they're going to hurt Dante. They all size each other up and when one boy looks ready to point his BB gun at Ari, Ari reaches over and takes it. It surprises the boy, and Ari throws the gun to the ground. The boys leave, mumbling.

*Making this game so regimented and specific speaks to the developmental space the boys are in right now: they're still definitely boys who play silly games with their shoes, but they're also starting to look forward to their futures as adults and try to infuse their games with some of the specificity of the adult world.*



*That Mr. Quintana laughs at Dante suggests that adults don't have to be entirely boring or uptight. He shows the boys that they can maintain some of their childish delight and still exist as adults.*



*In this situation, Ari's ability to see that Dante and Dad aren't so different in the way that they value truthfulness allows him to make more sense of Dad. Because of Ari's friendship and closeness with Dante, he's able to apply what he learns to his relationships with others. In doing so, he begins to connect better with those other people. Their discussion about bodies reminds the readers that the boys are in the throes of puberty, when their bodies are rapidly changing as well as their minds and their understanding of others.*



*Racing over to these boys shows that Dante is a selfless person and is extremely compassionate. Ari's inner monologue, meanwhile, makes it clear that he cares deeply for Dante and will do anything to make sure that Dante is happy and safe. While Ari may not be so interested in the bird, being around Dante when he behaves like this can start to help Ari become more compassionate to all living things.*



Dante and Ari stare at each other. Ari insists he doesn't really like to fight, and Dante insists he's not really a pacifist—he just doesn't think people should kill **birds** for no reason. They agree to not tell Mrs. Quintana and decide that moms are strict because they love them and because they want them to stay boys forever. Dante looks ready to cry. They state that they've never seen the other so mad. Dante says that the bird is just a sparrow and begins to cry. They walk back to Dante's house, where Dante throws his shoes across the street in anger, and Ari insists he wasn't afraid of the boys. Dante admits that he was. Ari asks why birds exist. Dante says it's obvious: they teach people about the sky.

Ari thinks that he wants to tell Dante that the **bird** doesn't matter, but he knows that the bird is very important to Dante. When Dante is done crying, they bury the bird in Dante's backyard. Dante cries again and Ari feels mean because he's not sad. Ari thinks that now Dante knows that he's not as emotional. Knowing that Dante wants to be alone, Ari says that they can go swimming tomorrow. Ari wonders what it's like to be a guy who cries over a bird. As he walks home, he thinks about Dante's answer as to why birds exist. It makes sense, and Ari wonders what his answer would be. He thinks that some guys have tears in them and some don't and feels alone, but not in a bad way. He thinks that it's amazing that Dante seems to have no darkness in him.

## PART TWO, CHAPTER ONE

The next morning, Ari wakes up with a fever. When he gets up, he spins and collapses. Mom appears and looks unreal to Ari. He can't understand what she's saying, except that he's hot. Ari doesn't know where he is. Mom holds him and then gets him aspirin and water. His temperature is 104 degrees and Ari says it's just a cold, but Mom says he has the flu. She tucks him into bed. Ari dreams that **birds** are falling from the sky and he can hear "La Bamba" as a plane falls. Dante cries and holds Richie Valens's body. Ari wakes up screaming, and Dad picks up Ari and rocks him in the rocking chair. Ari wants to hold Dad too, but he has no strength. He wants to ask if Dad held him like this when he was a kid.

*The way that Dante tries to tell himself that the bird doesn't matter creates the possibility that he's embarrassed about his sensitivity, or at least doesn't think that it's the best thing to show off to other guys. However, the combination of Dante's sensitivity and Ari's fearless willingness to fight suggests that if a person can combine these two qualities, positive things can happen—a person can possibly save other people or animals from cruel situations like this.*



*Ari seems somewhat anxious about not seeming as emotional as Dante, which shows that he recognizes that, at least for a person like Dante, being vulnerable and emotional is a positive thing. However, it's important to note that Dante has grown up in a family that encouraged this kind of vulnerability, while Ari leans on his strength because his family doesn't communicate well about difficult topics. In this case, Ari has more to learn about the benefits of being emotional and open.*



*Ari is extra vulnerable because he's so sick, which offers the reader insight into who Ari really is on the inside, when he's not posturing for other characters or for the reader. His desire to ask Dad about whether he ever held young Ari like this shows that inside, Ari is still just a little kid who craves affection and attention, especially from his dad. The falling birds in the dream contrast with this, foreshadowing Ari's coming loss of innocence.*



Mom changes Ari's sheets and then she and Dad change Ari's clothes. Ari asks that they not throw his tee shirt away since Dad gave it to him. They settle Ari in bed and Ari sees Dad's face. He knows that Dad is worried and is sad that he's making him worry. Ari wants to tell Dad that he doesn't hate him; he just wants to understand him. He falls asleep again and dreams that he's running through the **rain**, looking for Dante and then Dad. Ari wakes up and sees Dad studying him. Mom comes into the room and Ari apologizes for scaring them. Mom suggests that Ari take a shower and Ari puts his head on her shoulder, wishing they could be like this forever.

Dad helps Ari into the shower and Ari wonders if young Dad was as beautiful as Dante is, but he's not sure why he has this thought. Back in his bedroom, Mom declares that Ari's fever broke. Ari and Dad stare at each other for a moment and Dad says that Ari was looking for him in his dream. Ari whispers that he's always looking for Dad.

## PART TWO, CHAPTER TWO

Ari wakes up the next morning feeling like he died. Mom gives him water and chicken soup. The soup is great at first, but it gets boring when Ari eats it for every meal. After four days, Ari declares that he's done being held hostage. Mom and Dad disagree and say that Ari needs to spend one more day in bed. As Dad leaves Ari's bedroom, he asks if Ari has had more bad dreams. Ari admits that he always has bad dreams and is often lost in them. He says that he sometimes looks for Dad, but he thinks he's trying to find himself. This conversation scares Ari. Dad apologizes for being so far away. Dad starts to walk away and then says that he has bad dreams too. Ari wants to ask if they're about Vietnam or Bernardo, but he just smiles, happy that Dad shared something.

## PART TWO, CHAPTER THREE

Ari gets to watch TV because he's sick, but he discovers that he doesn't like it. One day, he asks Mom if she likes teaching, even when her students don't care. Mom explains that it's not her job to make her students care, but her job is to care about them. They laugh about how 15-year-olds are all in a phase where they think life is boring. Ari asks to go out but when Mom refuses, he calls her a "fascist." She takes offense to this, but Ari insists that she knows what he means. Ari complains that he's bored. Mom gets up, holds Ari's face, and starts to say something about how things will be when Ari is older. Ari asks how much older or smarter he has to be, since he's not a boy anymore.

*In opposition to the bird, the rain in Ari's dream here represents experience and learning more about the world. Notably, after this dream, Ari feels somewhat closer to Dad and at ease in his family the way it is now. This suggests that he's starting to learn more about how his family interacts and how he should fit into it in order to be happy. Looking for Dad and Dante in the dream also suggests that as Ari comes of age, he'll discover who Dad and Dante truly are inside.*



*In this moment of vulnerability, Ari again shows the reader that he's unaware of his own sexuality. Thinking that Dante is very beautiful suggests that Ari is attracted to him, at least on some level, but his confusion shows that he's trying hard to ignore the attraction.*



*The way that Ari explains what he thinks his dreams mean to Dad shows that for all his bluster, Ari is very introspective and certainly has the capacity to be vulnerable—he understands that the dreams are about his own desire to learn about how he fits into the world. His happiness at Dad's admission offers some hope that Ari and Dad will be able to connect as the novel progresses, showing that learning to communicate openly is a slow process but one that can be intensely meaningful for all parties.*



*For Ari, it's infuriating that Mom keeps talking about how things will change in the future—as far as Ari is concerned, the future is already happening to him but not much has changed. Though Ari's view is understandable, Mom has a point: though Ari can see now where he needs to go in terms of learning to communicate, especially with Dad, he still has definite ideas about how the world works that he'll need to interrogate before he can really step into adulthood.*



Mom cries and says that Ari is still a little boy to her. Ari doesn't understand the tears and tries to comfort her. Mom says that she's trying not to worry and asks what he does when he goes out. She whispers that he doesn't have friends, but Ari insists he doesn't want any and, for that matter, can't make them if she won't let him out. He mentions Dante, which pleases Mom. Ari insists that he's just different. Mom says that Ari doesn't know how loved he is and says that she wants him to be happy. Ari says he's supposed to feel miserable and asks if Dante can come over.

*It's clear to reader (though not to Ari) that Mom cares deeply for Ari and is aware of the emotional turmoil he's experiencing as part of growing up. The experience of being a teen is uncomfortable, scary, and is happening both too fast and not fast enough for him. However, Mom also can't do much to fix this except to remind Ari that he needs to be emotionally open if he wants to grow up healthily.*



## PART TWO, CHAPTER FOUR

Dante answers the phone angrily. He asks a few questions, but Ari refuses to tell Dante about his dreams. Dante shows up 15 minutes later. He chats with Mom and then appears in Ari's room. He says that Ari looks pale and is offended when Ari says that he still looks more Mexican than Dante does. Ari comments on Dante's sketchpad and Dante says that he's going to sketch Ari. Ari asks if models get paid and both boys blush awkwardly when Dante says that only the good-looking ones get paid. Ari asks if Dante is actually going to be an artist and then they talk about bad dreams.

*Dante's nervousness and secrecy surrounding his sketchpad and his desire to be an artist suggests that this is one place where Dante is trying to figure out who he is and, possibly, is already considering his sexuality through his art. Taken like this, his nervousness makes sense—he and Ari live in a homophobic world and at least at this point, it still pays to ignore their attraction to each other.*



Ari asks if he has a choice in the matter of Dante drawing him. Dante tosses him a book of poetry and then gets quiet. Ari feels uncomfortable and almost naked, but he starts to feel invisible. Ari forgets Dante as he reads and falls asleep. Dante is gone when he wakes up. Ari discovers a sketch of his rocking chair and he thinks it's beautiful. The rocking chair looks sad and solitary, and the drawing is almost scary. Ari feels jealous of all the things that Dante knows how to do, and especially jealous that Dante likes himself.

*It is questionable whether or not Dante genuinely likes himself. He does seem surer of who he is, but that doesn't always translate to self-satisfaction—which in this case, suggests more that Ari isn't happy with himself and is jealous that Dante knows who he is. In other words, Ari's interpretation says far more about himself than it does about Dante.*



Ari finds a note from Dante saying that he misses Ari at the pool, since the lifeguards are awful. Later, Ari calls Dante and says he likes the drawing. He says that it's sad and lonely. Dante says it's like Ari. Ari hates this, insists that he's not sad all the time, and asks to see the other sketches. Dante refuses and says it's the same thing as Ari not wanting to share his dreams.

*For both boys, their dreams and their drawings are symbols of who they really are on the inside. Because of where they are in the coming-of-age process, neither of them are ready to share these aspects of themselves. But as they learn better how to communicate, this could change.*



## PART TWO, CHAPTER FIVE

That night, Ari dreams that he and Bernardo are standing on opposite sides of the Rio Grande. Ari yells in English and in Spanish for Bernardo to come over, but Bernardo shakes his head. Dad appears next to Bernardo, and Ari sees that Dad is deeply hurt by Bernardo. The scene changes and Ari is on the Mexico side, while Dante is in the U.S. Dante speaks to Ari in English, and Ari replies in Spanish, but they can't understand each other. Ari feels alone and wakes up feeling lost. His fever is back. He falls asleep again and dreams of killing **birds**.

Again, Ari's dreams give voice to his anxieties. He wants to connect with his brother in a positive way, and he wants to understand how Dad feels about Bernardo in a more nuanced way than the silence in his family allows. Dreaming of killing the birds, meanwhile, speaks to Ari's anxieties about growing up and leaving behind childhood, even as this process is something that will help him in the long run.



## PART TWO, CHAPTER SIX

Dante comes to visit, even though it's not much fun. He reads poems out loud and Ari thinks of **birds** falling from the sky. He wonders if Bernardo ever read a poem and in a pause, asks Dante if he's afraid of catching the flu. Dante says he isn't, and Ari declares that Dante isn't afraid of anything. Dante says that he's afraid of lots of things, but Ari doesn't ask what. He doesn't think Dante would answer.

In this moment, silence is a way for Ari to show Dante that he cares about him and can be respectful. With this, the novel shows that silence doesn't have to be a universally bad thing. It can be positive when deployed in the service of others, as long as it doesn't go too far and begin to close off connections between people or prevent them from coping with trauma.



## PART TWO, CHAPTER SEVEN

Ari's fever breaks, but he continues to experience bad dreams. He lies around and thinks that this next school year is going to be awful. Dante is going to Cathedral, where there's a swim team, but Ari is going to Austin High. This is because, though Mom and Dad wanted to send Ari to Cathedral on a scholarship, Ari argued that he hated the boys there and wasn't smart enough. Ari thinks of Mom saying that he doesn't have any friends and of Dante's drawing of the chair. He feels sad and like he's not a boy anymore. He thinks that "man loneliness" is bigger than kid loneliness and, somehow, that his friendship with Dante makes him feel lonelier. Dante seems to fit in everywhere.

Dante is just a little further along in his emotional development than Ari is—but at this age, these small differences can feel substantial and insurmountable. For the reader, it's easier to understand that Ari will close the gap sometime soon and become more comfortable with how he feels as an adult, but for Ari in the thick of it, it feels far too overwhelming to make any sense.



Ari explains that when he was a kid, he started keeping a journal. In sixth grade, Mom and Dad gave Ari a baseball glove and a typewriter for his birthday. The glove made sense, but Ari was perplexed by the typewriter and uninterested in it. Despite this, he did learn to type and though he was good at baseball, he hated playing. Ari thinks about Cecelia and Sylvia, and how they talk about Ari being born "a little late." Once, he suggested that they were born early and used foul language while he did it, which made them stop talking like that.

This passage reminds the reader again that Ari desperately wants to rely on language and communication like Dante does, and at times, he can figure out how to use language to his advantage. His distaste for baseball suggests again that Ari isn't "properly" masculine in a sporty way, and instead he'd be better off dedicating his energies to writing and language.



Ari thinks that he was mad then because he couldn't talk to Bernardo, Cecelia, or Sylvia. He feels alone, since his sisters treat him like a baby, and thinks that keeping a journal counts as talking to someone his own age. Sometimes, he writes down every bad word he knows, and other times he muses about his name. He doesn't like Angel or Aristotle, his grandfather's name. He hates that his name is that of the world's most famous philosopher, too, which is why he goes by Ari. He likes that he can switch letters around to be Air, so that he can be necessary but invisible.

*Ari's desire to be needed like air shows that he wants to be a part of society, but he feels too different to be able to pick out how exactly he can or should fit in. Further, though he dislikes being named after a philosopher, Ari himself is quite the philosophical thinker. His dislike of his name, then, shows that his intellectualism, like his sexuality, is something that he'll eventually need to accept.*



## PART TWO, CHAPTER EIGHT

Mom interrupts Ari when Dante calls. Ari says that Mom is taking him to the doctor this afternoon and tells Dante a little about his sisters and his brother. Dante is jealous that Ari has a brother, but Ari says that they don't talk about Bernardo because he's in prison. He asks if they can not talk about Bernardo, since it makes him feel bad. Dante assures Ari that it's not his fault and says that Ari's life is interesting. Dante says that he has cousins, but his cousins don't like him because he's not Mexican enough and doesn't speak Spanish well. When Ari points out that Dante can learn, Dante says that learning it in school isn't the same as learning it as a native speaker.

*Again, Dante insists here that there's more to being Mexican than having previous generations of relatives that came from Mexico. Part of being Mexican, he suggests, has to do with learning the language at home or in the streets, which would teach him a version of Spanish that's more authentic and doesn't make him sound like someone who's just a tourist.*



Dante says that it's worse because his cousins are on his mom's side, poor, and they don't think that girls should go to college. Mrs. Quintana went anyway and met Mr. Quintana at Berkeley. Mr. Quintana's parents were born in Mexico and own a small restaurant in LA. Dante says that his parents created their own world, which he's a part of—but his parents understand the old world and he doesn't. Ari insists that he gets it, but Dante says that Ari is at least a "real Mexican." Ari says that he doesn't know anything about Mexico either. Dante asks when they'll start feeling like the world is theirs. Ari thinks they never will, but suggests tomorrow.

*Despite Dante's insistence that Ari is a "real Mexican," it's hard to tell if Ari is actually any more or less Mexican than Dante is. From the Spanish sprinkled throughout the novel it appears as though Ari speaks to his parents primarily in English, suggesting that Dante's insistence that Spanish isn't the universal defining factor in every Mexican person's identity. As in other cases, this says more about Dante's anxieties than it does about how Mexican Ari is.*



## PART TWO, CHAPTER NINE

Ari goes into the kitchen, where Mom is cleaning. Mom asks what he and Dante were talking about. Ari wants to ask about Bernardo, but instead talks about the Quintanas' education. Mom smiles and says that her story sounds similar: she got her bachelor's degree while Dad was in Vietnam, had Ari, and continued with school. Ari asks if it was hard, and Mom says that Ari was great and she was happy. She always knew she wanted to be a teacher and says that her mother cried when she said she was getting married. Mom says that her mother was afraid that she'd stop going to school. Ari thinks that he's seeing Mom as a person for the first time.

*Hearing about how Mom found her way toward becoming an educated, happy adult shows Ari that Mom is more than just a mother. With this, he begins to learn that when he sits down with people and expresses curiosity about them, he'll learn a lot and be able to feel a deeper connection to others. His choice to not mention Bernardo shows how deeply he's internalized the family rule to not talk about him—in a sense, he has inherited the pain his parents have surrounding the issue of his brother, despite being too young to understand the situation at the time.*



Ari asks if Dad was different when he came back from the war. Mom says that he has an injury somewhere inside and she doesn't know what or where it is. Ari asks if it will heal. Mom doesn't think so. Ari asks if it's hard to love Dad, and Mom doesn't hesitate when she says it isn't. She insists that she doesn't have to understand him to love him when Ari asks if she does. Ari says that it's hard for him to not understand Dad, but Mom suggests that someday, Ari will understand. Ari hates that he has to wait.

*Again, Mom understands that Ari is 15 and has some developing to do before he'll be able to have a conversation like this with Dad, just because Dad is so private about things. Because Mom is more open, she's able to act as an example for Ari and encourage him to develop these communication skills before he uses them with someone with whom it's more difficult to speak.*



## PART TWO, CHAPTER TEN

Ari enjoys talking with Mom about things, especially since it makes him feel like he knows her. She's different when they talk and doesn't give as much input on what Ari should be, which Ari hates. Ari wonders if Mom and Dad blame themselves for what happened to Bernardo. He knows that they're trying hard with him so he doesn't end up the same way, so Ari has to carry his family's guilt and he feels like the only son. Ari feels angry and like he's betrayed his family by talking about Bernardo to Dante, and he feels surrounded by ghosts.

*For Ari, he feels as though his parents' experiences with Bernardo are actively keeping him from figuring out who he is and developing identity all his own. This shows that Ari doesn't just crave knowledge about his family: he also craves independence and the ability to make his own choices. His anger that he mentioned Bernardo to Dante again drives home how important it is to Ari's family to stay silent, even if it's unhealthy to do so.*



Ari picks up his old journal and finds an entry from the week after he turned 15. He wrote that he didn't like being a teen or a preteen, but being 10 was great. He had a good teacher and kids liked him. Now, his voice is changing and he's clumsy. He's hairy and his feet keep growing. At ten, his biggest worry was speaking English well, as he decided that year to be an American and not sound Mexican. Ari is embarrassed to read this and feels like a loser.

*The fact that Ari wrote this entry indicates that on some level, he understands that language will be the thing that frees him. Writing in a journal gives him a place to practice communicating openly, even if it's just with himself—which, going forward, Ari can draw on as he learns to communicate openly with others.*



Ari keeps flipping through until he finds an entry about Bernardo. He wrote that there are no pictures of him, even though there are pictures of Mom, Dad, Cecelia and Sylvia and their children, and Ari. He wrote that being in prison is worse than being dead, since at least the living talk about dead people. They talk about their deceased dog, but they don't talk about Bernardo. Ari quips in his journal that he knows more about Alexander Hamilton than his brother, and he'd rather write essays about Bernardo. Ari stops reading and wonders if he'll ever be able to ask about Bernardo. He remembers whispering, "my brother is in prison" over and over again. The words were bitter and seemed to leak out of him.

*Ari sees prison as the ultimate symbol of silence because of the way his parents act about Bernardo. While Ari does struggle to speak truthfully, suggesting that prison is similar to silence suggests that Ari recognizes the damage and the pain that silence can cause. When he mentions truthful words "leaking" out of him, it indicates that the truth isn't something that Ari will be able to ignore forever. This holds true for a number of things, from Bernardo to, eventually, Ari's sexuality.*



Ari feels afraid and chaotic. He decides he needs to create order, so he starts a list in his journal of all the things that are happening in his life. He lists the flu, the fact that he feels terrible, that he's talking to Dad about his dreams, that he hates Mom a little, and that he wants to know about Bernardo. He writes that Dad held him and he wants Dad to hold him forever, that he doesn't know how to love his parents, that Dante is his first friend, and that he suspects that if Dante really knew him, he wouldn't like him.

*Despite his internal sensitivity, Ari is an angry boy—something that he fears won't go over well with the openly sensitive Dante. He shows here, however, that his problem really is that he doesn't know how to be open and vulnerable. Were he to learn these skills, it's possible that he wouldn't feel as angry—or, at least, that he'd be able to deal with his anger more healthily.*



## PART TWO, CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ari and Mom wait for hours at the doctor's office. Ari reads the volume of poetry by William Carlos Williams and Mom brings a novel. She comments that she didn't know that Ari liked poetry. Ari explains that it's Dante's book and that the Quintanas have poetry books everywhere. Mom says that Mr. Quintana's job is wonderful. Ari is skeptical, but Mom says with anger that she didn't have a single Mexican American professor when she was in school. Ari thinks that he knows so little about Mom. He's starting to care and wonder. Mom asks Ari if he likes poetry and when he says he does, she suggests he might be a writer. Ari thinks this sounds too beautiful.

*Again, this conversation lets Ari practice communicating openly with someone who makes him feel safe and seen. His recognition that he's starting to care and wonder more about who Mom is as a person points to his development as a person in the world, while Mom's comment about Mr. Quintana speaks to the importance of seeing one's identity represented in authority figures. Mr. Quintana is showing students that Mexican people can do all sorts of things, which Mom makes clear is meaningful and important.*



## PART TWO, CHAPTER TWELVE

The doctor declares that there's nothing wrong with Ari. Ari notices a look of rage appear briefly on Mom's face, which he thinks makes her even more of a mystery. Later, he meets Dante at the pool, but he doesn't swim. It looks ready to **rain**. As Dante and Ari leave the pool, it starts to pour. They walk slowly in the rain until they get to Dante's house. Mr. Quintana lectures them about common sense. Ari apologizes and looks down, but Mr. Quintana lifts his chin and says that they're summer boys. Ari thinks that Mr. Quintana is kind and brave, just like Dante.

*While Mom's anger remains somewhat mysterious, it's possible that she feels as though the doctor is questioning what she knows to be true about Ari: he is still ill and needs more than a clean bill of health. Staying silent here, however, means that she's not able to advocate for Ari and unfortunately, isn't able to keep Ari from experiencing tragedy mere hours later.*



Later, Ari asks Dante if Mr. Quintana ever gets mad. Dante says that once, he made him mad on purpose to get attention. Ari starts to cough, so Dante makes them tea. They sit outside on the porch and watch it **rain** and then hail. Dante interrupts the silence and says that they need to talk about who they are and about their parents. Ari declares that Dante isn't normal. They laugh and decide to make it a game. Dante asks Ari questions like his favorite color, favorite car, and favorite song. Ari gets annoyed and Dante says that Ari is interviewing for the position of best friend. They laugh and discuss that they'd love to shout all the bad words they know.

*Though Ari insists that Dante isn't normal, it's more likely that this statement is a cover for the fact that Ari finds communication like this wildly uncomfortable. The boys' desire to shout bad words again situates them as still immature and developing—language is something for them to experiment with and discover how to use, and making sense of the vulgar side of language is part of all this.*



Dante declares that they're too nice. Ari says he's not nice, but affirms that he's not in a gang, doesn't drink or do drugs, and would like to have sex. Finally, it stops **raining**. Dante suggests they go for a walk—barefoot, since their shoes are in the dryer. Ari knows that he's walked barefoot on wet pavement before, but it feels like the first time. Suddenly, Ari comes out of his reverie when Dante says that his family is leaving for a year for Chicago, where Mr. Quintana is going to be a visiting professor. Ari is sad, but he refuses to admit it. A strange look comes over Dante's face. Dante notices a **bird** in the street. Its wing is obviously broken. He steps into the street and picks it up as a car comes around the corner. Ari thinks of his bad dreams. Inside, he screams for Dante.

*The strange look on Dante's face when Ari refuses to say that he's sad suggests that Ari's silence does indeed have major consequences for all his relationships—here, Dante doesn't feel valued or cared for. Dante's choice to try to save the bird speaks to his innocence and his youth, which threatens to be destroyed by the car coming around the corner. When Ari screams for Dante inside, it again shows that his insides betray who he truly is and what he feels: he loves Dante and doesn't want him hurt, and so will do anything to protect him.*



## PART THREE, CHAPTER ONE

Ari wakes up in a hospital room. He remembers Dante standing in the street with a **bird**, and screaming Dante's name. Both legs and one arm are in casts. He groans in pain and Mom and Dad lean over him. Mom is crying. Ari wonders if this is real, but decides that the pain is very real. Mom pushes a button on Ari's IV and says it's morphine. Ari jokes that he gets to do drugs and Mom fetches a nurse. Ari tells Dad that everything is okay, but Dad says that Ari is brave. Ari insists this is false; he's afraid of his dreams. He thinks that Dad's smile is wonderful and wants to ask what happened, but he's afraid.

*Now, Ari has experienced trauma firsthand. This means that he's now in the driver's seat and will get to decide how to deal with it—whether he's going to communicate about it to heal, or whether he's going to emulate his family members by remaining silent, covering up his pain and fear, and passing the trauma on to others. Ari's jokes and his insistence that he's not brave suggest that he may be more willing to talk this time.*



Ari says, "Dante?" A nurse arrives to check Ari and Ari asks again about Dante. Mom says that he's fine and is at the hospital too. Ari asks what happened to the **bird**. Dad shakes his head and says that the boys are crazy and then leaves the room to get Dante. Mom tells Ari that Dante has been here for the last 36 hours while Ari had surgery. She says that Ari kept asking for Dante, and Dante stubbornly refused to leave. Ari smiles and Mom says she loves him. Like he did when he was a kid, Ari says that he loves her more. Mom tears up and tells Ari that the car ran over his legs. She breaks off and says that she's not letting Ari out again. Ari calls her a "fascist."

*Ari never does figure out what happened to the bird, which mirrors the way that Ari's innocence seems to slip away without rhyme or reason after this accident. Ari and Dante's dedication to each other in the hospital reinforces how close they are, especially since Ari was asking for Dante while delirious. Something inside of Ari understands that his relationship to Dante is special and something to hold onto at all costs, even if Ari himself might not admit it.*



Dante and Dad walk in. Dante and Ari smile at each other. Dante says that Ari saved his life, but Ari makes a joke of it. Dante begins to cry. Ari blames everything on the **bird**, and Dante insists he's done with birds. He tears up again, and Ari institutes the rule that nobody can cry. Dante laughs and says that Ari dove like he was swimming. Ari tries to stop him, but Dante keeps going. He says that Ari dove because he was an idiot who went into the road to save a "stupid bird." Ari tells him to stop crying and insists that birds aren't stupid.

*True to form, Dante wants to talk about what happened—something that makes Ari wildly uncomfortable given how he's learned to deal with trauma and difficult emotions thus far in his life. When Dante blames himself, he essentially suggests that his compassion is dangerous and not something that he should act on like this. In this sense, Dante is doubting who he truly is, just like Ari.*



Everyone laughs when Ari insists he didn't save Dante on purpose. Ari can't stay awake but feels Dante squeezing his hand. He hears Dante asking Ari to forgive him, but Ari thinks that there's nothing to forgive. Ari dreams that he and Dante are barefoot in the **rain** and he feels afraid.

*Insisting that he didn't save Dante on purpose allows Ari to avoid engaging critically with his emotions or his desires. This indicates that Ari isn't actually ready to become more open—here, he's doing what Dad does and repeating the cycle of silence and trauma.*



## PART THREE, CHAPTER TWO

Ari feels like he's in the hospital forever. They run tests and check his vitals all night long. Ari's room is full of flowers, and he decides that he doesn't like flowers. He does like his surgeon, Dr. Charles, a young man who looks like he was once a jock. Sometimes, in Ari's dreams, Dr. Charles heals Dante's **bird**. When Ari is awake, Dr. Charles answers all of his questions about his legs. He insists that Ari is tough and, to Ari's disgust, explains that Ari will be in casts for eight weeks. Ari wants to cry.

*Ari's dreams about Dr. Charles healing the bird symbolizes Ari's buried, internal recognition that he does need to ask for help from others and be open in order to heal and move forward healthily into adulthood. When he's awake with Dr. Charles, the way they communicate allows Ari to practice being honest with a person whom he won't have to see much after this.*



Dr. Charles says that Ari did an amazing thing for Dante—he could've died. Ari says that it was just a reflex. He doesn't remember making the choice to save Dante. Dr. Charles says that he has a different theory and suggests that Ari think about the fact that he dove in front of an oncoming car for someone else. A bit later, Mr. Quintana and Mrs. Quintana visit. Mr. Quintana kisses Ari and they thank him over and over. They discuss the move to Chicago. Mr. Quintana says that Dante doesn't want to miss swimming and even suggested that he could stay with Ari for the year. Ari closes his eyes and tells Mr. Quintana that he closes his eyes to escape the itching in his legs, but he doesn't say that he thinks about Bernardo when he does this.

*Again, insisting that he didn't save Dante because he loves Dante or because he's simply a noble person means that Ari doesn't have to engage with who he really is on the inside. It allows him to portray himself as a tough but unthinking person who doesn't feel the same kind of compassion as someone like Dante demonstrates. Thinking of Bernardo when he closes his eyes suggests that Ari is receding further into himself, as Bernardo is one of the main sources of silence in his household and thinking of him entails dwelling on silence.*



Mr. Quintana says that he's not leaving Dante behind and that Dante is going to miss Ari. Ari says he's going to miss Dante, but feels weird immediately. Mr. Quintana says that Dante doesn't have many friends and that Ari should know that he's Dante's best friend. Ari doesn't want to hear this but doesn't know why he doesn't want to hear it. He feels as though he has to keep talking to Mr. Quintana. Ari says that he's boring and doesn't know what Dante sees in him. Mrs. Quintana steps up and asks Ari why he thinks this. Ari closes his eyes again and wishes that he and Dante didn't have parents who cared. They talk about Chicago again and mention that they're taking Dante to a counselor. They suggest that Ari see one too.

*When it feels weird to admit that he's going to miss Dante, Ari shows that he's really not comfortable with his emotions, especially when they suggest that he's more introspective and compassionate than burly and masculine. Similarly, insisting he's boring and not worth Dante's time is a way for Ari to play down his heroics and deflect attention anywhere else, though Mrs. Quintana—who's a therapist—likely sees through it. This is Ari's first clue that continuing to deny his emotions will be harmful for him in the long run.*



Ari can't deal with Mr. Quintana's gratitude when they leave. Mrs. Quintana is even worse, however: she doesn't wear her emotions on her sleeve and before she leaves, she tells Ari that she'll love him forever. Ari understands that she doesn't say things like that often and that she loves Dante more than Dante knows. He doesn't know what to do with this information, so he keeps it inside.

*Even if Ari doesn't know what to do with this information now, that doesn't mean it won't become useful later in the novel. Ari's inability to recognize this suggests that he still sees silence and speech as a dichotomy, when in reality, silence doesn't have to be bad—it just can't last forever.*



### PART THREE, CHAPTER THREE

Dante calls Ari and apologizes for not visiting. He says that their moms talked and he can't get out of seeing a counselor. They laugh. Dante says he's starting to like his face and asks if things still hurt. Ari says that his legs own him. Dante says that it's all his fault, so Ari institutes more rules: no talking about the accident, no saying thank you, Dante can't think it's his fault, and they must move on. Ari refuses to budge, but Dante apologizes and thanks Ari once more. That afternoon, Dante comes to visit. He looks sad and guilty, but Ari insists that the doctor says he's going to be fine. Dante pulls out [The Grapes of Wrath](#) and [War and Peace](#) for Ari to read.

*The rules that Ari institutes are a convenient way for him to make sure that he can continue to perpetuate the cycle of violence and silence. At this point, staying silent is more comfortable for Ari. It's what he knows, and having to talk about the accident is far scarier and represents a huge change in habits that Ari isn't yet ready to deal with. Dante's gift of books, however, will start to steer Ari towards more intellectual and emotional maturity.*



Dante takes out his sketchpad. He says that Ari can look at his drawings and tells him to not get too excited. Ari explains that the pain comes and goes and that he's trying to not take meds. Dante hands over the sketchpad and says that Ari has to wait until he leaves to look. They laugh and things feel normal. Dante tells Ari about a man on the bus and Ari thinks about the **bird** with the broken wing. He still doesn't know what happened to it, but now that he's made his rules, he can't ask. Ari thinks suddenly that he hates Dante. When Dante leaves, Ari thinks that Dante is only letting him see his drawings because he's grateful. He hates this, so he throws the pad across the room.

*When Ari thinks about the bird and wonders what happened to it, he recognizes that his rules don't actually serve him or anyone else—they may save him some pain and discomfort in the short term, but in the long term, Ari will miss out on important knowledge by refusing to communicate. Ari throws the sketchpad in part because of this. He recognizes that Dante is trying to communicate, but this is very uncomfortable for Ari.*



### PART THREE, CHAPTER FOUR

Mom walks in just as Ari throws the sketchpad. Ari refuses to explain himself but tells Mom to not flip through the drawings. He insists that he doesn't know why he threw it and when Mom starts to say something, Ari says he doesn't want to talk or know what she thinks. Mom says this isn't good for Ari, but Ari says sarcastically that he won't talk unless she forces him to see a counselor. Angrily, Ari says that if she talks about Bernardo, he'll talk about how he feels. Mom looks surprised, hurt, and angry. She insists that this has nothing to do with Bernardo, but Ari says that he can keep things inside just like Dad keeps Vietnam inside. Mom leaves the room.

*While Ari is right that he can absolutely keep things inside, the way he goes about this conversation with Mom shows that he's just lashing out in pain and insecurity. It's possible that he feels stifled by the silence that rules him and his family, and it's even worse now that Ari himself is perpetuating the silence, just like Dad and Mom do.*



## PART THREE, CHAPTER FIVE

Dad visits Ari every evening, but Ari wants him to go away. Dad tries unsuccessfully to make conversation, but Ari suggests that they each choose one of the books that Dante brought and read. Dad reads *War and Peace*, leaving *The Grapes of Wrath* for Ari. Sometimes, they talk about Ari's dreams. Now, Ari dreams about searching for his legs. Mom never brings up what Ari said about Bernardo and she doesn't try to make Ari talk. Soon, Ari gets tired of Mom's hovering and of his wheelchair. One day, he threatens to curse in front of her if she doesn't give him some space.

Dante calls twice per day, but he never visits because he gets the flu. They discuss their bad dreams and one day, Dante says he has something he needs to say. He quickly walks this back. Ari is sure that it's actually very important, but they talk instead about swimming. Ari is happy to talk to Dante, but he's also glad that he doesn't visit. He somehow knows that his life will be different now that he's almost lost his legs.

Ari tries to use crutches, but has to settle for the wheelchair. He names it Fidel. Before he gets out of the hospital, Dr. Charles visits Ari one more time and asks Ari if he's thought about what they discussed. Ari cracks jokes and doesn't take it seriously. Dr. Charles says that it's time for Ari to go home, which makes Ari happy and then suddenly anxious. He lectures Mom about how she can't hover once they get home. In the car, Ari has to lie down in the backseat. He looks out the windows for **birds**.

## PART THREE, CHAPTER SIX

The next morning, Mom washes Ari's hair, gives him a sponge bath, and shaves him. After she leaves, Ari sobs and feels as though he's never been this sad. Mom leaves Ari to cry in peace. Later, Ari practices rolling around the house in his wheelchair and declines Mom's offer of TV. They discuss Ari's book and in the afternoon, Cecelia and Sylvia come for dinner. Ari is glad for the normalcy. After dinner, Ari, Mom, and Dad sit on the porch and drink coffee. Mom and Dad hold hands, and Ari wonders if a person can discover the mysteries of the universe by holding someone's hand.

*By suggesting that they read together, Ari is consciously trying to maintain the silence between himself in Dad. Subconsciously, however, reading together and connecting over these books will begin to lay the foundation for Dad and Ari to begin to use their words and actually connect with each other meaningfully in the future.*



*In this instance, Dante is starting to experiment with silence like Ari. When Ari recognizes that Dante really does want to talk about something important, he gains useful information: silence doesn't mean that nothing's wrong; in actuality, it keeps Ari from learning things he should learn.*



*For Ari, the hospital was a place where he didn't have to truly grapple with the gravity of his situation. There are others to care for him, but at home, he'll rely on Mom and Dad to do everything for him. This returns Ari to more of a childlike state, something that scares him because of his growing independence and desire to stay closed and hidden.*



*Wondering if holding hands (and by extension, intimacy) can show a person the mysteries of the universe indicates that Ari is fully aware of the importance of connection—something that requires communication. Again, this offers hope for his development going forward, as he at least sees the importance of developing vulnerability and better communication skills.*



## PART THREE, CHAPTER SEVEN

It rains almost every afternoon. Ari finishes [The Grapes of Wrath](#) and then *War and Peace*. Dad decides to read everything that Ari does. Dante comes over every day and reads [The Sun Also Rises](#) out loud to Ari. They talk about how sad it is, but they never discuss Dante's sketches. Ari thinks that he's punishing Dante by not looking at them, but he can't figure out why he's doing this. One day, Dante says that he saw a counselor. He asks if Ari is going to go and says that it helped. Ari points out that talking doesn't help everyone.

*The rainy weather mirrors Ari's injuries, and the changing weather also symbolizes that something fundamental has changed in Ari's life and in his relationship with Dante. Were Ari willing to admit it, his choice to leap in front of a car shows that he loves Dante, something that's uncomfortable for him—but the rain here suggests that it's still inescapable, even if he's ignoring it.*



## PART THREE, CHAPTER EIGHT

One morning, Dante arrives and asks if he can give Ari a sponge bath. Ari insists that it's Mom's job, but Dante says that she gave him permission. He quietly says that he won't hurt Ari. Ari wants to spit that Dante has *already* hurt him, but he agrees to the bath. Ari closes his eyes as Dante carefully bathes and shaves him. When Dante is done, Ari opens his eyes and sees that Dante is crying. Ari wants to yell at him for looking so sad and beautiful. He can barely stand how cruel he feels.

*The anger that Ari feels likely stems from how helpless he feels. Being on the cusp of independence and then having all of that disappear in an instant is certainly not easy, especially since Ari isn't comfortable being vulnerable and his injuries require him to be vulnerable for everyone who wishes to help him.*



## PART THREE, CHAPTER NINE

Three weeks after the accident, Dad takes the day off work to drive Ari to get his casts changed. In the car, Dad points out that Ari's birthday is coming up and asks if he'd like a car. Ari says he'd like a low-rider, but Mom refuses. They all laugh, and Ari amends his request to an old pickup truck. Mom and Dad agree. Ari asks if they're doing this because of his legs, and Mom says that he's only going to be in casts for another few weeks and then will be back to normal. Ari asks who's teaching him to drive, and both Mom and Dad say that they will.

*Either a low-rider or a truck would help Ari feel more masculine and more stereotypically Mexican, which offers several possible readings of his requests. He could be trying to escape the fact that he's gay and therefore, not "properly" masculine, though it's also possible that he recognizes that there's no one correct way for a man to be. He can, in other words, simultaneously embrace cars and be in love with Dante.*



## PART THREE, CHAPTER TEN

Ari hates living at home. He hates Mom, Dad, and Dante, and hates himself for feeling this way. Life improves with Ari's new casts, and after a week, his arm cast comes off and he graduates to crutches. Ari can bathe himself and he marks the occasion in his journal. Dante comments later that Ari is smiling again. One morning, Ari wakes up and catches his reflection in a mirror. He wonders who he is and then joins Mom in the kitchen. They discuss Ari's time as a Boy Scout and how he's going to keep his hair long. Ari thinks that Mom looks beautiful and like she knows who she is. He wants to ask when he'll know who he is, but he doesn't.

*Choosing not to speak up and ask Mom this question again shows that Ari isn't yet willing to be vulnerable and deeply interrogate who he is and who he's going to be as an adult. His questions about his reflection remind the reader that as a teen, Ari's body is changing rapidly and may not be entirely recognizable, especially since he's still in leg casts. Seeing that Mom is okay with who she is, however, suggests that Ari recognizes that communication and openness can help a person figure out their identity.*



Ari goes back to his room and pulls out his journal. He writes about his fear of going to school on crutches, the happy experiences he hopes he'll have in his pickup truck, and physical therapy. He writes that he's going to start lifting weights and that he's afraid that he and Dante won't be friends again. He wants a dog and doesn't know who he is, and what he wants most for his birthday is for someone to talk about Bernardo. He writes that he thought this summer would be the one in which he figured out that he was alive, and that the world is waiting for him.

Dante visits that evening. They compare the arms they broke in the accident, and Dante says he went swimming. He quietly says that he loves swimming and he loves Ari. Ari says that Dante shouldn't say that. He understands what Dante is saying and wishes that Dante didn't have to say things out loud. Dante asks if Ari hates him. Suddenly, Ari realizes that he doesn't hate anyone; he just doesn't know how to be Dante's friend. Ari assures Dante that they'll still be friends when Dante returns from Chicago.

*Again, it's important and positive that Ari chooses to be so honest and open in his journal. This shows that he's learning how to communicate and is practicing with himself in this safe space. Mentioning that he wants to start lifting weights suggests that Ari also wants to develop a sense of control over his body, and thereby a sense of control over the identity he presents to others.*



*In this moment, Dante effectively confesses that he's gay and in love with Ari. Ari's unwillingness to accept this shows that he's still too caught up in his own mind and isn't willing to do the difficult work of learning to communicate openly. Assuring Dante that they'll continue to be friends, on the other hand, shows that Ari now understands the importance of friendship and compassion.*



## PART THREE, CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mr. Quintana, Mrs. Quintana, and Dante come over on the night before they leave. Ari and Dante sit on the front porch quietly. Ari asks Dante to get his sketchpad from under Ari's bed. Ari admits that he hasn't looked at it and asks if they can look at it together. Dante says nothing, so Ari flips through it. He says that the sketches are honest and that he wants to keep the sketchpad. Before the Quintanas leave, Mr. Quintana kisses Ari on the cheek and Mrs. Quintana stares into Ari's eyes. Ari and Dante hug, and Dante promises to write. When they leave, Ari sits with Mom and Dad on the porch. It starts to **rain** and Ari sees Dante holding a hurt **bird** in his mind. Ari feels like the saddest boy in the world.

*Now that Ari can't deny that Dante is gay and starting to come out, his assessment that the sketches are honest suggests that Dante was using his art like Ari uses his journal (that is, as a way to speak the truth in a safe space). The rain again suggests that changes are on the horizon and that Ari is entering a new phase of knowledge and understanding. However, the image of Dante and the bird makes it clear that he'll still need to heal from the sudden loss of innocence represented by the accident.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER ONE

Gina Navarro sits down next to Ari during lunch on the first day of school and asks him what happened. Ari answers that he was in an accident and refuses to say more, which annoys Gina. She scolds him for being so sad and says that he's the least popular guy in school. Ari insists that Charlie Escobedo is less popular as Susie Byrd sits down and asks Ari what happened. She demands an explanation and Ari tells the truth: after a **rainstorm**, he saved a guy standing in the street and a car ran over his legs. Gina and Susie don't buy it, especially when Ari says that the guy's name was Dante. The girls leave and Ari smiles for the rest of the day.

*The simple fact that Gina and Susie don't believe Ari when he tells the truth makes it clear just how isolated Ari is: he's so much of a loner, it's unthinkable that he would've jumped in front of a car to save someone else. Though this makes Ari happy, it also speaks to how heavily he relies on silence and how proud he's learned to be of not sharing anything of himself with the world. In other words, Ari shouldn't be thrilled about this.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWO

Ari's last class is English with Mr. Blocker, who's a new, enthusiastic teacher. Mr. Blocker asks students to share one interesting thing that happened to them over the summer. Ari hates this, especially since Gina, Susie, and Charlie are all in his class. He checks out after a few classmates share, but when Mr. Blocker calls on him, says that he broke his legs and got to try morphine. Charlie laughs the loudest, since he loves drugs. Mr. Blocker asks if Ari is going to be okay and if it still hurts. Ari thinks that the answer to these questions are very complicated.

*Cracking jokes, like Ari does here with his quip about morphine, is another way for Ari to protect himself and ensure that there's privacy around him and who he is. Mr. Blocker's interest, however, suggests that adults have the power to teach Ari that this isn't a great way to live. Through engagement with language and books, Ari can learn to communicate and be more open.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER THREE

Ari flips through his journal and decides that his handwriting is horrible. He writes that he learned to swim this summer, but then amends it to say that Dante taught him to swim. He tears out the page.

*This entry likely means more to Ari than just learning to swim; it's likely an admission on some level of the love they share, hence not wanting to face it or make it real by leaving the page intact.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER FOUR

Ari asks Mom if she does icebreakers with her students. She says she does and that she likes to get to know them. She insists that students are people and are interesting. Ari says that students are difficult, and Mom says that's part of the charm. Ari knows she's being ironic.

*As a teacher, Mom understands that intellectual pursuits and emotions are, in the best cases, linked. She likely seeks to teach her students to be kind and curious, just as she'd like Ari to be.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER FIVE

The afternoon after the second day of school, a girl named Ileana writes her name on Ari's casts. She looks into Ari's eyes as she does. Ari thinks that her eyes seem to hold the entire night sky and decides that there's a whole world inside of her that he knows nothing about.

*Ileana represents opportunity and a kind of relationship that Ari hasn't experienced before. His suggestion that he knows nothing about her shows that he's coming of age, as he's now aware of just how little he knows about other people.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER SIX

Ari gets a 1957 red pickup truck with chrome trim for his birthday. It's beautiful and he feels inadequate as he thanks and hugs Dad. He doesn't get a picture of Bernardo up on the walls, however. Ari sits in the truck and wishes he could take the truck out with Dante and Bernardo rather than attend his party. He thinks that he does miss Dante and starts to think about Ileana.

*The pickup helps Ari begin to conceptualize who he'd like to be as an adult. His desire to have a photo of Bernardo on display does this as well, but it gives him something to aspire to: someone who's more communicative and engages with his parents as people, which may encourage them to share more.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER SEVEN

Ari gets up every day and sits in his truck. He feels optimistic sitting in the driver's seat, listening to the radio. One morning, Mom joins Ari and asks where he's going to take the truck the first time he gets to drive it. Ari says that he's going to take it to the desert alone to look at stars. Mom asks who Ileana is when she sees the name on Ari's cast, but Ari says she's too pretty for him. That night, Ari dreams that he's driving Ileana in his pickup. He doesn't see Dante in the road and can't stop the truck.

The next morning, Mom invites Ari to join her on the front steps. They discuss that Dad is going to start teaching Ari to drive in a few weeks. Mom asks if Ari misses Dante. Ari doesn't know, and says that Dante hovers like Mom, and that he likes to be alone. She says that Ari was screaming for Dante last night, but Ari refuses to talk about his dream. He decides to tell her some of the truth: in his dream, he was driving in the **rain** and hit Dante. He says he wishes he smoked. Mom threatens to take the truck away if he does, and asks Ari to break rules behind her back if he breaks them. Ari thinks about his whole dream: he hit Dante because he'd been looking at Ileana.

*This dream implies that Ari shouldn't actually be pursuing Ileana, and that she's a distraction from Ari's real project of discovering how to best engage with Dante and his true identity as a young gay man. Hitting Dante with the pickup shows Ari that if he leans too heavily on a particular version of adulthood and masculinity, he can horribly destroy their friendship.*



*While being alone isn't necessarily a bad thing—there's a difference between being lonely and being alone. For instance, the fact that Ari yells for Dante in his sleep, when he's alone, makes it clear that Ari is leaning on his solitude in an attempt to ignore bigger and scarier facts about his life and who he is. Mom's request that Ari keep any rule breaking a secret shows that she respects where Ari is in his development. He needs independence to experiment, but she can protect herself by not knowing about it.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER EIGHT

When Ari gets home from school, there are two letters from Dante on his bed. He hates that Mom knows about the letters. Dante writes that he loves Chicago. It's diverse, which is great, but his parents won't let him ride public transit at night. Mr. Quintana likes his job, and Mrs. Quintana is writing a book about addiction and young people. Dante's friends are okay. He's been going to parties, drinking, and trying marijuana. He asks Ari if he's experimented with substances yet. Dante writes that he heard his parents talking and if Mr. Quintana is offered a job, they're going to turn it down because of Dante. Dante knows that he's going to disappoint his parents, so he doesn't want them organizing their lives around him. He says that he cut his hair, misses Ari, and swims every day.

In the next letter, Dante writes that he's going to lots of parties. Mrs. Quintana is suspicious since Dante comes home smelling like cigarettes. On Friday night, Dante went to a party and decided he didn't like beer. He talked to a pretty girl named Emma, who kissed him. He liked it. Dante says that he's still thinking about her, but he's not sure about all of this.

*Dante's insistence that he doesn't want to disappoint his parents suggests that even if he's relatively sure of who he is, he still craves outside approval. This means that he's going to be more at risk and more anxious about who he is, because he'll look for validation from sources that may or may not be good places to ask. Worrying about his parents in particular shows that Dante values his relationships with his parents and their openness, but he's afraid that coming out to them will put that at risk.*



*Mrs. Quintana's ability to sniff out the cigarettes suggests that Dante might not be able to hide all of his experimentations, whether they're with substances or with people. His open relationship with his parents means that they'll likely detect changes, meaning that Dante can't hide behind silence like Ari does.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER NINE

Ari tries to think of Dante kissing a girl and imagine what he looks like with short hair. Instead of writing to Dante, Ari writes in his journal and wonders what it would be like to kiss Ileana. Ari tries to think about other things, but everything leads him back to Dante and Ileana. He feels sad, so he thinks about Bernardo. Ari tells the reader that he thinks that people dream so that they can think about things they don't know they're thinking about. Ari remembers a dream about Bernardo, in which Bernardo was walking with four-year-old Ari. Ari wonders if it's a memory and thinks he might study dreams when he's older. He'd like to help people who have bad dreams not have them.

*The way that Ari conceptualizes dreams shows that the reader is correct in interpreting Ari's dreams as coded versions of his truth: that he's lost, in love with Dante, and mourning the loss of his innocence that happened with the accident. His desire to help people who have bad dreams, on the other hand, shows that Ari is looking forward. He is coming to realize that he's not the only one who suffers with personal issues, and he wants to be a helpful part of society by making others feel better about their inner workings.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TEN

Ari decides that he's going to kiss Ileana, but is unsure of when or where because he barely ever sees her. He plans to find her locker at school.

*Kissing Ileana is Ari's way of emulating the masculine norms that he observes in other boys his age. Since he has shown a clear disinterest in girls throughout the story, it's clear that his plan is motivated by his desperation to fit in and be accepted rather than a genuine desire to be with Ileana.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mom suggests that Ari should write Dante back. Ari deflects. Once he gets home, he writes in his journal and wonders where dreams come from. He wonders what it means that he ran over Dante and that he's had the dream multiple times. He thinks that this is bad, since he can either think about his dreams of Bernardo or of Dante. His choices are awful.

*In this interpretation, Ari's dreams of Dante and of Bernardo represent something similar to the words leaking out of him. It shows that he's desperate to know more and connect with others, but that he doesn't yet have the skills or the desire to make those connections happen.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWELVE

Ari thinks that there's a direct connection between his dream of Bernardo and his last memories of him. Ari was four when Bernardo was put in prison. Ari knows that there's a difference between prison and jail—his alcoholic uncle goes to jail overnight, but people go to prison for a long time. Ari vows to find out why Bernardo is in prison. He decides to start looking through old newspapers and thinks that Dante would know how to figure this out, but Ari declares that he's going to do this alone.

*Choosing to search for the truth about Bernardo on his own is both a step forward and a step back for Ari. Taking matters into his own hands is, importantly, an attempt to end the silence in his family, which Ari believes will help him come of age. However, doing it without help at all means it's going to be far more difficult and suggests that he still relies on silence more than is healthy.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dante writes to Ari again. He's annoyed that Ari isn't writing back, but promises that he won't bug him about it. He writes that he loves going to the Art Institute of Chicago and thinks that Ari would love it too. He especially loves the painting *Nighthawks* by Edward Hopper, because it makes him think of Ari in his loneliness and sadness. His favorite painting, however, is *The Raft of the Medusa* by Géricault. Dante says that he knows that Ari's casts are off and he's going to break the rule about not talking about the accident. He says it's a stupid rule, but he hopes that Ari is as normal as he can be again. Dante says that he misses Ari and that he wonders why they have so many rules. It might be because their parents give them so many rules.

*Dante's insistence that the rule that they can't talk about the accident is stupid shows that he's beginning to come into himself. As he becomes closer to Ari, he feels more comfortable making it known that Ari isn't right all the time. Trying to figure out where Ari's love of rules comes from shows that on some level, Dante understands that trauma and silence are things that Ari inherited from Dad. Making it about the two of them suggests that Dante is learning to be silent as well, as he experiments with his identity.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Susie and Gina help Ari track down Ileana's locker, but they also warn him to leave Ileana alone. According to them, Ari is "just a boy," while Ileana is a woman. Ari leaves her a note saying "Hi," anyway.

*From Susie and Gina's warnings, it's clear that although Ari wants to appear mature and masculine, in reality he is still too young and inexperienced to realize that pursuing Ileana is unwise. This, too, suggests that Susie and Gina are genuine friends who are concerned with protecting Ari.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ari hangs out at the library and looks at microfilms of the *El Paso Times*, searching for Bernardo. He gives up after an hour and a half. He thinks about writing Dante, but looks up *Nighthawks* in a book instead. Ari feels like he's looking in a mirror, but it doesn't make him sad.

*Nighthawks shows people in a diner at night. The dark, melancholic atmosphere of the painting shows Ari that he's not alone or at fault for liking solitude—he just needs to be able to communicate about it, as Hopper did when he created the painting in the first place.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ari gets his casts off. He feels like his old self, but thinks that this isn't entirely true—that person doesn't exist, and Ari doesn't yet know who he's going to be. He takes a walk and ends up where Dante held the **bird**. He walks past Dante's house and sees a dog in the park across the street. Ari sits down with the dog, which wiggles close and puts its head in Ari's lap. Ari notes that the dog is female and doesn't have a collar. Ari walks to the library and then home again, thinking that Dante's math was off about when he was going to get his casts off. He wonders if Bernardo knew how to swim and thinks about how Dad never talks about Vietnam, even though he has a photo of his war buddies on the wall at home.

*Now that Ari recognizes that he's in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, he's able to let go of some of his anxiety and deal exclusively with the project of looking forward to who he's going to be as a grown man. Wondering more about Bernardo shows Ari continuing to expand the circle of people he thinks about critically. Dad's photo of his war buddies shows that even if he won't talk about the war, he does have emotional attachment to it and those who experienced it with him—which, in turn, continues to humanize him for Ari.*



At home, Ari sits on the steps. The dog, who followed him, lays down on the sidewalk and stares at Ari. Dad notices the dog, and both he and Ari start to smile. They reminisce about Charlie, their dog that died, and Dad laughs that Mom doesn't like dogs inside.

*The dog gives Ari another friend to teach him how to be kind, compassionate, and emotionally open—while also being silent. This shows Ari that his silence can be used for good, not just to hurt people or shut them out.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ari writes to Dante. He apologizes for not writing and says that, miraculously, his legs have healed. He says that he named the dog Legs, and that she's great. Mom tried to keep Legs outside, but this didn't last long. He tells Dante about his pickup truck and his first driving lesson with Dad. Shifting isn't intuitive yet, but Ari knows that eventually, it will be.

*Learning to drive gives Ari another safe place to practice healthy behavior—he understands that driving is something he has to work at, which can also remind him that he can work to become more emotionally intelligent and open as well.*



After the lesson, Dad parked and smoked a cigarette. He told Ari that the cigarettes help him with the dreams. Ari asks if Dad ever dreams about Bernardo. Dad said that he does sometimes, and then they drove home. Ari knows that he upset Dad, and that he's upset Dante too. He apologizes.

*It's commendable that Ari chose to ask Dad about Bernardo, even if it did make Dad mad. Ari is actively trying to form a connection with his dad, which is a major leap for him. This makes it clear that Ari will drive the change in his family as they become more communicative.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ari writes a list of all the things going on in his life. He's studying for his driver's license and for college, lifting weights, running with Legs, reading Dante's letters, arguing with Gina and Susie, thinking about Ileana, looking through microfilm, writing, having bad dreams, and working at the Charcoaler. Ari thinks that he's busy, which is better than bored, and he likes having money. He goes to one party just to see if Ileana is there, but Gina and Susie catch him on the way out. Gina accuses Ari of having never kissed a girl, and points out that he never will if he leaves parties early. She says that Ileana is playing with Ari, and Ari flips her off as he leaves.

*Again, Ileana represents one version of adulthood for Ari in which he follows the role of a typical heterosexual young man. It's a version that intrigues him, but the work it takes to actually pursue Ileana suggests that Ari might be looking in the wrong places for emotional connection. While it's unclear if Gina is correct about Ileana, it's possible that she truly is looking out for Ari and wants to make sure that Ileana doesn't burn him. This shows the reader that Ari is mistaken in his low opinion of himself, since it's clear that others value and care about him.*



Gina and Susie start stopping by the Charcoaler around closing time on Fridays. They order food and then pester Ari when he's done with work. They drink beer sometimes, and Gina continues to ask Ari who he's kissed. One night, he says that she must want him to kiss her, which Susie says is mean. Gina drops the subject. Sometimes, Ileana finds Ari at school and Ari feels like he's falling in love with her. Ari is generally happy at school. He likes Mr. Blocker but struggles in his art class.

*The fact that Ari enjoys his English class with Mr. Blocker implies that he's becoming more comfortable with intellectual pursuits, and specifically with writing. As he starts to put together this part of his identity, he's then able to feel more affection for Ileana. This suggests that as Ari becomes more comfortable with himself, he'll be able to open up more to other people.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER NINETEEN

On the weekends, Ari and Dad get up early for driving lessons. Dad is a good teacher, but they never talk about anything other than driving. Ari does notice that Dad seems more relaxed. Dad whistles, and Ari wonders if he just doesn't need words to move through the world. Ari thinks that on the inside, he's *not* like his dad: he's like Dante, which scares him.

*This realization scares Ari because it means that he has to be honest with himself and others, which silence has protected him from having to do up until this point. It's important, however, that Dad and Ari are getting to know each other better, as it lays the groundwork for a more open relationship in the future.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWENTY

Mom makes Ari take her out for a drive before she lets him go out alone. She warns him that if he ever drinks and drives, she'll sell the truck. Otherwise, Ari's life is uncomplicated. He gets lots of letters from Dante, and Dante tells him that he's still kissing girls but would rather be kissing boys. Ari isn't sure what to think of that, but he knows that he has to be okay with it if he's going to be Dante's friend. Ari thinks that he's trying to make his life uncomplicated since everything inside feels very complicated. He has bad dreams often, and dreams one night that his legs are gone. Ari wakes up screaming and Dad comforts him. Ari wishes that he didn't remember his dreams.

*Even though Ari isn't sure how to think about Dante's admission that he's interested in men, it's important and commendable that Ari understands that, regardless of his own sexuality, he needs to be there for Dante. This demonstrates that Ari is an intensely loyal friend, especially when it comes to Dante—and also, especially when it comes to things that are uncomfortable to admit. This shows that Ari understands how to deal with these kinds of truths on the receiving end; he just has to figure out how to admit them to himself.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ari writes to Dante that he got his driver's license and took Mom and Dad out to lunch. The best part about getting his license was driving out to the desert, listening to the radio, and looking at the stars. It was beautiful and there was no light pollution.

*The freedom of being a licensed driver allows Ari to feel more independent and surer of himself, and thus more comfortable speaking true things to Dante. He shows here that being alone doesn't have to be bad; it can be meaningful and not harmful.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

One night, Mom and Dad go to a wedding and leave Ari at home. Charlie shows up as Ari is making food. Charlie always looks hungry and though Ari thinks that he won't make Charlie food, he offers to do so anyway. Charlie refuses and invites Ari to try heroin with him. Ari refuses, so Charlie insults Ari and calls him gay. After Charlie leaves, Ari thinks that he liked Charlie until he got so into drugs. He *is* curious about heroin, but he's not ready to try it. Ari thinks about Dante and drinking, and wonders what it'd be like to get drunk. He wonders if Bernardo is in prison because of drugs. Ari knows that he loved Bernardo a lot when he was a kid.

*Charlie calling Ari gay brings to the forefront the fact that Ari and Dante are living in a homophobic world, even if they themselves aren't fully out yet. This shows Ari how difficult life could be, both as Dante's friend and as a young gay man himself. Refusing to try heroin with Charlie, however, suggests that Ari is becoming more secure in his identity and is learning that he needs to try new things in his own time, not just because he's pressured to do so.*



Ari doesn't know why, but he goes out and finds an old drunk man begging outside of a convenience store. He gives the man money for two six-packs, one for the man and one for Ari. Ari feels bad for using the man. He starts to drive into the desert, but hears Mom's voice in his head and angrily heads home to sit in the driveway and drink. Ari chugs the first two beers and then thinks about dreams, Bernardo, Dante, and Ileana. He tells Legs that he loves her and wonders why he's not more grateful for what he has. He wonders why the seasons exist and thinks that winter won't help him. Ari thinks that he wants a life, but doesn't know what that means. He decides that he'd like to kiss someone and then stumbles into bed. Ari doesn't dream.

*It's concerning that Ari doesn't dream after getting drunk, as it suggests that Ari may choose to rely on alcohol as a crutch to help him with the dreams in the same way that Dad smokes cigarettes. This opens up the possibility that Ari is even more similar to Dad in this sense than he thought, as he's learning both silence and how to use substances to deal with the silence from Dad. Hearing Mom's voice offers hope that not all is lost for Ari. He has Mom as a role model for healthier behavior, and her presence in his mind shows how strong her influence is.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

While Ari is wrapping Christmas presents, he goes to the junk drawer to find scissors. In addition to the scissors, he finds a big brown envelope with Bernardo's name on it. Ari knows that it contains everything about Bernardo. He wants to open it, but he pretends that he didn't find the scissors and asks Mom for some. That night, Ari writes Bernardo's name over and over again in his journal.

*Ari's unwillingness to open the envelope without permission shows that he truly values communication. He'd like this discovery to be a conversation with his parents, not another thing that he figures out in silence and despite their unwillingness to talk about it.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Dante writes to Ari and says that he has an image in his head of Ari looking at the stars from his truck. He includes a gift that makes Ari laugh: a pair of miniature tennis shoes to go on his rearview mirror.

*This letter impresses upon Ari the importance of communicating: when he lets Dante in, they can laugh and recreate some of the magic of last summer.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Ari works a full day at the Charcoaler the day after Christmas. At home, Ari is thrilled to find homemade tamales. Mom says that Dante called and didn't know that Ari had a job. Dante calls back. He and Ari talk about the cold, gray weather in Chicago and then Dante asks about Ari's job. He points out that Ari isn't going to be able to save money if he keeps buying art books, and thanks Ari for a book about *The Raft of the Medusa*. They laugh and Ari misses him more than ever. Ari takes Legs out for a run later, and it starts to **rain**. Ari thinks about the accident and his legs hurt.

*Calling Ari out on not keeping Dante fully updated on what's going on shows that Mom desperately wants Ari to learn the value of communication. When Ari's legs start to hurt on the run, it shows that rain still represents a fundamental shift and a loss of innocence for Ari. The fact that he's thinking about the accident suggests that Ari won't be able to just push down the reality of the accident just to comply with his rule. At some point, he'll have to accept that it happened and come to terms with his feelings for Dante.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ari has to work on New Year's Eve. Mom isn't happy, as Ari will miss the family celebration. Ari says that he's glad that 1987 is over and reminds her of the "small incident in the **rain**." They toast to 1988 and Mom says that Ari is looking more and more like an adult. Work isn't busy, so the staff sings along with their favorite songs of the year. Gina and Susie come through right before closing. When Ari takes their order out, they invite him to a party. Ari agrees to meet them there. He goes home first and is surprised that Mom lets him go. At the party, Ileana kisses Ari for a long time and then leaves. Gina appears right after. They hug and laugh.

*For Mom, the new year makes it abundantly clear that Ari isn't a boy anymore. Though she doesn't know about Ileana, Ari's kiss with her reinforces this and heralds his coming sexual maturity. The fact that Mom is happy and encouraging about Ari going to the party, even when she likely knows that there will be alcohol there, shows that she's willing to overlook risks if she thinks that it'll make Ari happier and more connected to the people around him.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

While Ari is home alone, he opens the drawer with Bernardo's file in it. He wants to open it and wonders if it'll set him free if he does. He thinks that he wants Mom to hand it to him and wonders if he wants too much.

*What Ari seems to understand here is that the knowledge itself won't set him free. What might be the relationship he'll build with his parents, if and when they choose to speak to him about Bernardo.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Dante writes Ari a short letter asking if Ari masturbates. He admits that he's obsessed and thinks it's a phase, but doesn't want to ask Mr. Quintana about it. He asks how often it's normal to masturbate. Ari is mad about the letter because he thinks it's embarrassing. He doesn't want to talk about masturbation at all, and definitely not with Dante.

*While kissing may be just fine for Ari, masturbation represents a different kind of sexual maturity that's less comfortable for him. Their differences of opinion here show that Dante is still a little ahead of Ari as they mature, and that there is a gap in communication between him and Ari as a result.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The months start to run together. Ari drives his truck into the desert some Friday nights, and tries to see Ileana. One day he asks her out on a date, but she refuses. They still talk after Ari is done with work. When prom approaches, Ari decides to ask her again. She refuses and says that she has a boyfriend who's in a gang. Ari thinks of Gina saying that Ileana is playing with him, and Ileana says that her boyfriend will hurt Ari. Ari asks why Ileana kissed him if this is the case, and she apologizes. On Monday, Ari can't find her at school. Gina discovers that Ileana dropped out. Later, Ari goes to Ileana's house. Ileana's brother says that Ileana is pregnant and got married. Ari thinks that kissing doesn't mean anything.

*Choosing to think that kissing is meaningless allows Ari to at least vow to close himself off from emotional intimacy with other people, something that falls in line with his habit of remaining silent and solitary about things that bother him. Ileana's choices, meanwhile, remind Ari and the reader that their world isn't as safe or secure as they might think. Ileana appears to be at the mercy of peer pressure and her own poor choices, something that Ari, who's not involved with a gang, can avoid.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER THIRTY

Dante writes to Ari and says that for every seven letters that he writes, Ari writes one. He threatens to drown Ari this summer and then revive him with mouth-to-mouth. Dante says that he's been kissing a girl, but the girl thinks that he's mentally kissing someone else. She asked if he's kissing a girl or a boy. Dante responded that he's kissing an imaginary boy. Now, he and the girl are friends and the girl admitted that she was kissing Dante to make another guy jealous. Dante says that he's bored with the rich Chicago kids and wants to go home to El Paso.

Dante writes that he's worried what Mrs. Quintana and Mr. Quintana will say when Dante admits that he wants to marry a boy. He won't be able to give them grandchildren, and he knows that he's disappointing them and Ari. Dante admits that he's worried they won't be friends when he gets back to El Paso. Dante walks through the speech he'd like to give his dad but thinks it sounds too needy. He wonders if he and Ari are too old to play in the street now, and says that Ari doesn't have to be his friend, but says it'd be weird if they weren't friends.

*Dante's letter may or may not be entirely truthful (it's likely that he's thinking of Ari and just doesn't want to admit it, either to this girl or to Ari), but it gets the point across that he's becoming surer of his sexuality, if not comfortable enough to be entirely truthful about it.*



*Dante's anxiety about not being able to properly perform adult masculinity shows how constricting being the only son in a Mexican family is for him. He knows that he can't do it "right," but his love for his parents makes this far scarier for him than it might be otherwise. Part of his fears also have to do with getting older, since he mentions possibly being too old to play in the street like children.*



## PART FOUR, CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

On the last day of school, Gina tells Ari that he looks like a hunk after a year of working out. She invites him to a party. They laugh, and then Ari asks if she and Susie would drive him out to the desert so he can get drunk instead. Gina agrees. She and Susie meet Ari at his house after work, and Mom is visibly excited that Ari has friends and is going out. As Ari changes, he whispers to himself that he's beautiful and wants to believe it. They pick up beer at Gina's cousin's house and then drive to the desert. Ari drinks and asks if they think they'll discover the secrets of the universe. Susie says it'd be beautiful, and they wonder if love has anything to do with it.

Susie asks Ari if he's drunk yet and why he wants to get drunk. Ari says he wants to feel something, and Susie says he's an idiot. They all lie down and look at the sky. Ari listens to Susie and Gina talk and thinks that it's nice listening to them. He wonders what it'd be like to love a girl and know how a girl thinks.

*This moment makes it clear that Ari does have friends, if only he's willing to ask them for attention and care. It's especially telling that Ari lets Susie and Gina in on his desire to understand the secrets of the universe, as this is a more introspective and personal side of him that, thus far, he's really only shared with Dante. Notably, Susie is onto something when she asks if love is part of it: Ari does come to figure out who he is later, when he accepts that he loves Dante.*



*The contentment that Ari feels as he spends time with Gina and Susie continues to show him that if he opens up to others, he can in turn create opportunities to think more critically about himself and where he fits into the world.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER ONE

Ari thinks that summer is supposed to be about hope, which is why he loves it *and* hates it. He decides that this is going to be his summer, and he's going to make it a good one. However, Ari's going to work 40 hours per week at the Charcoaler, and Mom signs him up to work at the food bank on Saturday afternoons. On the first Saturday of summer, Ari gets up early and finds Mom in the kitchen. He tells her that he's filling in for a coworker tonight, which Mom says is decent. He points out that she raised him to be decent, but he wants to be bad and it's her fault he's not. Mom says that bad boys are just bad; they don't need permission.

Mom and Ari look at each other and Ari asks what would happen if he quits his job. Mom insists it'd be fine, but Ari knows this is a lie. He suggests that he'll mow lawns and when Mom takes issue with this, he asks if it's too Mexican of a job. He says that flipping burgers is both reliable and unimaginative, just like him. Mom asks if Ari is going to beat himself up forever and points out that the Charcoaler is a transitional job, not a career. Ari thinks this makes Mom less of a Mexican mother, but Mom angrily says that being educated doesn't make her less Mexican. Ari thinks that Mom's anger is refreshing, since it doesn't paralyze her.

Mom asks Ari if he knows what an "ecotone" is. He says it's where two different ecosystems meet, and Mom says this proves her point: Ari is in transition. They banter about Mom acting like a teacher and Ari being almost 17 years old. They apologize, and Ari wants to tell her that nobody knows him. Mom brushes Ari's hair aside and tells him that she and Dad will give Ari money if he doesn't want to work. She tells him to have a nice summer. Ari says he might fall in love and thinks that parents love their sons to the point where they romanticize their lives. He thinks that parents forget that being almost 17 is painful, confusing, and sometimes awful.

## PART FIVE, CHAPTER TWO

Ari runs past Dante's house with Legs, even though he's not sure if Dante is back in El Paso yet. He lets Legs off the leash in the park and thinks that he loves how open she is with her emotions and affection. Dante calls for Ari from the porch and Ari walks over. Dante hugs Ari and then pets Legs. Ari wonders where Dante's happiness comes from, and whether he has the same kind of happiness inside of him. They remark on all the ways they've changed—Ari is muscled with long hair, and Dante is taller than Ari. They reaffirm that they're friends, and Ari thinks that maybe this summer they'll do nothing but laugh.

*Ari is testing limits here as he tells Mom that he'd like to be bad. He likely doesn't really want to be bad; he just wants to feel as though he can make mistakes or try new, possibly questionable things, without feeling like he has to somehow make up for Bernardo's crimes. Trying to blame this on Mom isn't entirely wrong, as she is responsible for making Ari feel like he's living in Bernardo's shadow.*



*Again, much of what Ari suggests is sarcastic and not necessarily serious, but Mom's insistence that Ari should do something more than manual labor indicates that she has hope Ari will pursue intellectualism, rather than rely on his strength and physicality forever. When Ari recognizes that Mom's anger doesn't paralyze her, it denotes progress—Mom is more vocal about her feelings, which is why she doesn't freeze, and this is something that Ari should emulate.*



*As far as Ari is concerned, being 16 is really no different than being 15 was last summer—until he becomes an adult, life is just a little bit scary and confusing. This reminds the reader that Ari is still trying to find his place in the world, and it suggests that it's a common fault on the part of adults to forget that being a teen isn't just a romantic period of discovery. In order to make important discoveries and mature, it requires mistakes that don't always end well.*



*Being able to compare himself to Dante makes it even more pronounced that both boys have grown up a lot in the last nine or so months. While they're now more adult—Ari can drive, and Dante is getting tall—they're also still kids trying to figure out how they fit into the world. When Ari questions where Dante's happiness comes from, it suggests that he doesn't fully grasp yet that happiness comes from being open and vulnerable.*



Dante invites Ari in, but Mr. Quintana steps outside and shouts for Mrs. Quintana. They hug Ari, and Ari wants to cry because he feels he doesn't deserve the affection. He wishes he could be himself and not the guy who saved Dante, but he's happy to see them anyway. Mrs. Quintana looks younger and more beautiful than ever. Dante asks when he can ride in Ari's truck and asks Ari to teach him to drive.

*Seeing Mrs. Quintana as so young and beautiful, and for no discernable reason, suggests that Ari has changed more in the last year than even his appearance would suggest. He's seeing Mrs. Quintana as more than just Dante's mom. Now, Ari is able to see her as a complex person with her own range of emotions.*



Before Ari leaves, Mrs. Quintana pulls Ari aside and asks him to be careful when he lets Dante drive his truck. Ari promises to be careful and says that he'll disappoint her someday. She kindly says that Ari is too hard on himself and that she missed him. Ari feels as though Mrs. Quintana's love is a weight, even if she doesn't mean it to feel that way.

*The way that Ari interprets Mrs. Quintana's love suggests that he is truly a part of the Quintana family, as this mirrors the way that Ari's parents love him. The expectations that come with this maternal love make it feel like a burden.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER THREE

Ari and Legs pick Dante up that evening. Mr. Quintana and Mrs. Quintana come outside to look at Ari's truck. Dante, inspecting the rims, says that Ari is a real Mexican. Mr. Quintana is just as enthusiastic about the truck, so Ari tosses him the keys. Ari watches the Quintanas and Legs look at his truck, and wants time to stop in this perfect moment. He sits down with Dante while Mr. and Mrs. Quintana drive away, and remarks that Dante's parents look like kids. Ari says that his parents are happy and adore each other, but Dad isn't "demonstrative." Dante makes fun of Ari's expanding vocabulary, but Ari says he's studying for college.

*The conversation that Ari and Dante have about their respective parents shows that now, at age 16, both boys are beginning to see their parents more as complex people. Ari understands now that Dad isn't just a piece of animate stone; he's a person who just isn't open with his emotions. Specifically, being able to recognize that Dad is happy despite (or because of) his silence indicates that Ari is seeing Dad as a human being with nuanced thoughts and emotions.*



Dante asks if Ari will ever be "demonstrative," and when Ari says he won't, Dante declares that Ari is like Dad. Dante says that Mrs. Quintana is reserved, but he also thinks that his mom loves Mr. Quintana more than his dad loves her. They wonder if love is a contest, and Dante remarks that Ari is talking and asks if there are rules this summer. Ari says that he doesn't kiss boys, so Dante can't kiss him, and Dante says he has a rule of his own: Ari can't run away. He knows that people will be mean to Ari for hanging out with a gay guy. They argue over who has the harder rule to follow. They reminisce about the game they played with their shoes last summer, knowing that they're too old to play it now.

*Talking about the game they played with their shoes (and especially the fact that neither Ari nor Dante have made any mention of whether or not Dante's war against shoes is still on) is an even more obvious flag that these two are growing up. Now, they're able to practice communicating better. This shows that Ari's practice in writing in his journal has paid off, as he's now able to combine the rules and the silence with actual deep conversation.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER FOUR

Ari drives Dante and Legs to the desert to look at the stars. After a minute, Dante says that Mrs. Quintana is pregnant. They wonder if parents ever outgrow sex, and Dante asks if it makes Ari think of Bernardo. Ari says that everything makes him think of his brother. Dante suggests that Ari sit Mom and Dad down and force them to talk about Bernardo like adults, but Ari believes this won't work. They laugh and then Dante says that he hopes his mom has a boy who likes girls. They laugh, and then Dante says he has to come out to his parents. Dante cries and Ari assures him that his parents will always love him. Dante is afraid that he's going to disappoint them and Ari, but Ari says he's not disappointed. On the way home, Dante says he's going to get a job to learn about life.

*Dante's hope that the new baby will be straight speaks to the intensity of his shame and discomfort with his own sexuality. While he's clearly more comfortable with being gay than Ari is, he's acutely aware of the difficulties that he'll experience as a young gay man—and the ways in which his parents might struggle as a result. The simple fact that Dante isn't out yet to his parents shows that when it comes to his sexuality, he's trying to rely on silence in order to preserve his positive relationship with his parents for as long as possible, in case things change.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER FIVE

One night in Dante's room, Ari asks to see the canvas he's been working on. Dante refuses and seems far away, but he asks Ari how he knows if he doesn't like kissing boys when he's never kissed a boy. Ari points out that Dante hasn't kissed a boy either and might not know that he likes it. Dante convinces Ari that they should try it and Ari doesn't know why, but he agrees. They kiss, but Ari pulls away and insists it didn't work for him. Dante says that it worked for him. Ari admits that he's a little mad, but more at himself for letting Dante talk him into it. He tells Dante to not cry.

*The way that both boys behave in this instance suggests that there's more to what's going on than they'd like to admit. Though Ari doesn't know why, he likely agrees to the kiss because he's at least curious on some level, if not in love with Dante. Telling Dante not to cry afterwards reveals how uncomfortable Ari is with the possibility that he's in love with Dante, as stopping Dante's emotional exhibition means that they can ignore their connection.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER SIX

Ari and Dante don't talk for a few days. Finally, Ari invites Dante to go running. Everything feels normal for a while. Ari runs and works, and Dante gets a job at a drugstore. Mrs. Quintana starts teaching Dante to drive and the boys don't see much of each other for a few weeks. One morning, Ari gets back from a run to find a note from Mom, asking when he's going to start his shift at the food bank. He calls Dante and invites him to volunteer with him. Dante agrees and Ari realizes how much he missed him.

*Especially once Dante gets a job, the boys have the opportunity to experience more with what it's like to handle their relationship as adults with adult responsibilities. In this moment, they can also experiment with communicating more like adults, and Ari's realization that he misses Dante shows that he's becoming more mature.*



Ari showers and then finds Bernardo's envelope. He wants to open it, but doesn't. All day, Ari thinks of Bernardo and after work, he invites Dante to go get drunk with him. Dante agrees without a question. Ari showers at home and discovers that Mom and his sisters are visiting Aunt Ophelia in Tucson, so he and Dad are home alone. Ari takes a tone with Dad, who says that Ari seems angry. Ari thinks of the conversation he'd like to have in his head, in which he accuses Dad of being silent about Bernardo. Dad would insist that silence saved him, and Ari would shoot back that he hates Dad for teaching him to be silent. Dad reaches for Ari, but Ari pulls away.

*While the way that Ari treats Dad might not serve him, Ari's anger is entirely justified. It's especially important to note that he is now fully aware that he's learned to be silent from Dad, and that being silent is detrimental, rather than helpful, to his family. The fact that Ari doesn't know why exactly they have to be silent, but must fall in line anyway, makes things even worse, as he doesn't have any reasoning to back it up.*



At Dante's house, Mr. Quintana and Mrs. Quintana see that Ari is crying and invite him inside. Dante smiles at everyone and gets in the truck. Ari isn't sure how he finds his way to his spot in the desert, but he thinks it must be one of the secrets of the universe. When they arrive, Ari shouts that he forgot the beer and that they need it. He starts to sob and falls into Dante's arms. Ari thinks that pain can come out of nowhere, like a **rainstorm**.

*Ari's meltdown illustrates how destructive and unsustainable this kind of silence can be when a person has to maintain it without knowing why for so long. However, friendship or relationships in general, like what Ari has with Dante, can help make things better by showing Ari that he's not alone; he can find companionship and understanding.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER SEVEN

The next morning, Ari thinks it's weird to not have Mom home. Dad leaves a note asking Ari if he's okay. Ari thinks he's fine but as he and Legs run, he thinks of Dad and Dante. He wonders why they're friends, but then thinks about Aunt Ophelia and why he never visits her. He loves her and thinks that he could make more of an effort. After Ari showers, he studies his body in the mirror. Aunt Ophelia is the only person who has ever told Ari that bodies are beautiful, and Ari wonders if he'll ever think his own body is beautiful.

*The way that Ari thinks about his relationship to Aunt Ophelia again shows that he's beginning to come of age. Now, he recognizes that she's an amazing mentor in a way that he didn't recognize as a kid. He also understands that if he wants to maintain a relationship with her, he needs to put in the work and cannot stay silent.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER EIGHT

Ari stops at the drugstore where Dante works before heading to the Charcoaler. Dante smiles and says that Gina and Susie came in a while ago, and they asked if Dante knew Ari. He told them that they're best friends. Ari starts to get angry and reminds Dante that they're not supposed to talk about the accident. Later, Dante calls Ari at work and asks why he's mad. Ari says that he just doesn't want other people to know. Gina and Susie show up at the Charcoaler as Ari gets off and talk about how nice and cute Dante was. He tells them to leave him alone.

*Gina and Susie finding out the truth about the accident makes it clear to Ari that his silence isn't going to save him long-term. Eventually, people will speak up and the truth will come out, no matter how hard others try to obscure or ignore the truth. As uncomfortable as this is for Ari, this does imply that the truth about Bernardo and about Dad's experience in Vietnam might come out in a similar manner in the future.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER NINE

Dante and Ari argue about whether or not Ari should be upset that Gina and Susie found out about Dante and the accident. Ari gets up to go and thinks about Dante chasing the boys who shot a **bird**. As he gets in the truck, Dante asks if Ari wishes he hadn't saved him. Ari says he doesn't regret it and Dante says that Ari is "inscrutable."

*Notably, Dante understands the positive power of being open and truthful about things, something that is still wildly uncomfortable for Ari. This suggests that the two won't be able to truly connect until Ari opens up and begins to communicate better.*



Ari and Dad quietly eat dinner together and feed Legs scraps. Dad invites Ari to go bowling with him and Mr. Quintana, so Ari calls Dante to invite him. Dante says to say no so that he and Ari can do something else. Once Mr. Quintana and Dad drive away, Ari and Legs pick up Dante and greet Mrs. Quintana. She explains that Dante is making lists of names for his baby brother. When Ari asks what happens if it's a girl, Dante says that it'll be a boy and they'll give him a Mexican name so he feels more Mexican. Mrs. Quintana asks if Legs can stay with her and Ari agrees. She makes Ari promise to be careful and to remember the **rain** before he and Dante drive away.

*Again, Dante shows here that he's channeling all of his own anxieties about his sexuality and his cultural identity into the new baby. However, it's worth noting that simply having a traditional Mexican name doesn't guarantee that the baby, male or female, will feel more Mexican. Mrs. Quintana's warning to remember the rain shows Ari that she recognizes how meaningful of an experience the accident was for all of them. She warns him, in effect, that things can change in an instant.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER TEN

As they drive, Dante pulls out two joints. They laugh that they're bad boys now. Dante says he got the joints from Daniel, a guy he works with who might like him. Dante isn't sure he wants to kiss Daniel. When they get to their spot in the desert, they pass the joint until it's gone. They can smell **rain** and hear thunder in the distance. The wind picks up and the boys run into the truck as it starts to rain. They laugh and laugh, and Dante suggests they get out. He strips naked except for his shoes, and Ari follows suit. They laugh and then run into the rain. Finally, they climb back into the truck and the rain stops.

*This moment of wild, gleeful abandon shows that Ari and Dante are still kids—and furthermore, that while rain can signify difficult change, it can also be a cleansing and fun experience. In this sense, it parallels the transition to adulthood as something that is both challenging and enjoyable. Dante's choice to keep his shoes is an important way that the novel shows how he's growing up. He now understands, to a degree at least, the importance of protecting his feet out in the desert.*



Ari closes his eyes and Dante comes around to stand next to him. Dante doesn't touch Ari, but Ari isn't sure what he'd do if Dante did. Dante says that he's hungry for *menudo*, which Ari says makes Dante a real Mexican. Dante isn't sure that it's Mexican to want to kiss boys. They giggle about their dads bowling and when their eyes aren't red anymore, they decide to go home and laugh about how much fun they had.

*When Ari isn't sure what he'd do if Dante were to touch him, it reminds the reader again that Ari is fighting hard against his attraction to Dante. In this sense, even as he and Dante communicate relatively openly, Ari is still insisting on silence in this one, extremely important way—and it's not serving him.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dad wakes Ari up early and says that they're going to Tucson. He hands Ari a cup of coffee and they step outside so Dad can smoke. Dad says that bowling was fun; both he and Mr. Quintana are horrible at it. After a minute, Dad says that Aunt Ophelia had a stroke and is dying. Ari remembers that he lived with Ophelia for a year when he was small. She never married and wasn't connected to the rest of the extended family, but she laughed often and knew how to make Ari feel loved. Dad calls Ari back to attention, and when Ari shares his thoughts, Dad says that Ari didn't want to come home from Ophelia's. Ari says that he loves Ophelia more than his other relatives, and Dad says that Ophelia and Mom wrote each other weekly for years.

*Losing Aunt Ophelia impresses upon Ari that the people he loves aren't going to be around forever, and if he wants to make sure that people understand how he feels about them, he needs to communicate that to them. It appears that, to a degree, Dad is experiencing the same realization. This is why Dad begins to share that Mom and Ophelia wrote each other so much. Further, Dad starts to become more of a well-rounded person in Ari's eyes as he talks about bowling and the fun he had, as it begins to separate Dad out from just being a parent.*



Dad asks if Ari can have the Quintanas watch Legs. Mrs. Quintana agrees immediately. Ari thinks she sounds happier and wonders if it's because she's going to have the baby. Dante calls a minute later. He offers condolences for Aunt Ophelia, but is excited to get Legs. They discuss that Mrs. Quintana is suspicious about Ari and Dante's activities last night. A bit later, Dad and Ari drop Legs off and have coffee. They joke about how Mexican Dante is, and then everyone but Dad laughs that Dante is going to let Legs chew his shoes. They all laugh when Legs walks in with a shoe.

*The way that Ari and Dante interact with Legs shows that the dog functions as a mirror for how the boys really feel about things. Legs is loving and affectionate in a way that Dante is, and that Ari wants to be on some level, while chewing Dante's shoe shows that Dante hasn't truly moved on yet from his war on shoes. It's also possible to see Ari maturing here as he thinks about how happy Mrs. Quintana looks. Like Dad, she's becoming more of a person to him.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER TWELVE

Dad and Ari drive in silence until Dad says that Mom is sad. He lets Ari drive, and Ari apologizes for his behavior last night, saying that he doesn't know what to do with his feelings and doesn't feel normal. He says he's angry and Dad suggests they talk more, but Ari points out that neither of them are good talkers. Dad says that Ari is good with words, but just not when they talk. They laugh that they're glad Mom makes them talk, and Dad lights a cigarette. Ari thinks about Legs, Dante, and why he didn't look at Dante's sketches. He wonders if Bernardo was close to Aunt Ophelia, why Ophelia wasn't close with the family, and why he lived with her. He asks Dad.

*Aunt Ophelia becomes a convenient starting point for Ari and Dad to connect and talk about their family. Though it's horrible that they only are able to have this conversation as Ophelia is dying, and not with Ophelia herself, this also makes the case that tragedy and trauma don't have to be damaging in the long run. Instead, if people choose to reach out to each other in times like this, they can actually grow closer and become better prepared for the next tragedy.*



Dad takes a minute to answer but says that Ari went to Aunt Ophelia's during Bernardo's trial. They were all having a hard time and Bernardo didn't want Ari to remember the trial. Ari says that it didn't solve anything, but Dad says that it was complicated—Mom had a breakdown, so Ari stayed with Ophelia for nine months. Mom acted like Bernardo died after he was sentenced. Though she gradually came back to herself, Dad still wonders if it's over. Dad cries and Ari pulls over. Dad gets out and Ari leaves him alone, but then decides to stand with him. He thinks that leaving each other alone is hurting them, and tells Dad that he sometimes hates him for pretending that Bernardo is dead. Dad apologizes.

*Learning that Mom had a breakdown during Bernardo's trial makes it clear to Ari that Mom is a real person who has, at points in her life, been seriously unwell. When Dad confides in Ari that he sometimes wonders if it's over, he shows that even if these events feel far away to Ari, they're actually still very close for Mom and Dad. This allows Mom and Dad's silence to start making more sense to Ari, which in turn helps him understand their motivations for acting this way.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Aunt Ophelia dies before Ari and Dad get to Tucson. Her funeral mass is standing room only, but Ari's immediate family is the only family there. People approach Ari and tell him that Ophelia adored him, which makes Ari ashamed that he didn't talk to her more. After the funeral, Mom, Dad, and Ari stay at Ophelia's house to take care of things. Ari can barely imagine Mom having a mental breakdown and asks one evening why nobody else came to Ophelia's funeral. Mom says that Ophelia lived with another woman, Franny, and that the rest of the family doesn't approve. Ari remembers Franny fondly. Mom makes it clear that Ophelia and Franny were lovers, but Ari says it doesn't bother him.

*The revelation that Aunt Ophelia was a lesbian and that Mom and Dad clearly didn't care much, if at all, is important information for Ari. His insistence that it doesn't bother him and that he still remembers Ophelia and Franny fondly shows that Ari himself is more than willing to see all people as people, regardless of who they might love. This implies that he may be ready to come to a realization about his own sexuality, and that his parents' acceptance of Ophelia will serve as a model for his own self-acceptance.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ari looks at Dad, and Dad says that it didn't bother him either; Aunt Ophelia was kind and decent. It did matter to the rest of the family. Ari sees that Dad is angry at Mom's family, and asks again if Ophelia's sexuality didn't matter to Dad. Dad points out that if they'd cared, they wouldn't have let Ari stay with her. Mom asks if she can show Ari pictures of Bernardo when they get home. Ari starts to cry and Mom says that she thinks she hurt Ari. Ari says he's crying because he's happy.

*Mom's offer to tell Ari about Bernardo suggests that Aunt Ophelia's death is a tipping point for the family. Now that Mom sees that silence isn't helping anyone and has instead hurt Ari, she's willing to reevaluate her actions and make choices that will help her connect better with her family. This will ideally help Ari understand his family and his place within it, and consequently come of age.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ari calls Dante and says that he'll be back in a few days, and that Aunt Ophelia left him her house. One of Ophelia's friends wants to buy it from him, so Dante points out that Ari can quit his job. They laugh. Dante says that he's been working and hanging out with a guy. Ari doesn't ask which guy, and Dante changes the subject to Legs.

*Ari's unwillingness to ask Dante about who he's seeing shows that Ari is still very uncomfortable applying his newfound openness with his parents to his relationship with Dante. This suggests that he's not quite ready to make the final leap to maturity.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER SIXTEEN

On the Fourth of July, Ari, Mom, and Dad watch fireworks together, and Dad lets Ari have a beer. Mom pretends to disapprove but only confirms that Ari has drunk before and hasn't driven while drinking. She says that Aunt Ophelia used to say that Franny was the Fourth of July, and Ari asks what happened to Franny. Franny died of cancer six years ago. Mom came to the funeral. Ari notes that Franny used to send him Christmas gifts, and Mom says they should've told him about her death.

*For Ari, learning that Aunt Ophelia was a lesbian adds a layer of complexity to his parents as people. Mom was clearly supportive and very close to her sister, which helps Ari conceptualize who she is aside from being his mother. Ophelia herself shows Ari that he can make a good life for himself if he chooses to accept his own sexuality.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Before they leave Tucson, Mom puts two big boxes of letters in the trunk of the car. She says that they're the letters she wrote to Aunt Ophelia, and that she's going to give them to Ari. Ari wonders if his smile is as big as Mom's, but thinks it's not as beautiful as hers.

*Passing on the letters means that Mom will give Ari another way to understand who she has been for the last several years. With this, Ari will be able to interact with her even more like equals.*



## PART FIVE, CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ari sits in the backseat on the drive home and watches Mom and Dad hold hands. He thinks of smoking and running naked in the rain with Dante. Ari says that he's going to work, read, and hang out for the rest of the summer, and Dad points out that Ari doesn't have to work. Ari says he doesn't have anything else to do since he doesn't like TV, which he insists is their fault. Mom suggests that Ari and Dante take a camping trip since it's summer, but Ari thinks of Mrs. Quintana's warning to remember the **rain**.

*Ari's sense of contentment in this rainstorm shows him that the experience and knowledge he's gaining isn't at all a bad or traumatizing thing, as it was when he was hit by the car after a rainstorm. Like the traumas of his family that are gradually being revealed to him, Ari can now remember the rain and the accident but knows that these things don't have to rule his life. Now, he understands that the rain can be transformative in a positive way.*



Ari rolls down his window and looks at dark clouds ahead.

**Raindrops** fall on his hand and he thinks they're like kisses. He's been dreaming about kissing, but can never figure out whom he's kissing. Suddenly, the rain begins in earnest and Ari rolls up his window. Dad pulls over and Ari feels small in the middle of the storm. Ari thinks that for him, summers are about storms that make him feel alone, and that boys like him belong to rain, not sunshine.

## PART SIX, CHAPTER ONE

It **rains** the entire way back to El Paso. Ari sleeps and feels safe and protected. He dreams about smoking with Dad and Bernardo while Mom and Dante watch, but he can't decide if it was a good dream or not. Ari wakes up to hear Mom asking if rain ever makes him think of the accident. Ari says that he and Dante don't talk about it, though they talk about everything else. At home, Mom assures Ari that Legs is fine and happy with Dante, and Ari imagines Legs snuggling up to Dante for kisses. Ari thinks that Dante likes kissing everyone and likes masturbating, but Ari thinks it's all a bit weird. He feels stupid thinking about sex because it makes him feel inadequate.

Ari sits at the table with Mom and Dad and wonders why he's thinking about all of this now. He hates being in his head and thinks of Bernardo. He wonders if Bernardo would've taught him more about how guys should be. Ari thinks that he should be happy, but that there's something in him that makes him feel bad. Mom calls Ari back and asks what he's thinking about. Ari says that he's too much like Dad to answer, which makes Dad laugh. Ari thinks that Dad looks young and like he's changing, and he wonders if everyone is always becoming someone different. He falls asleep and dreams again of kissing someone. When Ari wakes up in the night, he wants to masturbate but takes a cold shower instead.

## PART SIX, CHAPTER TWO

When Ari wakes up, he feels funny, and not just because of his dream and wanting to masturbate. He walks to Dante's house to get Legs. Mr. Quintana answers and Legs is thrilled to see Ari. Ari notices that Mr. Quintana looks like something is wrong. Mr. Quintana says that Dante is in the hospital after being beaten and invites Ari in for coffee. They sit and Mr. Quintana asks how close Ari is to Dante. Ari plays dumb, but can tell that Mr. Quintana wants to know if Ari knew that Dante is gay. Ari asks if Dante told Mr. Quintana, and says that Dante shared that he'd like to marry or at least kiss another boy.

*Ari's analysis that summers are about storms and loneliness shows that he's still not yet able to fully accept who he is. Doing so will allow him to connect more fully with others and metaphorically embrace the sunshine and the warmth of his relationships.*



*Again, Ari's discomfort when he thinks about Dante, kissing, and masturbation points to the fact that he's still not entirely at ease with his identity and how to most effectively relate to other people romantically. He's still insistent that he, at least, needs to be silent about it so that he doesn't have to acknowledge his discomfort. This becomes a vicious cycle when it makes him feel stupid and inadequate, as this gives him even less incentive to think about why he feels this way.*



*The thing inside of Ari that makes him feel bad is, presumably, the fact that he's ignoring his sexuality, a major part of his identity and something that can be harmful to deny or try to change. When Ari realizes that Dad is changing, too, he comes to the understanding that adulthood isn't just a single endpoint after adolescence. Rather, it's a continuing experience of change and growth. With this, Ari comes to understand that reaching adulthood won't automatically solve all his problems, an outlook that heralds his coming maturity.*



*Ari plays dumb here in an attempt to protect Dante's privacy, which speaks to how loyal Ari is to his friend and how misguided (though understandable) Dante's fear that Ari would abandon him was. Importantly, leveling with Mr. Quintana like this catapults Ari into a situation where he has to understand that though Mr. Quintana is an adult, he too made mistakes in how he interacted with Dante, since he now knows that Dante was afraid of coming out.*



Mr. Quintana says that he thinks he knew from the way that Dante looks at Ari, but he doesn't know why Dante didn't tell him. Ari feels like he's betraying Dante as he says that Dante didn't want to betray Mr. Quintana. Mr. Quintana asks Ari to call him Sam, and Ari points out that Dante loves his dad. Ari says that Dante was thrilled that they were having another baby and was insistent that the baby be a boy who liked girls, so Sam and Mrs. Quintana could have grandchildren. Sam cries and says he cares about Dante, not grandchildren. He says that they beat Dante and cracked his ribs. Ari wants to hold Sam.

*Asking Ari to call him Sam represents a major turning point in Ari's development his role in relation to the adults in his life. With this change in address, Ari has to see Mr. Quintana as more of a peer who, though he's far more open than Ari and Dad are, still remained silent in important ways that ended up being harmful for Dante. Insisting that he doesn't care about grandchildren, however, shows that Sam loves Dante more than anything.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER THREE

Ari isn't sure what to tell Mom and Dad. Legs is thrilled to be home and greets Mom and Dad while Ari tells them that someone jumped Dante. He heads for the hospital. Dante is bruised and swollen to the point of being unrecognizable. Ari takes Dante's hand and says that he hates the boys who did this. He sits with Sam and Mrs. Quintana, and Mrs. Quintana confirms that Ari will always be Dante's friend. Ari says that he needs a friend too.

*For Mr. and Mrs. Quintana, the important thing now is that Dante won't suffer any more than he already has, now that he's been forcibly outed in the most dangerous way possible. Admitting that he needs a friend, too, shows that Ari is becoming more open and vulnerable.*



Later, Sam and Mrs. Quintana walk Ari to his truck. Mrs. Quintana tells Ari what happened: an old lady saw Dante and another boy kissing in an alley, and some boys jumped them. She says that she thinks Dante is in love with Ari, but Ari suggests that Dante likes the boy he was kissing. Sam awkwardly suggests that the guy is a stand-in, and Ari says that the best and worst thing about adults is that they don't always act like adults. Ari says he thinks he knows who the other boy is, but he asks what he's supposed to do about it and tries not to cry. He thinks that Dante is his first friend and has taught him everything about the world, including that talking is good. Sam says that the other guy ran, but Dante didn't. Sam breaks down crying and asks why Dante didn't run.

*Ari's insistence that he likes adults in part because they don't always act like adults makes it very clear that Ari is now a very mature young man who recognizes that adults and parents are imperfect people just like him. When Sam cries because Dante didn't run, it shows that he recognizes how dangerous it is for Dante to be so open and confident in who he is, as it leaves him vulnerable to this kind of violence. While Dante's refusal to run is a testament to his strength and confidence in himself, it also did irreparable damage.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER FOUR

Ari tells the reader that he didn't have a plan for what he does next. He says that a person can't always control what they do when they feel too much, and thinks that the difference between boys and men is that men can control what they feel. He says that in this moment, he's a crazy boy and not at all a man. Ari drives to the drugstore where Dante works and finds Daniel. He introduces himself and tells Daniel to take a break and meet him outside. Ari threatens to beat Daniel if he doesn't comply. Daniel comes out a minute later and Ari ascertains that he hasn't been to visit Dante in the hospital.

*Ari's assessment of the differences between boys and men shows that, in his understanding, someone his age can easily move back and forth between being an adult and being a child, depending on their emotions. This also reinforces that part of becoming adult means developing the emotional intelligence to control anger like this, and not seek revenge from someone like Daniel.*



Ari wants to beat Daniel, but instead asks who jumped them. Daniel is concerned that Ari is going to tell people, but Ari grabs Daniel by the collar and demands names. Daniel says it was four guys, but he only knew two: Julian Enriquez and Joe Moncada. Ari confirms that Daniel left Dante there, but Daniel says that Dante wouldn't run and asks what good it would've done to stay. Ari points out that Daniel didn't go back and then shoves him against a wall.

*It's worth noting that while Ari is justified in being angry with Daniel, Daniel also did what he felt he needed to do to protect himself. This speaks to the difficult place that gay teens and adults can find themselves in, where doing the stereotypically cowardly thing is actually the only way to stay safe and escape violence.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER FIVE

Ari knows Julian Enriquez. They played baseball together in grade school, but they never liked each other. He drives to Julian's house and his little sister tells Ari that Julian works at Mr. Rodriguez's body shop and gets off at 5:00. Ari drives around and lurks at the shop. Mr. Rodriguez knows Dad, and Ari doesn't want to deal with the questions. When he sees Julian leave, Ari waves him over and lets him look at the truck. He pictures Julian beating Dante and pictures himself beating Julian. Ari grabs Julian by the neck and tells him to get in. Julian punches at Ari, and Ari beats Julian until people pull him away.

*The way that Julian interacts with Ari up until Ari begins to beat him indicates that Julian likely doesn't suspect that Ari is gay too. The way that Ari presents himself and interacts with others makes it seem as though he embodies the traditional, acceptable image of young adult masculinity. However, beating Julian also begins another cycle of silence and violence, which suggests that this is another step back for Ari's development.*



Mr. Rodriguez incredulously asks Ari what happened, but Ari can't talk. Mr. Rodriguez helps Julian up, and Julian whispers that he's going to kill Ari. Mr. Rodriguez tells Ari that he's lucky he's not going to call the cops. Ari says that if Mr. Rodriguez does call the cops, he should ask Julian what he's been doing first.

*As horrendous as this violence is, Ari does understand perfectly that Julian will never admit to beating up gay guys to a man who he probably looks up to—or to the police, for that matter. His observations of how the world works have led him to take justice into his own hands, rather than to sit back helplessly.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER SIX

Ari doesn't notice Julian's blood on him until he gets home. He sits in the driveway shaking. He knows he did something crazy and doesn't know what to think. Dad comes outside with a scary look on his face and says that he got a call from Mr. Rodriguez. Ari can't stand the way Mom looks at him and lets Dad steer him to the living room. Ari says that he wanted to hurt Julian and Mom starts sobbing. She says that Bernardo hurt someone and that Ari broke Julian's nose. Mr. Rodriguez's friendship with Dad is the only reason Ari isn't at the police station, and Ari has to pay for Julian's ER visit. Ari apologizes, but he's not sorry for breaking Julian's nose. He is sorry for hurting Mom.

*Linking Ari's behavior in the present to Bernardo's behavior in the past doesn't help matters for Ari, as it reminds him yet again that he's living in Bernardo's shadow and must be good, in part because Bernardo was so bad. Ari's sense of being sorry that he hurt Mom shows that even though he's emotional and doesn't quite know how to conduct himself, he still recognizes that he loves his family and can rely on them for support as he navigates this choice.*



Ari says that he's not like Bernardo and hates living in his shadow, and he's not sure he's sorry. Dad says that he's going to sell Ari's truck, but Ari doesn't care. Mom asks Ari to tell her why. Ari confirms that they're going to listen and then says that four boys beat Dante because he was kissing another boy. Ari sobs and feels angrier than he's ever been. He says that the other boy ran, but Dante didn't. Ari admits that he's ashamed, and Dad says that Ari is going about this in the worst way. He says that Ari should ask for help, but Ari says he doesn't know how.

*It's possible that part of Ari's anger stems from the fact that Dante didn't do the one thing he could've done to protect himself, just to make a point. This shows that Dante clings to philosophical arguments and making points like this even when it's not actually safe to do so, something that suggests that intellectualism is good up to a point—it just needs to be tempered with an understanding of the possible dangers.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER SEVEN

Dad is gone when Ari gets out of the shower. Ari finds Mom at the kitchen table with Bernardo's file and a glass of wine. Ari sits down and admits that he drinks beer and isn't always a good person. Mom opens the envelope and offers Ari a photo of him and Bernardo. Bernardo is handsome and Ari looks happy. Mom says that Ari loved Bernardo, but it hurt too much for her to talk about him. She hands Ari the envelope and says that Bernardo killed someone with his bare hands. She says that it still hurts and always will. Ari reminds her that it's not her fault, but she says that parents always blame themselves.

*Learning that Bernardo killed someone by beating them to death makes it more understandable why Mom had such a reaction to learning that Ari beat up Julian. It likely made her question whether she'd failed at being a mother more than she thinks she already has because of what Bernardo's actions. This conversation, however, reminds both of them that they can begin to heal by talking about their shared trauma.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER EIGHT

Ari tells Mom that he didn't know he could love her this much. Her smile is suddenly not sad, and she says that Ari helps her bear everything. Ari warns her that he's going to disappoint her, like he did today. Mom says she understands why he did what he did, and Ari feels as though she understands something about Ari that even he doesn't understand about himself. Ari looks through pictures of Bernardo and asks where Dad went. Mom says that he went to see Sam to talk, since they're friends.

*The fact that that Dad went to see Sam shows that, just like Ari, Dad is starting to seek help and affirmation from other people. He's beginning to realize that he can't just be silent about things and expect everything to work out. This sets an example for Ari and encourages him to seek out Dante, as well as Gina and Susie, as he figures out who he is.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER NINE

Ari asks if he can frame a photo of Bernardo saluting Dad before Dad left for Vietnam. Mom says she loves the photo and that Bernardo was inconsolable when Dad left. She says that she tried not to think about the possibility that Dad might not come back and asks if they can put the photo in the living room. Ari feels like Bernardo has suddenly come home. Dad answers Ari's questions while Mom listens, and Ari thinks that he loves her for her silence. He starts to realize that Dad is careful with his words and with people.

*Ari's realization that Dad is careful rather than cold shows that he now understands that there are many different types of silence. Ari's youthful inability to understand Dad may have been in part because Dad was exhibiting a more negative kind of withdrawal, but it's also possible that Ari just didn't understand that silence could actually be a kind and valuable thing under certain circumstances.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER TEN

Ari visits Dante daily during Dante's stay at the hospital. Dante seems sadder and on the day he comes home from the hospital, and Ari holds him as he cries. Ari knows that Dante broke more than his ribs and will never be the same.

*The simple fact that Ari visits Dante shows how much he and Dante have grown—remember that Dante didn't visit Ari in the hospital. Ari now understands that he needs to make Dante feel supported.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER ELEVEN

While Dante naps one day, Ari sits with Mrs. Quintana and Sam. Mrs. Quintana says that there's nothing wrong with seeing a therapist and Ari watches them exchange a look when he says that he's fine. He knows that Sam talked to Dad, and that Sam knows what Ari did. Mrs. Quintana asks if Ari knows who beat Dante, and Ari says that he knows two and could find out who the other two are. This makes Mrs. Quintana laugh and she suggests that it's all about loyalty. Ari says that he knows it's wrong and confirms that nobody is going to punish the boys. Sam says he only cares about Ari and Dante.

*Understanding that Julian and his cronies will never have to answer for what they did shows that Ari is beginning to understand more clearly the ways in which the world is stacked against gay boys like Dante, and specifically how the justice system, at least at this point, can't be relied upon to ensure their safety.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER TWELVE

Ari assures Sam that he's not going to go after the other boys. He says that he's not going to pay for Julian's ER visit if the boys don't have to pay for Dante's hospital stay, and Dad can take the truck away if he wants. Mrs. Quintana smirks. Ari says that Julian can also call the cops, but he doesn't think it's going to happen. Later, Dad doesn't argue with Ari about not paying for Julian's bill. He says that Sam spoke to the witness, but the old lady insisted she can't recognize the boys. Julian's dad comes by to speak with Dad and leaves looking unhappy. Dad, however, doesn't take Ari's truck away.

*When Dad doesn't take Ari's truck away or force him to pay for Julian's hospital bill, it's an important way for Dad to show Ari that when Ari is ready to accept his sexuality, Dad will have his back. This also encourages Ari to do the right thing if something similar comes up in the future, as it shows Ari that he doesn't need to fear punishment for behaving loyally and taking care of his friends.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ari and Dante can't find much to talk about. Ari reads poems to Dante and neither of them go back to work. Ari thinks that in some ways, he feels closer to Dante than ever, but further away in others. One morning, Ari takes the photos of Bernardo and tells Dante what happened. Bernardo was 15 and an angry boy. One night, he picked up a prostitute. Dante interrupts and asked where Bernardo got the money, since what 15-year-old has money for a prostitute, but Ari cuts him off. He says that the prostitute was a transvestite, and Bernardo lost his temper and beat "him" until "he" died. They discuss that Dante already knew about transvestites, but Ari didn't. Ari says it gets worse: in prison, Bernardo killed someone else.

*While Ari uses "transvestite" and male pronouns to discuss the person Bernardo killed, there is a good chance this person would have preferred to be referred to with female pronouns. This is a reflection of how people viewed LGBT people the late 1980s more broadly, but it also speaks to the fact that Ari is very disconnected from the LGBT community in general. It also suggests that while Ari may crave mentorship from Bernardo, it might be okay that he hasn't had it. If Bernardo is willing to kill a "transvestite," it's unlikely that he'd look kindly on his brother being gay.*



Dante offers his condolences but Ari says he's glad to know and would like to get to know Bernardo someday. Ari says that Bernardo's story is so sad and he's afraid that he's like him. Dante says that he knows Ari broke Julian's nose and asks why Ari never told him. Ari says that he just wanted to hurt Julian for hurting Dante. They discuss Dante's injuries and that Dante doesn't like the pain pills, but he does like marijuana. They laugh and Dante says that Ari isn't like Bernardo. Ari isn't sure about this.

Dante asks if it bothers Ari that he was kissing Daniel. Ari says that he thinks Daniel is an awful person. Ari wouldn't have left Dante. Dante says that he's glad that Ari broke Julian's nose and tries to defend Daniel when Ari insists that he doesn't care about Dante. Dante says that he'd like to tell Ari a secret: in his head, he was kissing Ari and not Daniel. Ari shrugs and tells Dante to get a new head.

## PART SIX, CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ari wakes up early and thinks that senior year is going to start soon. Once he graduates, real life will start and he'll get to write his own story. He touches the scars on his legs and wonders if he actually was hurt and then healed. He thinks that people just live in spaces between hurt and healing, like Mom and Dad do. Legs watches Ari, and Ari wonders what she's thinking and if someone hurt her. Ari wonders what will happen after he graduates and if summers are different elsewhere.

## PART SIX, CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dante asks Ari what he really loves. Ari answers that he loves the desert, but Dante says that it's a lonely place. Ari isn't sure and thinks that Dante just doesn't understand. He starts to think that he *is* knowable.

## PART SIX, CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ari decides to go swimming and ignores the lifeguards. He swims laps and remembers the day he met Dante. When he gets out of the pool, a girl waves at Ari and says that she goes to Austin High too. She's a sophomore. They laugh together, but Ari walks away and heads for Dante's house. Sam opens the door and says that Dante is doing better. He hesitates and says that Daniel is over right now. Noticing the look on Ari's face, Sam says that Ari must not like Daniel. He encourages Ari to forgive, but Ari angrily leaves.

*For Ari, it's disturbing that he might be angry like Bernardo, if not about the same things. In his defense, Ari beat up Julian because he wanted to protect and avenge Dante, not because he flew into a rage when someone's body or identity didn't match what he expected. Talking about all of this also allows Ari and Dante to get closer to each other and begin to move on from this particular trauma more healthily.*



*For Ari, beating up Julian was all about loyalty, and he sees that Daniel isn't a loyal person in any way. Again, however, he's ignoring the fact that Daniel did what he needed to do to keep himself safe, something that speaks to Ari's youth, inexperience, and naïveté.*



*As Ari considers that people just exist between hurt and healing, being able to apply this to Legs shows that Ari is continuing to grow and develop as he becomes an adult. He now recognizes that the world is a much bigger place than just El Paso, and a different locale might not have the rainstorms, either real or proverbial, that define his life here.*



*Ari's insistence to the reader that he's knowable suggests that he's finally coming to terms with who he is. The question now is whether or not Ari will share his true self with others.*



*Sam's advice to Ari to forgive Daniel again reinforces that Ari is still more idealistic than will be useful in the real world. Brushing off the girl at the pool and ignoring the lifeguards continues to show that Ari actually isn't interested in women, and suggests that part of his dislike for Daniel stems from jealousy.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dante calls and says that Sam told him that Ari was upset. Ari deflects, but says that he just wasn't in the mood to see Daniel and he doesn't like him. Dante invites Ari to a party later with him and Daniel. Ari agrees to think about it, hangs up, and lifts weights until his muscles hurt. He showers and then wakes up to Legs lying on his stomach. Mom asks Ari if he's okay and says that when he's upset, he lifts.

*In this instance, choosing to lift weights until he's too tired to function shows that Ari is leaning heavily on his physical strength so that he doesn't have to talk about difficult subjects like his feelings about Dante and Daniel. This indicates that coming to terms with his feelings rather than brushing them off will be Ari's final challenge as he comes of age.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mom tells Ari that Dante called, and asks if Ari is going to call him back. She points out that he's been moping and lifting weights for five days now. Ari says this isn't true; he's been reading and thinking about Bernardo too. He'd like to start writing to him. Mom says that Bernardo returned her letters, but she stopped writing because it hurt too much. She tells Ari to temper his expectations, since Bernardo refused to see Dad the one time that Dad visited. She thinks that Bernardo is angry and ashamed of himself. Angrily, Ari says that Bernardo should move on and punches the wall. Mom stares with concern and asks Ari what's wrong.

*Wanting to write letters to Bernardo shows that in some aspects, Ari has internalized that language and communication are positive things—but this isn't a constant understanding, as evidenced by his sudden anger and punching the wall. Now that Ari has a better relationship with Dad, it's offensive that Bernardo would've willingly given up a relationship with him—which continues to offer hope for Ari's understanding of the positivity of open communication rather than stifling his emotions or resorting to violence.*



Mom pours herself a glass of wine and then pulls out two beers. She declares that they're going to have a family meeting and goes to get Dad. Ari says he's scared, which Mom says is good. Dad and Mom return and Ari says he's not actually interested in drinking with his parents. Very seriously, Dad tells Ari about an experience in Vietnam. He and his fellow soldiers were on a reconnaissance mission and suddenly, there were grenades everywhere. They called for a chopper. Dad starts to cry as he says that a young man named Louie went down. Dad tried to go back for him, but the others wouldn't let him. Dad sobs and Ari feels his heart breaking. He regrets seeing Dad's pain and understands that Dad's trauma is still raw.

*While it's not entirely clear if telling Ari about Louie is cathartic, per se, for Dad, it does allow Ari to begin to truly understand the kind of pain with which Dad lives every day. It's fitting that Mom facilitates this conversation, since she's the one in Ari's family who is the most in touch with her emotions and is open to talking about them. Being willing to sit and have this conversation with his parents, however, shows that Ari is growing and changing for the better—he's no longer running.*



Dad says that he's not sure how he felt about the war or the U.S., but he loved the men he fought with. He wasn't always a good man or a good soldier, and he dwells on the men they left behind. They're silent for a long time and then Dad says that he hears Louie calling for him sometimes. Ari points out that Dad would've died and says that they don't have to talk about this. Dad says that it might be time to stop the dreams and then smiles at Ari.

*For Dad, stopping the dreams means that he takes active steps to connect with Ari, so that he can make sure that Ari doesn't experience the same years of pain and suffering that Dad has because of his trauma in Vietnam. With this, Dad chooses to break the cycle of silence and violence, and gives Ari the tools to do the same.*



Dad tells Ari that it's time to stop running. Ari has no idea what Dad is talking about, and Dad explains that he's talking about Ari and Dante. He says it's clear that Dante loves Ari, but Ari says that Dante is into Daniel, not him. Dad says that the bigger problem is that Ari is in love with Dante. Ari stares at his parents' faces and says he doesn't think it's true. Dad cuts him off and says that he thinks that Ari saved Dante last year because Ari couldn't deal with the thought of losing him. This, he says, is love. Ari insists that Dante is just his friend, but Dad points out that Ari also beat up Julian. Ari asks why Dad is talking like this and cries as Dad says that he loves Ari and is tired of seeing him so lonely.

When Ari stops crying, he says that he liked it better when Dad didn't talk and admits that he's ashamed of being gay. Mom says that Aunt Ophelia taught her a lot and that Ari can't run from Dante. When Ari says that he hates himself, Mom tells him not to—she can't bear to lose another son. Ari asks how she can love him so much. Mom says that he's beautiful and Ari asks what to do. Softly, Dad says that Dante didn't run when they beat him. Ari understands Dad, and feels as though Dad understands him.

## PART SIX, CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ari calls Dante. Dante is angry and refuses to say much about Daniel except that he's self-involved, conceited, and not smart. Ari says that they can talk about this and Dante says that their parents are going bowling together tonight. Ari apologizes when Dante asks him to and Dante says that their parents want them to join.

## PART SIX, CHAPTER TWENTY

Dante bounces into Ari's truck and says that bowling is boring, mostly because he's not good at it. They discuss that Ari now likes his parents a lot, even though he used to think they were aliens. They also declare that they must bowl better than their moms. At the bowling alley, Dante says that he told his parents that he never wants to kiss boys again. They rolled their eyes and laughed. Dante says that their parents are weird about how they love them, and that Ari seems different—weird, but in a good way. They end up having fun and Ari bowls better than anyone else. Everyone laughs the entire time.

*As far as Dad can tell, Ari's loneliness stems from the fact that he's denying a major part of himself in an attempt to keep himself safe and secure. However, he is, in many ways, doing what Dad did with Vietnam, and refusing to admit that he's struggling with being gay is actually hurting him more than it's helping. When Dad takes the lead on this conversation, it makes it even more meaningful for Ari, as it shows him that his dad truly does know him, understand him, and will love him no matter what.*



*Mom sees that if Ari continues to deny who he is, she is going to lose Ari since his anger is a direct result of repressing his sexuality. In this way, accepting his sexuality and all the emotions that go along with it means that Ari can learn to be more vulnerable, and value communication with words more than he relies currently on violence and overbearing masculinity.*



*Choosing to go bowling with their parents indicates that both boys now see that their parents are people worthy of their free time. They're no longer just parents; they're individuals with rich internal lives, just like Ari and Dante.*



*What Dante is likely picking up on when he says that Ari seems different is that Ari is now becoming more comfortable with his sexuality. This, in turn, makes him less angry and more open. The way that Ari mentions how much he loves his parents shows that this is the culmination of Ari's journey to discover that his parents are multifaceted people—and now, even more meaningfully, Ari is willing to say this out loud.*



## PART SIX, CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When they finish bowling, Ari drives into the desert. Dante tries to insist that it's late, but he agrees to go. When they arrive, Ari says that he loves the desert and the tennis shoes hanging from his rearview. Dante sounds angry and says that he can't just be friends anymore. He gets out and slams the door and when Ari touches his shoulder, he tells Ari not to. Ari feels inadequate and small as he asks Dante to not be mad and reminds him about the time they kissed. This makes Dante even angrier, and Dante says that he hates talking about that kiss.

Ari confesses that he lied when he said that the kiss didn't do anything for him. He takes Dante's shoulders, looks him in the eye, and says that the only thing he's afraid of is Dante. He asks Dante to kiss him. Dante refuses and then smiles and asks Ari to kiss him. Ari does. They laugh and talk and look at the stars, and Dante says that he wishes it were raining. Ari says that they don't need the **rain**.

Ari thinks that he's been trying to figure out the secrets of the universe and what's wrong with him. Now, he knows that he's been in love with Dante since the moment they met and he thinks that Dad was right—everyone is fighting their own war. Lying in the truck bed with Dante, Ari feels free and unafraid for the first time. He thinks of telling Mom how ashamed he was of loving Dante. He takes Dante's hand and wonders how he could've ever been ashamed.

*It's important to note that even though Ari feels inadequate and small in this situation, he doesn't do what he normally does when he feels this way—instead, he keeps talking. This shows that now, Ari is willing to accept his sexuality and recognize that if he's going to be happy, he needs to begin communicating openly and honestly with the object of his affection, Dante.*



*Dante's suggestion that they need rain indicates that he understands the how, like a storm, the changes he and Ari need to undergo in order to mature are dramatic. Ari, on the other hand, now recognizes that they don't need outside forces to change. They just need to make the changes themselves and communicate honestly.*



*It's telling that once Ari admits who he is and what he wants, his shame lifts. This, then, becomes a message to readers that it's much healthier to accept one's true identity rather than hiding it. Staying silent can lead to seemingly inexplicable anger and brutality, while speaking the truth allows a person to feel more at ease and happier in the world.*





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