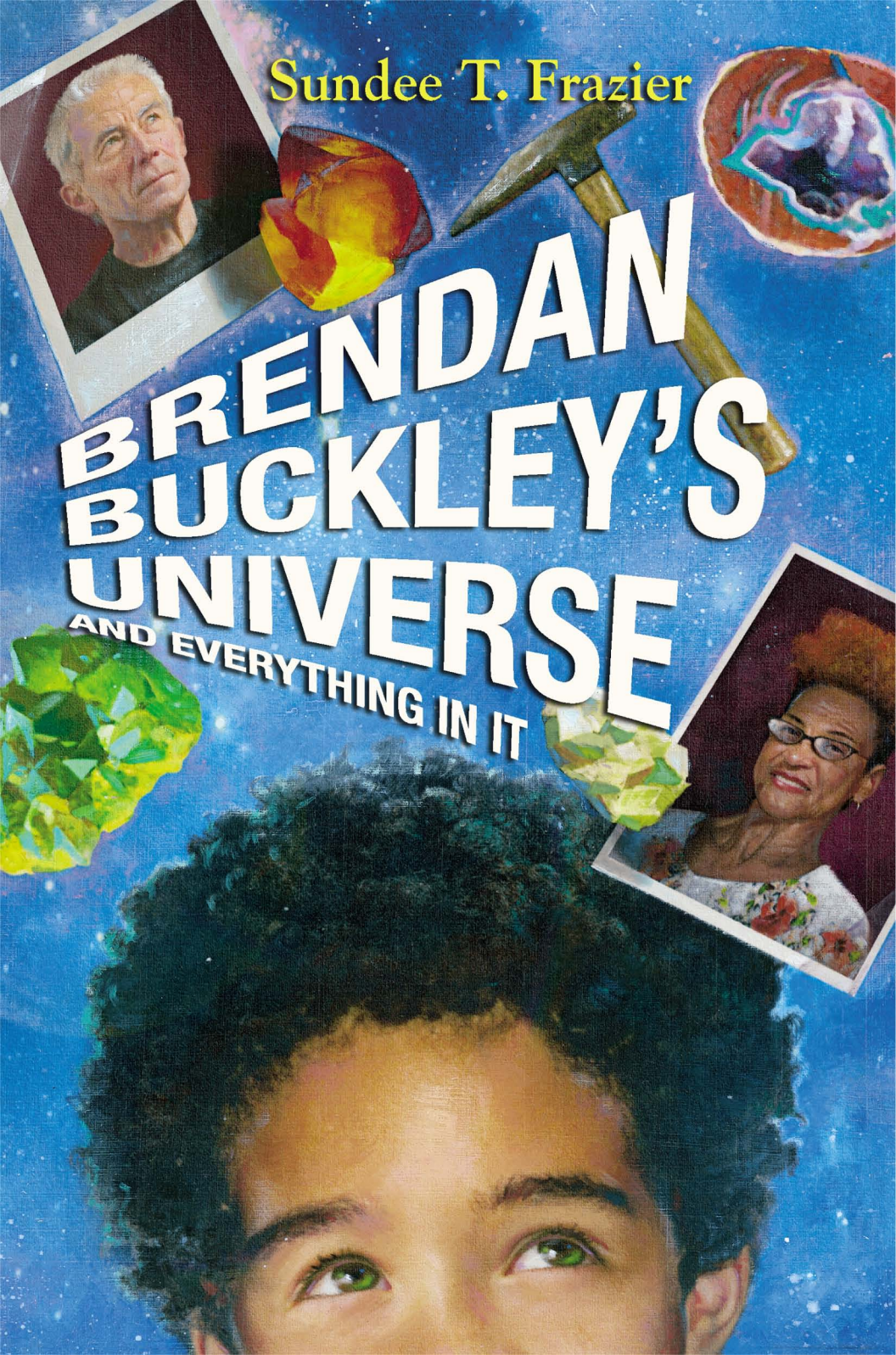


Sundee T. Frazier

# BRENDAN BUCKLEY'S UNIVERSE

AND EVERYTHING IN IT





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First Edition

To my grandparents  
Vernon and Vera Strand  
and  
William and Willabell Tucker  
*For being there from the beginning . . .*



## **CHAPTER 1**

It was the first Sunday of summer break, and I was in a hurry to finish my dusting chores fast so I could call Khalfani to ride bikes. I wasn't even thinking too hard about anything, like Dad says I do sometimes.

Well, okay, maybe I was thinking a little bit hard. About Grampa Clem and how I'm going to miss fishing with him this summer. Which made me think about the funeral and how the man in the black robe had said, "From dust we come and to dust we shall return." And then I started looking more closely at the gray particles I was picking up with my dust rag, and I thought, *What is this stuff anyway? And where does it come from? And how come it keeps coming back no matter how many times I wipe it away?*

That's when the science part of me took over.

I stopped thinking about Khalfani and riding my

bike, and even Grampa Clem. And I definitely wasn't thinking about finishing any chore. I went straight to my computer and got on the Internet, where I typed in the search question "What is dust?"

Sixty-seven million, nine hundred thousand results came up.

I had no idea there would be so much out there about dust, but that's the thing about asking questions: They often lead to surprises, and they *always* lead to more questions.

I climbed our table to get a sample from the candelabra-thingy (it was the dustiest place I could think of in our house, since I never dust it), and went to my room. I set the microscope slide on my desk and pulled out the spiral notebook I keep between my bed and the wall.

Across the yellow cover, I had written in big black letters, CONFIDENTIAL. Dad taught me how to spell it. He's a police detective, so he knows all about confidential things. CONFIDENTIAL says that what's inside is important. Plus, you never know when you might discover something that really is top-secret.

I sat at my desk and flipped open the cover. The question notebook was my fifth-grade teacher's idea, but the name for the notebook was mine: *Brendan Buckley's Book of Big Questions About Life, the Universe and Everything in It*.

"Scientists," Mr. Hammond had said at the beginning of the school year, "ask questions."

That's when I knew: I am a scientist. Because as far

as I'm concerned, no question is unimportant, and nothing in the universe is too small to ask about.

I ran my hand across my book's title. Summer vacation had finally arrived. That meant seventy-nine days to find answers to the questions I'd already recorded. Seventy-nine days of scientific experimentation. And seventy-nine days to mess around with Khalfani, swim in his pool and get to the next level in Tae Kwon Do. Khal and I are only five ranks away from our black belts.

The thing I wouldn't be doing was fishing every Monday with Grampa Clem. When Grampa Clem died in April, it was sort of like having my leg taken away. You always expect it to be there, but then to one day wake up and find it gone? Suddenly everything's different and there's nothing you can do about it.

Now Gladys is my only grandparent, because my other grandma died right after I was born and I've never met my other grandpa. Mom doesn't talk to him. Or about him, either, which makes me wonder what happened. But I guess I can't miss someone I've never even known.

The one time I asked where he was, she bit on her lip, and her forehead bunched up like when she cut her thumb and had to get stitches. She just said, "Gone," and that we'd talk about it when I was older. So that's the One Thing I know not to ask questions about.

I turned to the front section of my notebook, which I'd titled *The Questions*. The back section was called *What I Found Out*. Under "Do centipedes really have 100 legs?",

“What’s inside a black hole?” and “Do boys fart more than girls?” I wrote my latest questions about dust.

Mr. Hammond told us that scientists’ questions compel them to find answers, and that’s how they make their discoveries. I asked Mr. Hammond what being *compelled* meant, and when he said it meant to have an uncontrollable urge that won’t be satisfied until you find what you’re looking for, I knew exactly what he was talking about. I get compelled all the time.

I ran to the bathroom with an eyedropper from my microscope kit and suctioned some water from the faucet. I went back to my room, squeezed a couple of drops onto the slide and pressed another slide on top. I stuck the dust under the lens.

The cool thing about my scope is that it displays whatever it’s looking at on my computer. I clicked a couple of times to open the program and up popped my dust—magnified four hundred times.

It was basically a bunch of small flakes. But flakes of what? I opened an Internet article called “Dust Creatures” and started reading.

The article said when you examine household dust under a microscope you can usually spot ant heads or other insect body parts. I had just clicked over to my microscope display to look for bug legs when a car door slammed outside.

I glanced out the window. Dad was back with my grandma, Gladys. A minute later the front door opened.

“I’m here!” Gladys shouted.



I got up to say hi because I wasn't seeing any bug parts, and because any minute Gladys would show up in my room anyhow. Gladys doesn't pay attention to my EXPERIMENT IN PROGRESS sign.

I stood at the top of the stairs that go down to the front door. Gladys was bent over, pulling off her shoes.

"These bad boys got to go!"

Dad tried to squeeze in behind her.

Gladys looked at him over her shoulder with her eyebrows raised. "Where's the fire?"

Mom says that Gladys can be *testy*, like a bull that's been prodded one too many times. Gladys's nostrils were flared. I could almost see the long horns coming out the sides of her head. Dad was about to get it.

"Hi, Gladys," I said. She stood up straight and Dad slipped past. He tipped his head at me. That was his way of saying "Thanks, son." Even if all my questioning and experimenting sometimes get on Dad's nerves, we're still partners.

"There's my grandbaby." Gladys started up the stairs. "Come give me some sugar."

Gladys pushed herself along by the handrail, as if she were a hundred years old or weighed five hundred pounds. She's old, but she's not crippled or hunchbacked or anything. And she's not fat. Gladys reminds me of a chicken with a rooster head. She's got skinny legs and bony elbows that stick out like wings. Her hair is short and black, but on top it's orange and piled up high like curly popcorn. It comes forward like it's going to tip

over. The top is the part that makes me think of a rooster. And she wears pointy glasses.

I stepped down a few stairs and kissed her cheek. Gladys's cheek feels like a football. I know because I tried kissing a football once to see if it felt like Gladys's face. Gladys's skin is about the same color as a football, too. I wrote these things in one of my observation notebooks, and I for sure marked that one CONFIDENTIAL.

Gladys pulled my head into her bony chest. She smelled like she'd taken a bath in stinky flower perfume. I choked back a cough. She pecked my forehead with her lips. "How's my milk chocolate?"

Dad's the chocolate. Mom's the milk. That's how I became milk chocolate.

"Great," I said, stepping back. "It's summer break."

"So I hear." Gladys climbed the rest of the way and hobbled into the living room.

"Dinner's ready," Mom called from the kitchen. She pulled her famous extra-garlic garlic bread from the oven. The smell was so strong, my eyes started to water. I've even done an experiment with Mom's extra-garlic garlic bread. She says the basement hasn't smelled right since.

"The cooks are okay over there at Brighton Fields, but food loses something when it's made for a hundred fifty people. I don't care how good you are." Gladys sat at her chair in the dining room. "I've been looking forward to this meal all week."

We sat around the table, just like we did every Sunday night. I was in my chair near the kitchen door

(or cutout rectangle, to be exact about it—there’s no door). I plopped a pile of noodles onto my plate. I liked having dinner with Gladys. It was always entertaining. But I missed having Grampa Clem sitting by my side.

Mom had poured me some milk, and iced tea for her and Dad. Gladys raised her glass full of radioactive-looking yellowish green liquid. “To my daughter-in-law, because she’s always got my Mountain Dew.”

“Anything for you, Miss Gladys,” Mom said, smiling.

Gladys sucked the pop through her straw. She made a face like she’d just tasted vomit. “Is this *diet*?”

“You know what the doctor said.” Mom sipped her tea. The cubes clinked.

“That old fart doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Look at me.” Gladys flexed one of her bony arms. “I’m still going strong.” Flabby skin hung from her humerus like a turkey’s neck. (We memorized the human skeleton in science this year.)

“Cutting back on sugar never hurt anyone,” Mom said.

“I want the real deal. None of this artificial stuff.”

Mom and Gladys were getting into one of their tussles, as Grampa Clem liked to call them. “I’ll never be sugar free, Gladys,” I said. “You can still get plenty from me.”

Gladys scowled at her glass. “That’s true,” she muttered.

“How was your day, Mama?” Dad asked.

She grimaced. “Bernard from upstairs is after me again. I keep telling him Clem was my one and only, but the man’s head is like a block of cement. He’s just not getting my drift.”

Grampa Clem had been my one and only, too. My one-and-only grandpa. I sprinkled cheddar on my spaghetti and watched it melt. The cheese's edges disappeared, and the orange goo ran down the spaghetti sauce like streams of lava. I swirled my fork in the center of my pasta volcano, watching the crater grow.

The melted cheese looked almost—what was that word Mr. Hammond had taught us? *Translucent*: letting some light through. Some minerals, like calcite—number three on the Mohs Scale of Mineral Hardness—are translucent. We had started to learn about rocks and minerals in fifth grade.

That was another thing I would do this summer—go exploring for rocks. I could even start my own collection.

“You should take him up on the offer,” Mom said. “Get a free dinner out of the deal.”

“Yeah, Mama, what could it hurt?”

“My nose, that's what. That man smells like cat. You know how I feel about cats. And he's got two of the critters. Lets them crawl all over him.” Gladys shuddered.

“He's probably lonely,” Mom said.

I stretched my fork into the air to see how high I could get it before the cheese strings broke.

“All I know is I'm glad tomorrow's my day with my grandson. I got to get away from that man.” Gladys stabbed the small tomato in her salad. “We still on for tomorrow?”

I looked at her just as the cheese snapped. I shrugged. “Guess so.”

“You're still on,” Mom said. She gave me one of

those my-baby's-growing-up-too-fast looks. "My boo's first summer without a sitter."

I wanted to say I could have gone without one last summer. All the girl did was watch mushy soap operas while Khalfani and I played Yu-Gi-Oh! in my room.

"Hey," I said, chewing my bread, "did you know we're turning into dust every day?"

"Mouth, Brendan," Dad said, meaning I shouldn't be talking with my mouth full.

I swallowed. "Our skin is constantly flaking off and that's partly why there's so much dust in the world."

"I never knew," Mom said.

"Disgusting," Gladys said.

"Yeah, and there are these eight-legged creatures related to spiders and lobsters that feed on our dead skin cells, called dust mites." I took another bite.

"Hmmm," Mom said.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Gladys said.

Dad put down his fork and stared at me.

I decided not to add the part about the dust mites going to the bathroom all over our house and in our beds.

"You've got Tae Kwon Do tomorrow," Dad said. "Have you practiced your *hyung* for this week?"

"Yes, sir." Not as much as Master Rickman had told us to, but I had practiced.

I finished dinner quickly and asked to be excused. My seventy-nine days were counting down, and I had a lot of questions to answer.