

*In this excerpt from the novel Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe, sixteen-year-old Aristotle (Ari) Mendoza discusses his summer prospects with his mother. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.*

## *from Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

*by Benjamin Alire Sáenz*

- 1 SUMMER WAS HERE AGAIN. SUMMER, SUMMER, SUMMER. I loved and hated summers. Summers had a logic all their own and they always brought something out in me. Summer was supposed to be about freedom and youth and no school and possibilities and adventure and exploration. Summer was a book of hope. That's why I loved and hated summers. Because they made me want to believe.
- 2 I had that Alice Cooper song<sup>1</sup> in my head.
- 3 I made up my mind that this was going to be *my* summer. If summer was a book then I was going to write something beautiful in it. In my own handwriting. But I had no idea what to write. And already the book was being written for me. Already it wasn't all that promising. Already it was about more work and commitments.
- 4 I'd gone on full time at the Charcoaler. I'd never worked forty hours a week. I liked the hours though: eleven in the morning to seven thirty at night, Monday through Thursday. That meant I could always sleep in, and if I wanted, I could go out. Not that I knew where I wanted to go out. On Fridays I went in late and closed at ten. Not a bad schedule—and I had weekends off. So, it was okay. *But this was summer!* And Saturday afternoons, my mom signed me up for the food bank. I didn't argue with her.
- 5 My life was still someone else's idea.
- 6 I got up early on the first Saturday after school let out. I was in my jogging shorts in the kitchen, having a glass of orange juice. I looked over at my mom who was reading the newspaper. "I have to work tonight."
- 7 "I thought you didn't work on Saturdays?"
- 8 "I'm just filling in for a couple of hours for Mike."
- 9 "He your friend?"
- 10 "Not really."
- 11 "It's decent of you to fill in for him."
- 12 "I'm not doing it for free, I'm getting paid. And, anyway, you raised me to be decent."
- 13 "You don't sound too thrilled."
- 14 "What's so thrilling about being decent? I want to be a bad boy, if you want to know the truth."
- 15 "A bad boy?"
- 16 "You know. Che Guevara.<sup>2</sup> James Dean.<sup>3</sup>"
- 17 "Who's stopping you?"
- 18 "I'm looking at her."

<sup>1</sup> *Alice Cooper song* — reference to "School's Out," a song by the musician/singer Alice Cooper

<sup>2</sup> *Che Guevara* — an Argentine revolutionary and guerilla leader

<sup>3</sup> *James Dean* — an American actor who starred in the movie *Rebel Without a Cause*

19 “Yeah, blame it all on your mother.” She laughed.

20 Me, I was trying to decide if I was joking or not.

21 “You know, Ari, if you really wanted to be a bad boy, you’d just do it. The last thing bad boys need is their mother’s approval.”

22 “You think I need your approval?”

23 “I don’t know how to answer that.”

24 We looked at each other. I always wound up getting into these conversations with my mother that I didn’t want to have. “What if I quit my job?”

25 She just looked at me. “Fine.”

26 I knew that tone. “Fine” meant I was full of crap. I knew the code. We looked at each other for about five seconds—which seemed like forever.

27 “You’re too old for an allowance,” she said.

28 “Maybe I’ll just mow lawns.”

29 “That’s imaginative.”

30 “Too Mexican for you, Mom?”

31 “No. Just too unreliable.”

32 “Flipping burgers. That’s reliable. Not very imaginative, but reliable. Come to think of it, it’s the perfect job for me. I’m reliable and unimaginative.”

33 She shook her head. “Are you going to spend your life beating up on yourself?”

34 “You’re right. Maybe I’ll take the summer off.”

35 “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.”

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

37 “I’m an educated woman. That doesn’t un-Mexicanize me, Ari.”

38 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. “Okay, I get your point, Mom.”

39 “Do you?”

40 “Somehow, Mom, I always feel like a case study around you.”

41 “Sorry,” she said. Though she wasn’t. She looked at me. “Ari, do you know what an ecotone is?”

42 “It’s the terrain where two different ecosystems meet. In an ecotone, the landscape will contain elements of the two different ecosystems. It’s like a natural borderlands.”

43 “Smart boy. In transition. I don’t have to say any more, do I?”

44 “No mom, you don’t. I live in an ecotone. Employment must coexist with goofing off. Responsibility must coexist with irresponsibility.”

45 “Something like that.”

46 “Do I get an A in Sonhood 101?”

47 “Don’t be mad at me, Ari.”

48 “I’m not.”

49 “Sure you are.”

50 “You’re such a schoolteacher.”

51 “Look, Ari, it’s not my fault you’re almost seventeen.”

52 “And when I’m twenty-five, you’ll still be a schoolteacher.”

53 “Well, that was mean.”

54 “Sorry.”

55 She studied me.

56 “I am, Mom. I’m sorry.”

57 “We always begin every summer with an argument, don’t we?”

58 “It’s a tradition,” I said. “I’m going running.”

59 As I turned away, she grabbed my arm. “Look, Ari, I’m sorry too.”

60 “It’s okay, Mom.”

61 “I know you, Ari,” she said.

62 I wanted to tell her the same thing I wanted to tell Gina Navarro. *Nobody knows me.*

63 Then she did what I knew she was going to do—she combed my hair with her fingers. “You don’t have to work if you don’t want to. Your father and I will be happy to give you money.”

64 I knew she meant it.

65 But that wasn’t what I wanted. I didn’t know what I wanted. “It’s not about the money, Mom.”

66 She didn’t say anything.

67 “Just make it a nice summer, Ari.”

68 The way she said that. The way she looked at me. Sometimes there was so much love in her voice that I just couldn’t stand it.

69 “Okay, Mom,” I said. “Maybe I’ll fall in love.”

70 “Why not?” she said.

71 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 forgot about this one small fact: being on the verge of seventeen could be harsh and painful and confusing.