

DECEMBER 1982

On the last day before Christmas break, Mr. Solomon hands out a bunch of sharpened number two pencils and a stack of xeroxed sheets. Just answer honestly, he instructs our class; it's a career-assessment test, not a final exam.

The first question:

Which tasks would you prefer to undertake (list in order):

- > *Arrange flowers*
- > *Sell products*
- > *Study the cause of diseases*
- > *Make people laugh*
- > *Drive a truck*

I hesitate and write my own list in the margins, drawing boxes and filling them in hard until the pencil tip is ground down to nothing.

→ *Fall in love*

→ *Figure out who the hell I am*

→ *Have sex without catching something*

→ *Repair my family*

→ *Escape*

St. Sebastian's is glowing with candles, swirling with incense, and overrun by kids allowed to stay up way past their bedtime to attend midnight mass. But the only thing I can focus on is my brother, Connor, drumming his fingers on the wood of the back pew, trying to pretend he doesn't care that he's sitting alone in our family's church on Christmas Eve.

When Dad goes to talk to someone he knows from work, I whisper to my mom and ask if she can find a way to get my father to allow Connor to sit with us.

She looks back at my brother, who is wearing a bizarrely conservative button-down and sweater. The only part of the getup that looks like Connor is the "Beat It" button over his heart. Even when he tries to rein it in, he can't.

Connor glances over and then looks away. He knows we're watching.

For a minute I'm optimistic. After all, it's Christmas and Connor didn't have to come to St. Sebastian's. He has a million friends. A world of boys that he's replaced us with. He only came to this church because he knew we'd be here. That *has* to

count for something. Even to my father.

But then Mom spins her wedding ring and says, It's a holiday, Michael. Let's not make waves. You know how your father is.

And any hope I have for a Christmas miracle is dashed faster than an eight-year-old's belief in Santa Claus.

My parents would murder me if they knew I was standing outside Central Park at midnight on New Year's Eve with my best friends.

They'd murder me twice if they knew I was drunk.

But Becky brought a flask of something that goes down like fire, and it's freaking cold out, so we pass the container back and forth, while behind us, horses pull tourists around in carriages. Then, in unison, we tilt our heads toward the sky, watching the clouds move across the moon, while the whole city explodes in noise and light and the possibilities that 1983 might bring.

Time kind of stops, and I hold my breath, trying to hold on to this feeling. We're standing shoulder-to-shoulder—Becky, James, and me—for warmth, or friendship, or safety, or something I can't name. James is in the middle as always, holding our little group together simply by being James.

He's wearing this long, black, wool coat with tiny anchors etched onto the silver buttons that might make anyone walking by think he had military leanings, but the sharp architectural cut of his white-blond hair and the gray slash of his eye shadow would set them straight.

Next to him, I look like a mannequin for Sears's Young Men's department in my sweater and jeans, while Becky is

channeling that new singer, Madonna, all teased hair, rubber bracelets, and a fishnet shirt under her blue wool pea coat.

James reaches an arm around each of us.

I lean my head on his shoulder, careful to avoid his *Teardrop Explodes: Treason* button.

Becky reaches behind his back and grabs my hand, her skin cold through her black lace gloves.

You know what, Michael? James asks, as he steps forward and turns to face us, backdropped by the fireworks, arms open wide as if he could embrace the entire city.

I shake my head and watch the snowflakes fly off my hair, each perfect crystal reflecting the flash of colored lights: red, green, gold.

Becky moves closer to me, either to wait for the wisdom of James, or to warm up.

This is it, he says, in the quiet space between explosions. The silence is so gigantic it's as if all of New York reserved this moment to hear what James has to say. And what he says is: This is the day it all begins.

What? Becky asks.

James looks at the sky as if he owns it and says, The best year ever.

And that is how I know I'm drunk—I believe him.

I'm the only one of us stuck with a curfew.

I have to be home by one thirty—a New Year's Eve reprieve from my usual midnight deadline—because my mother worries.

And because my father is a control freak.

The question is always this: Use the bulk of my allowance to take a taxi—if I can even find one—or risk my life and take the subway?

A slideshow plays in my head. Graffiti-decorated trains and silent cars where no one will meet your eyes and, this time of night, the smell of piss and vomit, and the lights that dim when we hit certain parts of the tracks.

Take a taxi, Becky says. Money won't help if you get stabbed.

James grabs her from behind in a bear hug, his head resting on her shoulder. He says, Oh, kitten, that will never happen. Don't forget that Andy and his new friends will swoop in like Spiderman to protect Michael from the bad guys.

Becky has been dating Andy since the middle of sophomore year. BeckyandAndy, AndyandBecky.

Once Andy found out he only had to be sixteen to join the Guardian Angels, he started training to become a card-carrying vigilante, like he's doing tonight.

James rolls his eyes. Must make the subway safe for the tourists, he says under his breath.

Becky scowls and pulls away. James shrugs and says to me, Or spend the seventy-five cents on a token and buy the new U2 import single. You know you want it.

There *is* that.

Really? Becky asks me with her hands on her hips. Really? You can't wait, like, two weeks for a record to come out in the States?

James and I stare at her with matching expressions.

I love you, Becks, but you don't get it, I say.

And she doesn't get it. She listens to music, follows the

fashions, but to her, it's all background noise. Something to cover up the sound of traffic and the neighbors screaming at their kids, and to take her mind off the fact that it's New Year's Eve and her mom probably won't come home or even call.

Music isn't the thing that makes her feel alive.

I try to stand next to the cop on the subway. Try not to stare at the hundred-year-old woman with the accordion, or the girl reclining on the lawn chair, or the guy talking to himself and rattling the door between the cars, or the two kids at the end with gang tats.

I try not to think that maybe Becky was right.