

**WE
ARE
LOST
AND
FOUND**

Helene Dunbar

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Published by Sourcebooks Fire, an imprint of Sourcebooks, Inc.
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410
(630) 961-3900
sourcebooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the publisher.

Printed and bound in [Country of Origin—confirm when printer is selected].

XX 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For those we lost...
And for those who found their voices.

All through the years of our youth
Neither could have known
Their own thought from the other's,
We were so much at one.

—*William Butler Yeats*

We've got to live,
no matter how many skies have fallen.

—*D. H. Lawrence*

PART



ONE



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 (select as many as apply):

- > *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 bedtimes 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 cardigan. 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 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 horses pull tourists around in carriages behind us. 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 hang 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, binding 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 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 Spider-Man 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 of the car with gang tats.

I try not to think that maybe Becky was right.

JANUARY 1983

The three of us spend the first day of the new year at a place in Chinatown with no English menu. The fun of it is pointing at the signs on the wall and eating things we can't identify.

When we're too full to move, too talked out to focus, James pays the check, and the waiter brings us fortune cookies.

Becky's fortune says she'll come into money. She laughs as if it's the funniest thing she's ever read and sets the paper on fire by holding it over the candle on the table until the slip turns to ash.

Mine says, Change can hurt, but the pain always leads to something better. I read it twice and shove it in my pocket,

pretty sure I'll be awake all night trying to figure out what it really means.

James's cookie is empty.

What the hell? Becky asks. Her hair is in a long braid, and it swings emphatically as she shakes her head at the affront.

James pushes his bangs out of his eyes and gives her a reflective look.

I guess I get to write my own future, he says.

This sums up the difference between me and James. I would have assumed that a cookie with no fortune meant I was going to be hit by a truck.

After, Becky suggests we go to a party. She has a friend who has a friend whose older brother has a houseboat docked at the 79th Street Boat Basin and is celebrating 1983.

Are you sure they won't mind us coming along? I ask.

Oh, Michael, she says looking me up and down, no one will even notice you're there. Besides, they're only making spaghetti. Not like you eat that much.

James hesitates because he knows I hate inviting myself places, hate the feeling that I might be intruding.

He says, I have an idea. Then he leads us into a bodega where he piles a mountain of Ronzoni noodle boxes on the counter and gives the clerk a twenty. He stuffs the change, well over five bucks, into the cardboard charity collection box that's raising money for a little girl with cancer.

The clerk stares at him. At his long, white-blond, New Romantic hair, at his cat-eye eyeliner, at his favorite powder-blue

linen jacket—the one with the linebacker shoulder pads, cinched waist, and rhinestone belt.

You ain't up to something, are you? the guy asks.

James doesn't answer, but shakes his head as we walk out. Sometimes you can't win, he murmurs under his breath.

Will Andy be at the party? I ask.

Becky fiddles with her braid, her all-black watch wrapped around her wrist, reflecting the sun.

I don't think so, she says. He's on duty again.

James coughs deliberately, and I knock my shoulder into his.

James thinks Andy isn't good enough for her. But aside from the fact that Andy loves to patrol the creepiest parts of New York City and help make citizen's arrests, he isn't that bad. He brings Becky presents every Friday in homeroom. Flowers from his mother's rooftop garden. Iron-on patches for her favorite ripped jeans. Song lyrics scrawled on rough, old paper.

Becky loves him, she says. She wants to marry him someday, she says.

But then, she says, there are times I wish he weren't so nice. We never fight, so we never get to make up. It's kind of boring.

The houseboat is rocking from the weight of the people (which is a lot) and the weight of the weather (which is threatening to turn ugly) and the expectations of the partygoers (which are as high as they are, considering that the cloud of pot smoke hanging over the deck is thick enough to blot out the moon).

Someone shoves a Bartles & Jaymes wine cooler in my hand but disappears before I can thank them. James appears out of nowhere with an open bottle of Asti. He grabs my drink and sets it on a counter. Then he takes a slug of the bubbly wine before handing me the bottle and gesturing for me to drink.

Before I take a sip, he says, This year you will create music. You will fall in love. You will find your place. You will be happy.

Only James can say things like this without sounding sloppy drunk.

Yeah? I ask, daring him. And how exactly do you know?

He leans in close. I can smell the alcohol mixed with cigarettes on his breath. It's not at all unpleasant. His mouth is up against my ear, his words only for me. This is your year, Michael, he says. Trust me about this.

And the silly thing is, I do.

Last night's snow didn't stick, and now there's a loud Trivial Pursuit drinking game happening up on the roof deck. I'm about to suggest that James join in, because I don't know anyone as good at remembering obscure facts as he is, but then a bunch of guys throw the host overboard.

James winces and says, You can't even fish in the Hudson; everything here is contaminated.

The guy surfaces, sputtering. He's hauled up from the freezing river by the same people who threw him in. They're all drunk and hooting, while he's laughing and dripping water and who-knows-what-else all over the floor.

I watch the guy strip off his wet coat and clothes. The

alcohol and pot have dulled my reflexes, and my gaze lingers on his abs long enough that James has to cough to get my attention.

Do you think he knows about the pollution? I ask.

I doubt he cares; it's the danger of being young, James says, as if he weren't just eighteen himself. You think you're invincible.

The conversation spreads through the party like the wave at a Yankees game.

He's queer, how did I not know...? I mean, he doesn't *look* like a fag... Well, *I* knew... Shut up, you did not... Well, I do now...

Acid rises in my throat. I forget sometimes.

Forget that I'm not transparent.

Forget that if I just stay silent, no one will know this piece of me.

Forget that, unlike James, I can hide in plain sight and let them assume what they want. If I take Becky's hand, they'll think we're together. That I'm one of them.

And that makes me feel sicker.

James twists a ring and takes a drink. It's hard to know where he ends and the actor begins. He's heard this all and worse before, of course, but his face is impassive. Perhaps he's used to it. Perhaps he's able to tune it out. Perhaps he has his own way of hiding.

Later, James and Becky and I stand out on the deck. Prince's "1999" plays inside. I wonder where we'll be in sixteen years. In our thirties, I guess, which is bizarre to even think about.

It's a clear night under a full moon, and we're out here so Becky can do her monthly ritual of trying to emotionally let go of things, although I'm never really sure what she's trying to let go of.

James leans back against the railing, his eyes to the sky, a thoughtful look on his face.

I hover over Becky's shoulder, close enough to be surrounded by a cloud of Love's Baby Soft perfume, and watch as she writes *fear* on a piece of paper towel with a black Sharpie, and folds it into a square.

She holds out her hand, and James wordlessly passes her a slim, silver lighter as if they'd choreographed their movements. Then she lights the paper and throws it over the side of the boat. It hits the water, sizzles, and sinks.

Well, says James in a voice dripping with sarcasm. There you go. I guess we're all safe now.

The next day, I take the rest of my allowance to collect my reward for braving the subway on New Year's Eve.

B-Side Records is my father's worst nightmare. New albums in on Tuesday. Comics on Thursday. A steady stream of rich kids, poor kids, weird kids, gay kids, kids who smell like pot, kids who smell like booze, kids who just smell.

Music is the great equalizer: \$7.99 for an LP. \$5.99 for a cassette. Twenty-five cents for all the used stuff in the bargain bin.

I could easily spend every dime I have in this store, but I stay focused and head to the import section. UK 45s have this tiny hole in the middle, like an LP, instead of a big hole like

U.S. singles. Thankfully I have an adapter, a yellow piece of plastic with RHINO RECORDS stamped on it to use with the rest of my singles, so I can stack the U.S. and UK ones together on my turntable's spindle.

The import section is decked out with a million flags from a million different countries, even though 90 percent of the records are from the UK. The British flag is red, white, and blue. I don't get why the colonists hated England enough to declare war on them but stole their flag colors anyhow.

I think about James and his British mother. About how there's so much tension between them all the time.

It's funny how sometimes you can speak the same language, yet you still need a piece of round plastic to bridge the gap.

I met Becky and James at a fire drill two weeks into my freshman year. When the bell went off, I followed the other students into the hallway and then through the door as they trudged out to the street on a dreary day.

Everyone knew everyone else. Except for me.

It took a minute to notice James fitting himself into a doorway, marking up a paperback with a highlighter he kept bringing thoughtfully to his lips.

But then I couldn't stop noticing him, couldn't look away from his bright white shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, or his gray striped suspenders. Couldn't stop smiling at the girl who was twirling around in front of him, singing Blondie's "Call Me" woefully out of tune.

I watched them, thinking they looked interesting. They

looked unique. They looked like people who were living the kind of life I wanted.

Before that, I used to go to St. Sebastian's Academy for Young Men, but then my parents decided to blame St. Sebastian's for my brother being gay. So after they kicked Connor out of the house, they sent me to a mixed-gender public school.

You aren't worried he's going to get some girl knocked up? Connor asked my mother at one of our rare family meetings.

I think we'll take our chances, my mother responded, looking wistful, as if my becoming a father at twelve had been an actual possibility. As if the law of averages guaranteed my parents one straight son.

I'm not going and that's that. My father's voice cuts through the walls. Pulling off paint. Dissolving Sheetrock.

But it's Connor's birthday, my mother pleads.

I don't care if it's the Second Coming, my father says. I'm not going to sit in some filthy diner in the godforsaken Village and shove some infected fork in my mouth.

This is the music of our house. This is how things are, now.

Connor and I sit next to each other at a table in Veselka. I try not to stare as he gobbles down meatballs and potato pancakes like he hasn't eaten in a year.

My mother sits on the opposite side of the table from us—if

this were a book, my English teacher would label this seating arrangement symbolic—and pushes pierogis around her plate.

Your father is sorry he couldn't make it, Mom says, handing Connor a birthday check. He had to work.

My brother opens his mouth to call Mom out on her obvious lie, but I shake my head, begging him to shut up for once.

And for once, he actually does.

After she pays the bill, Mom hands Connor a slip of paper. Mrs. Jaffe's daughter, Caroline, is moving back to the city, she says, not looking my brother in the eye. You should give her a call.

Connor tilts his head and raises an eyebrow. Waits to see where Mom is going with this.

Well, you were so close when you were kids, she continues, obviously feeling masochistic. And Caroline's such a nice girl.

Connor reaches out to take the paper, looking like a snake ready to gobble up a rat.

In a breathy voice, the deliberately bad Marilyn Monroe impersonation he drags out at parties to make the boys laugh, he says, I don't know, Mom, do you think she'll still let me borrow her high heels?

Then, without another word, he slides out of the booth, tosses the paper behind him, and leaves.

I don't know why your brother has to be so angry all the time, Mom says as we're taking the subway home.

I sometimes forget how good she is at denial. How good

she is at forgetting that her inability to stand up to our father had so much to do with Connor moving seven times in four years, crashing on friends' couches and floors. How good she is at pretending she had nothing to do with him working a job for not much more than minimum wage because Dad pulled his college funding.

This time it's *myself* I have to remind to shut up. But it's hard.

Things that fill our house:

- *My grandmother's old flowered sofas*
- *A scratching post from our cat, Henry, who died when I was in seventh grade*
- *Conversations about the weather and the Yankees*
- *My mother's collection of salt-and-pepper shakers from all fifty states*
- *My father's anger*
- *My brother's absence*

It isn't that I'm unhappy, Becks, I say. Not really. It's just that...

Ennui, James interjects, not looking up from the copy of the *New York Times* he's smuggled into our apartment. He has the Arts section spread out across my bedroom floor and is trying to read and solve the crossword at the same time.

Damn, he says, we missed our chance.

What? I ask, happy to have the conversation shifted away from me.

To see the worst play to ever appear on Broadway, James replies. *That* could have made for a good time.

Yeah, well, better not let my dad see that paper, I warn. You know my father only reads the *Post*.

James smirks. He isn't a fan of my father, and I think my dad is scared shitless of him, because James is a walking billboard for everything Dad hates. James looks up at me and says, Seriously, you just need something to be excited about.

I lower my eyes while Becky asks him, Are you *sure* you don't know anyone you can fix Michael up with?

I don't know why Becky thinks that's the answer; for some reason, people in relationships always think that relationships can solve everything.

No, kitten, James says with a sideways glance at me. I'm pretty certain that Michael wouldn't be interested in anyone *I* know.

Well, I guess you could always get a job, she says to me as she gets up to flip the Ramones cassette she's playing to get under James's skin.

Or a dog.

Or a hobby.

Or.

I stare at my guitar.

My guitar stares back.

When Connor was still living here, I played all the time. Filling the nights, drowning out the sounds of my parents' fights, beating down the silence of the house while we all waited

to see if my brother was going to come home from wherever it was he'd gone. I played until my fingers bled, until calluses formed, until I was better than I ever thought I could be.

Then Connor got kicked out, and I stopped playing for a while because I didn't want to join a band, and I wasn't sure of my voice, and my father kept telling me to shut the hell up because without all the noise Connor made, the neighbors could hear, and who did I think I was anyhow? John Lennon? Because he was damned if I was going to turn into one of those lipsticked, eye-shadowed, black-wearing weirdos who hung around on St. Mark's looking like they were dead.

My father sells insurance and hates every minute of it.

My father is angry that it's only money from my mother's parents that allowed us to move from Queens to Manhattan.

My father hates that Little Italy is being taken over by Chinatown, but he won't spend any time there because he doesn't want to ride the subway downtown with "all the crazy tourists."

My father has gotten meaner as I've gotten older. Or maybe I'm more aware of it now.

My father plays poker on the first Thursday of every month. He treks to Queens, picking up a six-pack or a bottle of whiskey on the way and doesn't come back until late.

Sometimes he wins money and brings my mother a cake from the Greek bakery she likes. Sometimes he loses money and wakes me by slamming the pantry door too loudly, or drunkenly ranting under his breath about the "damned foreigners" on the 7 train.

But while he's gone, the apartment is quiet, peaceful, relaxed. Mom and I can use the phone without worrying that we'll say the wrong thing. Instead of the TV, Mom will put on music and read or bake or simply hang out.

I leave my bedroom door open on these nights, not worried about being told that I'm a disgrace.

Friday afternoon there's enough snow to close businesses and schools. Seven inches and still falling. My parents wander through the house, unsure of how to interact in daylight when they're both stuck at home.

I'm going out, James says on the other end of the phone.

Out where?

Into the world. Come with me.

I hang up. Pick up the receiver again. Wait for the tone. Dial. Let it ring twice. Hang up.

Miracle; it rings back. I pick up.

You're going to owe me, Connor says instead of hello.

Put it on my tab, I answer, making sure he can hear the sarcasm in my voice.

I throw some gel in my hair, grab my coat, and tell my parents that Connor is working and I have to walk his dog. Which I would do, I think, if he had a dog, because I don't trust my brother to stay home often enough to keep another creature alive.

Maybe I'll crash there so I don't have to deal with the snow, I say.

Mom smiles, happy that Connor and I are close enough that I'd head out in a storm to walk his dog. It's odd, my mother's smile. It isn't the smile of a mother who allowed her son to be kicked out of the house. It's the smile of a mother content with things that don't really exist. She lives in a strange kind of world where Connor is straight and an executive at a bank or a successful filmmaker or a hotshot journalist, anything instead of what he is, a gay shop clerk with more friends than she'll ever have, and a taste for free will.

On the other hand, my father's emotions are written all over his face. The grimace he wears now is the one he always has when I mention Connor. The one he filled the house with, along with his rage, the night Connor graduated from high school and came out to my parents, St. Sebastian's, and all of the Upper West Side as he accepted his diploma, high as a kite, and announced his unfortunately short-lived love for Tony Ramos.

Even now, I can't meet my father's eyes. While he won't go as far as forbidding me from seeing Connor, he makes his feelings clear. I'm not sure if he's more worried that I'm lying about going to my brother's or telling the truth, and he's too afraid of my answer to ask directly. Afraid I might confess to being "that way" too.

In truth, Connor wouldn't need me to walk his dog, he'd probably have friends lining up to do it.

Connor has a knack for collecting people. He meets them at clubs, and in stores, at parties and shows. He strikes up conversations with bartenders and librarians, taxi drivers and street

performers. Connor lives his life out loud, but until that night at graduation, I hadn't really noticed *how loud*, and even though it's been four years, the reverb is deafening.

You have to take control of your life and run with it, Connor tells me. Don't let anyone hold you back. There's a world waiting for you. It's big and flashy and exciting, and you need to put yourself out there and grab it. Or let it grab you, you know, whatever you're into.

And while he talks, I can picture it. This community, this family he's replaced us with. These people who can dance all night fueled by rhythm and freedom, drugs and each other. These people who have grabbed their lives away from everyone who has told them they're wrong and they can't and they're damaged. These people who have made themselves into who they want to be, even if it's just for one night.

These people who are not me. Not yet, anyhow.

I don't know if I'm jealous of Connor or of the people he hangs out with. I only know that my brother has moved on to someplace I'm not.

I miss him.

I make my way to James's apartment. He's two years older than me, went to at least three schools I know of, and none could keep him interested enough to show up for anything more than tests. Tests that he passed with honors, but still. Even those weren't enough to make the schools happy. There were meetings with his parents, and meetings with expensive private tutors, and meetings with the psychologists who accused him of acting

out. All those meetings never changed anything; James was still James. In the end, each of the schools decided that he might be better suited “elsewhere.”

He got his GED, and now his parents, who moved to a sprawling mansion on the water in Connecticut, think he’s attending NYU. They deposit his “tuition” into a bank account in the city, out of which he draws a seemingly always-available allowance.

James has made a name for himself in the underground world of performance art and lives in a Hell’s Kitchen rent-stabilized share: four guys in three rooms and a snake named Boris in the tub.

Snakes aren’t my thing, James told me when he moved in, but at least we’ll never have to worry about rats.

The buzzer to James’s building is busted, so when I get there, I call up from the pay phone outside the bodega across the street. A cat weaves its way through the fruit display, one bitten ear twitching against the snow, tail dusting a frozen pyramid of apples.

James picks up the phone, and I have to scream over the sound of trumpets and bongos leaking, along with a stream of pot smoke, out of a car window at the stoplight next to the phone booth.

Let me in.

What?

Let me in.

Michael?

The car pulls away.

Let me in.

Oh, why didn't you say that?

I shrug, even though James can't see me.

I wait for James in the vestibule.

This is poetic snow, he says, running down the stairs, wrapping an impossibly long scarf around his neck, It hasn't had time to become tabloid slush.

Connor gave me a fake ID last year for my birthday. I only wanted it so I could get into this club, The Echo. Regardless of what the ID says, I won't be legal to drink for three years, but that's beside the point anyhow, because I wanted to go there to dance, not to get drunk. Even before then, the bouncer, Freddy, had to know I was underage, but New York is sticky hot in summer, and really, what did he care if one more I'm-queer-but-nobody-really-knows-it kid added his sweat to the already wet brick walls of the basement club?

Now, I don't need to wait in line to get in, and they don't ask to see my ID. I love The Echo. If I wanted to, I could be anyone in there. A playboy. A hard-ass. A romantic. I could be a drag queen if I learned to walk in heels.

I could even be myself, if I ever figure out who that is.

Danni is DJing tonight, which means the music is so loud the words are getting sucked into the bass. It's too loud to talk, too loud to hear, too loud to think.

Just the way I like it.

I stare into the spinning blue lights and then blink so that blue spots cover the dark walls, the dark boys, the black jeans, the clear glass, the stretched white shirts.

I'm struck with a sudden and deep hunger. I want it. I want it all.

Relax, the speaker screams. Don't do it.

Easy for Frankie to say.

Over the course of the evening, I:

→ *Dance with a hundred cute shirtless boys*

→ *Sing along to a hundred different songs*

→ *Dream a hundred different dreams*

But at the end of the night, I'm still alone.

James doesn't dance. Instead, he leans against the wall, smoking the long, thin cigarettes he encases in an etched silver holder, his extensive bangs obscuring his face.

Becky says that James observes people like a scientist. I think he's more like an alien, sent to report back to his home planet on the deteriorating state of humanity.

Becky and I have spent an absurd amount of time debating this.

But there's no debate about how tonight will play out. It's always the same.

At some point, almost everyone will try to get James to dance. They'll stand, hand against the wall next to his head,

leaning in to make their case. Trying to be charming enough. Sexy enough. Eccentric enough.

James will smile and run his fingers through his hair. For a moment, he'll give them 100 percent of his attention and 90 percent of his piercing gaze, and they'll each feel as if they're the center of his world.

But he won't leave the space he's staked out against the wall. Not until the last song, anyhow.

Then, Danni will give in to James's standing request and play Roxy Music's "More Than This." James will make his way to me, and we'll dance, him swaying like he's possessed, and mouthing the words as Bryan Ferry sings about being carefree for a while.

Everyone will watch. And it's easy to believe, in that moment, there is nothing that matters to him more than that.

Time moves faster as you get older. That's what my dad complains about, anyhow.

I once tried to explain to him how time stretches and retracts on the dance floor. How you can lose yourself in the overlapping beats as one song bleeds into another, and you can almost ride the lights as they swirl and spin, and the smoke of the dry ice mixes with the heady scent of cloves and who knows what else until you're someplace different altogether.

All I got from my father in response was an eye twitch that too closely resembled the one I remember from when Connor still lived at home. I stopped trying to explain it.

Two in the morning comes out of nowhere. James and I stumble onto the street. Ears ringing with silence. Legs adjusting to the tedious movement of walking. Shoulders pressing together for warmth. And snow. Snow everywhere. Piles and piles of it covering the statue of George Washington on his horse in Union Square and still falling.

Before George married Martha, he was in love with his best friend's wife, James tells me, his breath crystalizing in the frigid air.

These are the types of things that James knows. Obscure facts about George Washington. Statistics of sports he doesn't follow. City death tolls from GRID (gay-related immune deficiency), which James tells me is now called AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), because being gay doesn't equal being dead, and because there is something drastically wrong with naming a disease something that places the blame on those it infects. From what James says, it didn't matter anyhow; the name change hasn't altered anything else.

People are dying regardless.

I guess, given everything, I'd rather hear about George.

Once I asked James why he was so fascinated by other people's relationships.

It's less messy than being in one myself, he said.

Hey! You two want this?

A guy in his twenties, wearing a suit and tie and carrying a fridge door stops near Broadway. The door is clean. Gleaming white as if he'd just ripped it off a floor model at the Appliance Warehouse out on Long Island.

I feel for the five bucks stuffed into the front pocket of my jeans. Mug Money, my mother calls it. Something to give a thief so they don't get your wallet, or your watch, or whatever else you have that's actually worth something.

I've never had to use the fiver and wonder if we're really going to get mugged or if this guy is simply hopped-up on drugs. I mean, why else would he be walking down 17th carrying a fridge door?

I take a step closer to James. He isn't much good in a fight, but he can talk his way out of almost anything. That boy could charm the birds out of the trees, my mother says of James, despite the fact that James is exactly the kind of person my dad thinks is ruining the world. Not that Mom would ever defend James, or anyone, to my dad. Instead, she feeds James. Lasagna. Spaghetti. Cannoli. It's not good to be so thin, she tells him.

The fridge guy breaks into a smile and points at the snow-covered street. I've been sledding all night on it, he says, nodding toward the door. But I can't feel my fingers anymore. It's yours if you want it.

James looks at me and raises an eyebrow. Snowflakes perch on his long lashes, and time shudders to a standstill, leaving me breathless with longing for something...someone...I'll never have. It's as much of a rush as it is painful, like a brain freeze after eating your favorite ice cream. It's a song that craves to be sung, a chord bent out of shape. My feelings for James are just one more of the things I've learned to stay silent about.

It's ultimately pointless anyway.

James shakes his head, sending the snowflakes flying, and time jolts forward. The next thing I know, we're sliding down

Broadway. Careening into curbs and piles of snow. Pushing ourselves off parked cars, holding onto the door, and each other, and our coats. James's scarf wraps around my neck like the last Dr. Who, and James is laughing, laughing, laughing, and I realize I've never heard him laugh quite like that before.

Then we slam into a fire hydrant. We're fine, but the door is banged up. So we shake ourselves off, haul it to the sidewalk, and leave it for someone else to salvage.

We walk crosstown. The trip takes three times as long as normal because of the snow and because James insisted on wearing boots with metal heels instead of anything remotely practical. By the time we get to his apartment, we're both shaking with cold. James jimmys the lock on the front door while I stand guard. Last week, someone was stabbed in the tiny lobby.

You sure there's room for me? I ask, wheezing like a pack-a-day smoker as we hike up five floors of stairs.

In front of me, James shrugs. There's always room for you, Michael, you know that. Besides, he says, slowing down so much I almost run into him, we're one person down. Steven is in the hospital.

Oh no. What happened?

We reach the top floor, James pulls open the door, and we huddle inside. He stops again before he says, Pneumonia, I think. His sister came and cleared out his stuff.

I wait for some bit of random information, the dosage of a common antibiotic shot or Steven's third cousin's middle name, but James is quiet, staring at the couch.

I stop short of asking whether they'd cleaned the cushions. It doesn't matter. Not like I'm going to make it home in this weather.

James's roommates:

There's Rob, who almost got arrested with James at a rally to save some Broadway theaters from being torn down last year. There's Ted, who is a painter. James thinks Ted's father owns the apartment, but isn't sure since Ted doesn't talk much and James sends his rent check to some P.O. box in the Bronx. Then there's Steven, who does lighting or something and travels a lot and has the couch in the front room.

Had, I guess.

Most of the guys who have lived here are older, somewhere in their mid to late twenties, with jobs as waiters or cashiers they never talk about, and dreams of being actors or musicians that obsess them.

When I'm here and they're talking about art and meaning and rehearsals and their big breaks, I want to be one of them.

Only later do the doubts creep in. Only later do I remember the late notices from the electric company stuck to the fridge door and the drunks passed out in the doorway.

Only later do I wonder what's really going on with Steven.

Some are saying seventeen inches, some twenty-four. Either way, it's a lot of snow. The subway is running because it's easier, apparently, to keep it going than to shut it off and restart it. We

can go anywhere we want, except it's the middle of the night and we're in Hell's Kitchen and there's nowhere to go.

Smoke leaks out from under Ted's door.

The ceiling squeaks like it's going to come down. Rob pounds on it with a broom and says, Fucking newlyweds. Then he shakes his head and laughs at the double meaning of his own joke.

We hang out in the living room. I try to solve a Rubik's Cube. Blue. Red. Yellow. Nope, the green and white are wrong. Start again.

James sits on the floor, leaning against the wall, legs folded insect-like, smoking the thin cigarettes he rolls himself.

James is a collection of straight lines. His concave cheekbones and his too-straight nose, the cut of his cream-colored hair, the lapels on his jacket decorated with ever-changing pins of silver crowns, ringed hands, tiny bells.

My edges are round. My hair curls violently when it's wet. James's waist-cinched jackets are too restrictive for me to dance in. And mostly that's okay. But there are nights when I watch James, and his straight lines, and his straight fingers around a straight cigarette, and I wish I were more like him.

Rob likes to flirt.

And he likes to flirt with me, although we both know it's a joke.

But James isn't the only one in the apartment who seems

subdued tonight. Everyone is kind of glancing at the couch and then looking away without saying anything.

Rob is stretched out perpendicular to me, his long legs on top of mine, back on the floor, eyes on the smoke that rises toward the ceiling.

Oh, Michael, Michael, Michael, he says, dramatically breaking the silence. Why don't you have a boyfriend?

All of James's roommates are dramatic. And I don't know them well enough to tell what's real and what's theater, or to know whether I should even care.

Maybe I have a boyfriend and I just haven't told you, I tease back.

As if.

I stare at the laces on Rob's shoes. They're blue. Faded.

And easier to look at than James's face when I'm lying about having a boyfriend.

MTV is blaring in one of the bedrooms. *I Want My MTV*, a variety of rock stars chant.

I kind of wish I could see it, because watching MTV at home around my dad is risking a lecture on morality and, of all things, fashion.

As if either of those were things my dad knew anything about.

I assumed I'd sleep on Steven's vacated couch, but am not about to put up a fight when James suggests the beanbag chair in his room instead.

Do you think Steven will be okay? I ask, Is he coming back?
James shrugs a sad I-don't-want-to-talk-about-it shrug. I don't know what he's hiding or whether I'd want to hear it, but I'm not going to press.

I follow him to his room, a world away from the rest of the apartment.

Tapestries from India line the walls.

A stack of Playbills threatens to topple over on his tiny desk.

A Styrofoam head wears a pair of shutter shades.

His cologne, spicy and intoxicating, fills the room.

James lights two oil lamps that hang from the wall as I settle in on the beanbag at the side of his twin bed.

Every time I move, it sounds like one of those rain sticks they sell in the Village. Like James's laugh while we were riding the fridge door.

We talk about music, whether film can ever be considered as much of an art form as live theater, and the rumor about a new Bowie album, until we're hoarse and James is tired enough to allow the British accent he inherited from his mother to bleed through.

I've been hired to collaborate on a new performance piece, he says.

Then James tells me he wants me to contribute sound to it. Not, he explains, music, but noises. Guitar strings breaking. A percussive effect. A chord out of tune.

Out of tune? I ask. I spend all my time getting *in* tune.

But aren't all things more interesting if they're ever-so-slightly wrong? James asks.

I shrug. If that were true, I'd be the most interesting guy in the world.

I wake to a clatter of dishes. James is obsessed with breakfast. Somewhere in his past, he had a German nanny, and on weekends he likes to recreate her puffed apple pancakes, piles of bacon strips, fresh squeezed juice.

I make my way to the kitchen, passing Rob who gives me a seductive, sleepy smile that makes me wish I were attracted to guys in their midtwenties with facial hair.

James is quiet as he cooks, measuring flour and who knows what into a large bowl. Duran Duran meets Julia Child, Becky likes to say about him.

It's funny, though. I have a hard time seeing James as Simon Le Bon. Sure, he's got those delicate features and his hair is cut in kind of the same way, but James always makes me feel like he's going to morph into something else. Something dark and slightly dangerous. I told him that once, curious to hear his response. He just smiled.

As if she's been summoned by my thinking about her, Becky calls.

James holds out the phone to me.

Becky says, Your mom told me you were at Connor's, so I figured you were at James's. Meet me at the cathedral?

Becky is pretty much Jewish. Technically, half. Or maybe a quarter. Her family is as much a melting pot as the city, and people are always looking at her permanently tanned skin and her dark straight hair that she's constantly teasing, and her dark blue eyes, and asking her where she's from as if "here" isn't an option.

Anyhow, her dad was the only one who practiced. Now

he's gone, and her mom doesn't care about religion. Though she still goes to a synagogue on the big holidays, standing in the back because she doesn't have a ticket, somewhere along the line Becky has become fascinated with Catholic churches: the incense, the music, the candles, the stained glass. She doesn't go to mass; it isn't about worship, she tells me. She only likes to pop in at odd times, when she has St. Patrick's mostly to herself. She says she likes to hear her steps echo through the high arches.

I cock my eyebrow at James, who is taking off a yellow apron. He knows what she's asking without my having to repeat it.

Tell God I said hello, he says. James tries to avoid religion at all costs.

I'm somewhere in between. Catholic school years aside, I'm not particularly interested in religion, but not totally ready to rule it out yet either. Plus, I'm kinda pissed at my dad for using God as an excuse to kick Connor out of the house. As if my dad has any use for God. Or God has any obvious use for him.

Come, I mouth to James, silently begging. Sometimes church makes Becky depressed and I'm already feeling out of sorts.

James holds out his hand for the phone and passes me the apron in trade.

I love you to pieces, kitten, he says into the phone, but it's you and Michael today.

Damn.

They talk about the snow for a while, and when he hangs up, his hand stays on the receiver, back in its cradle.

I want to ask him if he's okay. He has these moments with

Becky sometimes, like there's something he wants to say but can't, and they seem to be happening more and more lately.

But then he turns, that sly smile on his face, and says, Light a candle for me, will you?

I need to learn to say no. Becky tells me that all the time; only she never wants me to say no to *her*.

When I walk into the church after trudging through the snow for what feels like an hour, she says, You're late, you missed the bells.

The bells. Of course. Becky knows facts about the bells—even their names—the same way James knows facts about... everything.

It's snowing, I remind her. You know, like a lot.

She bumps her shoulder into mine, surrounding us in a cloud of powdery perfume. A dusting of slush sprays off my coat.

No shit, Sherlock, she says with a laugh. But you still missed the bells.

I offer my apology, though, really, I'm surprised I made it at all.

Did you get home okay last night? I ask. Becky lives in Queens but lies and uses her aunt's address on the Upper West Side, so she can go to our school in Manhattan. Her aunt actually lives in California, though, and only rents the place out, so it isn't like Becky can move there for real or anything.

I crashed at Andy's, she says, And don't look at me like that. His mom took the night shift at St. Vincent's, but his dad was there.

Andy's mom is a nurse and his dad is, like, seven-feet tall and a cop who no doubt made Andy sleep on the couch and kept his hand on the butt of his gun all night.

So remind me why your boyfriend doesn't do this church thing with you again?

Becky snorts. He doesn't believe in God.

And you're Jewish, I say. So why go to church?

She smiles, and in the light that's shining through the stained glass, she looks a little angelic.

I believe in an equal opportunity God, she says. Sue me. Come on, let's light some candles.

I always feel pressured lighting candles in church. If I light one for one of my grandparents, I worry the other might feel slighted. What if I light one for a cousin and forget someone else?

Then there's James. It's kind of odd lighting candles for people who are alive, right? I ask Becky, even though, lapsed as I am, I'm the one who should know. But I feel as though I'm jinxing people when I light one in their name. Like it's some sort of bad omen.

It's fine, Michael, she says, slipping a couple of dollars into the box. It's about intention and prayer.

Intention?

What if my intentions and James's are different?

I can't lie in church, not even to myself, so I switch my focus to prayer.

What would James want me to pray for?

Why don't I know?

Be happy, I think as I light a candle for him. And even though Becky thinks it's okay, I still feel weird about doing it.

But he asked.

That being said, Becky might be on to something. I feel lighter as I leave the church. Like I've done something worthwhile.

It's still snowing. *Still snowing*. And since it isn't ridiculously cold, I walk back home, notes flying through my head. They'd make a good song if I'd only remember them, which I won't.

I'm sleep-drunk. Or rather, tired-drunk. Exhausted. And the snow is making me numb and giddy. Happy. And that's the odd thing. Not being happy, but realizing it. Because how often, when you're happy, do you have the chance to step back and notice?

When the snow clears, the city goes back to trying to clean up the subway cars. Monday, they take the 1 train out of service, and on Tuesday, it comes back silver and heartless. It's as if they dipped the whole thing in peroxide, and I spend the whole ride trying not to touch anything.

By Wednesday, the train is comfortably covered in tags and graffiti again, the station boasting a Haring chalk drawing of dancing figures losing themselves in joy.

My morning starts with chemistry.

How's your brother? Mrs. Bryson asks. She had him his

senior year and really liked him, even tutoring him for free to get his grades up high enough for college applications.

He's good, I say, not knowing if I'm telling the truth. I have to assume Connor's good since it isn't like he's easy to get hold of. But at least he's having fun, I guess.

Is he giving any thought to college? she asks.

Mrs. Bryson knows that my dad cut Connor off financially after kicking him out of the house, so he had to get a job. But no way am I telling her that I'm pretty sure his entire hourly salary goes toward boys and drugs and summer tickets for the ferry to Fire Island.

Whatever he's giving thought to, I doubt it has much to do with school.

I have study hall third period, but nothing to study for. Instead, I smuggle my UK single of U2's "New Year's Day," which was totally worth getting since it came with an extra 45 of three live tracks, into one of the language labs that line the back wall of the library. Then I shut the door, and hope the librarians won't do a spot check.

I put the disc on the turntable, grab the worn headphones, and mouth the words to the songs, hoping that anyone passing will think I'm conjugating French verbs. Which I'm not.

Then I read the wall. The story goes that some kids started writing on the walls of the lab back in the seventies. Things like: *Even though I'm in ROTC, I don't support this war, and I'm not sure how to feel about my brother getting out of serving in Vietnam by wearing woman's underwear to his draft meeting.*

Now, there's paper covering the marked-up wood, and everyone refers to this as the "fear room." Now, it says things like, *I missed a period and I'm afraid I'm pregnant* and *They're calling this thing the gay plague, and I wonder if having sex is going to kill me.*

As Bono sings about blood-red skies, I grab a pen, and under the last comment, I write, *Me too.*

I don't sit around thinking about the fact that I'm attracted to boys, because then I start thinking about all the things I want and don't know how to get.

And I don't talk about the fact that I'm attracted to boys because I don't see the point, given that I obviously don't have a boyfriend or anything, and the only reason I have somewhere to live is because, having heard nothing to the contrary, my parents assume I'm straight.

Besides, Connor has done enough talking for both of us.

I try to have dinner with Connor on Wednesday nights, but it doesn't always happen. He's cancelled so often that I'm surprised when he actually shows up.

This week, he's actually at the diner before me, wearing a black tux jacket over a gray T-shirt that's probably supposed to be white. The block letters on the shirt say **SAVE THE FUTURE.**

Connor works at a thrift store in the West Village. He sorts the clothes when they come in and keeps a lot of the best stuff for himself.

He sticks his foot out—he's wearing black-and-white saddle shoes—and says, Maurice.

I stare at him. Then I ask, You've named your shoes?

He hits me on the arm with the menu, and says, No, idiot. The designer. Maurice.

I stare at him some more until he shakes his head. You're hopeless, he says. Do you know how much these would go for at Charivari? I got them for a steal. I can't believe anyone would throw them out.

When I keep staring at him, wondering how anyone could get so amped about footwear, he says, You know nothing about the world outside of Mom and Dad's. The thing is, you won't learn anything about life until you move out on your own. I have a futon waiting for you. I'll even get it cleaned. And you can have your friends over. Or, you know, whatever.

I don't point out that not knowing the name of a designer doesn't mean I have no life.

I get that Connor doesn't understand why I don't follow in his footsteps, tell Dad to shove it, get myself thrown out. So I also don't point out that he isn't even listed on the lease of the place where he's living and could get evicted at any minute.

Why would I want that for myself?

Why would he?

But realizing that makes me feel sorry for him. My brother lives in the moment. I have no clue how it would feel to be that carefree or how he manages to ignore all the shitty stuff that's happened to him. He must take after Mom.

So, knowing I might regret it, I ask if he wants to come with me to Echo on Friday. Connor might be almost five years older than me, but he still doesn't have his shit together, regardless of what he thinks.

A complicated expression flashes across his face. The same one he wore at St. Sebastian's on Christmas Eve, and I think, for a minute, he might say yes.

But then he glances away, smirks, and says, That's your scene, not mine. I don't need to jump up and down in front of a roomful of coked-up boys to get laid.

I swallow an equally snotty comeback because I can't win when he's like this.

I know he'd rather hang out with his friends and screw around at the baths or on the street or wherever else he thinks his next high or fuck will come from. There's no way that spending time with his little brother can touch that.

I think back to the writing on the wall of the fear room. Just be careful, I say so quietly there's no chance of him hearing. Not like he'd pay attention anyhow.

James tells me to take Connor up on his offer to crash with him. James tells me spending the next year at my parents' before going to college is going to hurt my song writing. James tells me he knows a girl who knows a girl who can get me on the bill at The Bitter End. James tells me he smoked the best joint of his life last week. James tells me if I moved out, I could go dancing every night and just forget, forget, forget.

FEBRUARY 1983

Make sure you finish your homework at lunch so that you can come with me tonight, my dad says.

There was a time when my father would invite me to come with him to ball games and work barbeques, to spend Saturdays with him in the office, and even once to join him at the bar with his buddies.

But that was a long, long time ago.

Come with you where? I ask, without thinking. Before he can answer, I have a flash of memory. Connor going with him to his poker game and coming home with a perfect imprint of my father's hand on his arm.

Alan's son has been joining us, he says. You two can hang out together.

Alan works at the insurance office with my father. I've met his son before and have no reason to ever do it again.

I have a chemistry test to study for, I say. And I suck at poker, remember? You used to say you didn't want me to come along and embarrass you.

My father sighs and walks away. He'll do anything to avoid being embarrassed around "the guys." I've dodged a bullet this time.

There used to be a time when Connor and I both wanted to go with him, just to see what happened on these mysterious jaunts to Queens. But that was before we understood the type of people our dad called friends. Before we understood that we were the enemy.

Where's Andy? James asks Becky. I think he's trying to torture her or make her realize they should break up or something.

James and Becky are always trying to get under each other's skin, but something about this topic makes me squirm, because while Andy and James are polar opposites, Andy is a good guy and as long as he makes Becky happy, I think we should be happy for them.

It's like James is penalizing her for being the only one of us in a relationship.

Becky looks up and answers, On patrol. Like always.

James makes a point of not looking at me when he says, Well, there *are* other boys. Other girls. Other...

I'm sure she knows that, I cut him off.

James doesn't like to think about my sordid past, she says.
Like he's one to talk, I joke.
James rolls his eyes and says, Oh, you'd be surprised.

Later, I wrap the phone cord around my wrist like a snake.

So how wild is your past, Becks? I tease. I've heard rumors and all that, but it's not like I really believe them.

Oh, you know, she says. Before I met Andy...well, I've always liked falling in love more than being in a relationship.

I nod, even though she can't see me. Even though I'm not sure what it's like to really fall in love or to be in a relationship. Or which I'd like better.

I pull the cord tight around my wrist, oddly enjoying the way my fingers go cold and numb.

But, she says, and I can hear her pause, figuring out the best way to string together her words. She settles on, Let's talk about James. Can you name anyone he's actually been with?

Becky's theory confuses me because James is always surrounded by girls, always surrounded by boys. Always in the center of a storm of admirers. Who knows what he does when he isn't with us? And when would he have time to get to know one person and why would he bother?

But no, I tell her. I don't know anyone.

Me either, she says. And don't you think that's strange?

It's just James, I answer. It's like the way he taps on the top of a pack of cigarettes for luck before he opens them. Or the way he goes to dance clubs but won't dance.

There's a pause while I try to picture James in a relationship,

going on dates, too busy on Friday nights to go to rehearsal or develop a new show. Uninspired.

I listen to Becky breathe out before she says, Yeah, or he's hooked on someone he already knows.

I've heard this theory from her before.

And it still makes my heart race in an uncomfortable way.

Regardless of what Becky thinks. Regardless of how I always feel a little happier, a little more energized around him, James Barrows is out of my league. And regardless of the fact that he probably spends more time with me than anyone, there's no way he's hooked on me as anything other than his best friend.

'Night, Becks, I say and unravel the phone cord. It leaves a red mark around my wrist, shaped like barbed wire.

It's Valentine's Day and the girls from Student Council interrupt Mr. Solomon's class. They're weighed down with carnations for their fund-raiser. Red. White. Pink. The colors match the girls' shirts and their lip gloss and the oversized bows in their oversized hair.

A garden's worth of flowers land on a classroom's worth of desks. Two, one white, one pink, land in front of me. The white one first from Becky. The card reads: *Pretend this is from the future and signed by your one true love.*

The pink one is also in Becky's handwriting. *James gave me a Kennedy half dollar to send this to you. Make of that what you will.*

Sometimes it's like this: I can stay in my room with my books and my music and my guitar and my dreams, and stare out the window and be content.

Leaving means opening the door and heading down the hall and dealing with the looks and the silences and the questions—Where are you going, Michael? and Is that eye makeup? You aren't turning into a fag like your brother, are you?—and the glares and the anger, and sometimes it's just easier to stay in my room.

But sometimes it isn't. Sometimes it's worth the abuse.

The Echo is crowded. Everyone freed from their snow caves.

I sip a Coke and watch until I can't resist the pull of the music. Then I dance. And I dance. Waiting for that feeling of losing myself in something. Becoming something. Something that isn't me. Something more.

There's a boy in black watching me. We're all in black, but there's something darker about him, something even more than a typical Goth. He sways off tempo, like he can't quite find the beat, his red eyes ringed with kohl against a drug-pale face that would be impossible to imagine breaking into a smile.

I try not to stare back. Try and fail. He's captivating in the same way as a gun, in the same way as the stained knife that Andy found last month on patrol. The boy is wearing a crop top under a wool coat far too warm to dance in. His emaciated ribs jut out every time he moves.

He comes over and stands too close. Head cocked at an odd angle, the dark centers of his eyes, planet-like. I wonder what he's on.

You should come home with me, he says, under his breath, under the music.

I almost laugh because I'm not the kind of guy that people say things like this to. But I look at the boy and his eyes flare with something like anger or hunger, and I wonder if this is how James feels being hit on all the time and why he doesn't get involved.

Thanks, but...

He leans in, breath hot on my neck. We live in Brooklyn, he says. We have a coven. We would love you.

I swallow hard and pull back.

No, I say. I'm good.

Figures. The only ones I can attract are nuts.

He extends his middle finger as I turn and walk away. Apparently, drugged-out Brooklyn vampires can't handle rejection.

This week when I see Connor, I try to keep things light. Usually I drone on about Mom and Dad, and all the things he's missing at home, which takes massive creativity on my part and usually revolves around food and space, and abundant hot water, because really, what else is there?

This week, I let my brother do all the talking. Connor tells me he's seeing a drag queen whose stage name is Destiny, but whose day job is in advertising, which really means he sells classifieds for *The Daily News*. But, Connor says, it's an honest living. They've been meeting every night, but Destiny won't go back to his apartment because it's a fifth floor walk-up and he doesn't want to work that hard. Not for my brother, anyway.

I look at Connor, sure he's lying, but it's hard to tell about which part.

When we get up to leave, I grab a plastic bag off the seat and hand it to Connor. *I <3 NY* the bag declares, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't designed by someone handing off bread, peanut butter, and the occasional fiver he's saved from his allowance to his older brother.

I know Connor's working, but I don't think food is at the top of his shopping list.

And I know he hates this part because he never says anything, not even thanks.

But he never refuses the bag either, and I guess that's something.