Halfway House

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Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

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Chapter One

Another windstorm had knocked the farm's electricity out, so the dining hall was lit by candles. She'd been here three months now, and they'd lost electricity three times. Angie liked how the flickering light made the movements of both Staff and Residents oddly holy, seeming to invest the smallest gesture – emptying a cup, unbuttoning a coat – with grace and purpose. In the candlelight, the tremor in her hands was barely visible. One of the things she hated about lithium was the way she shook, like an old woman. This half-light meant she didn't have to pull her sleeves down over her hands or turn her body so it was between other people and whatever she held. Angie didn't know what she was going to do about the trembling this afternoon, when Jess visited. Keep her hands in her pockets, maybe.

'Eggs and bacon,' said Hannah, folding back the foil from a pan. She lifted the serving tongs. 'What can I get you, Doug?'

'Yeah, yeah.' Doug was sitting on his hands; his long legs knocked against the underside of the table.

'You want both?'

'Yeah.' As he reached for his plate, a coin of scalp shone at the back of his hair where he'd begun to bald.

Hannah was Staff, one of the college students taking a semester off to work at the farm. She'd told Angie that she would write a paper at the end and be given course credit by the psych department. Most of the college students looked like hippies, with their long hair and rough shirts, but Hannah had crew-cut hair and overalls. She wasn't pretty, but she was graceful, and she stood out in a way the prettier students didn't.

She finished serving and closed the tinfoil back over the pans.

Doug had already wolfed down half his food, and he held out his plate anxiously. 'Can I have seconds now?'

'What's the rule, Doug?'

'Not until six-forty-five.'

'Yeah. I don't think everyone's up yet.'

Doug put his hands under his thighs again. He rocked forward. 'I used to have a car. A Honda Civic. It was green. They're good cars, aren't they? Aren't they?'

'Damn good cars,' Hannah said. Angie liked the way Hannah talked to Residents about whatever they wanted to talk about. Most Staff would have insisted on reality-checking with Doug every two seconds, steering him again and again back to the here and now.

The milkers came in, stamping snow from their boots. Sam Manning poured himself sap tea from the samovar. He had gray hair, cracked hands, wrists so wide he could have balanced his teacup on one of them. Sam was the only Resident who milked – the other milkers were on Staff – and he'd been down to the barn already this morning. He sat down next to Angie. When he reached for the sugar bowl, she felt cold air on his sleeve. His boots gave off the sweet, murky smell of cow shit.

'The big day,' he said.

Angie nodded and looked away. With Jess's visit only a few hours off, thinking about it made her feel as though she had something sharp caught in her throat. They hadn't seen each other in the time Angie had been at the farm. Sometimes Angie couldn't bring her memory of Jess's face into focus, which gave her the crazy fear they wouldn't recognize each other. At least the doctor had taken her off Klonopin completely now. She was fat and she trembled, but each word wasn't its own search-and-rescue mission.

'They're good, they're good, they're good cars. They're good cars. They're *good cars*. Mine was green. Not too slow and not too fast. Not too safe and not too unsafe. Not *too* safe. Can I have more bacon?'

'She said six-forty-five,' a Resident said reprovingly.

'She said, she said, she said bedhead.'

Hannah shrugged lightly. 'About ten more minutes, Doug.'

The door behind them opened, bringing the din of wind. Cold air rushed into the dining hall; the candle flames hunched low, wincing. The Residents who'd just come in had to struggle to close the door.

‘Do you ever see any of your old friends?’ Angie asked Sam. ‘From before you got sick?’

‘Before I got sick was a long time ago.’

‘But do you?’

‘I’m not like you.’ He turned his big hands over, looking neutrally at the dirty nails a moment before looking up at Angie again. ‘I’ve never been good with people. Really, my only friend is my sister.’

Angie still hadn’t gotten used to the way people here said agonizing things so matter-of-factly. *He couldn’t stay married to a mental patient. My mother says it would have been better if I wasn’t born.* Angie said, ‘You have lots of friends here. You have me.’

‘You were asking about outside, though. You’re nervous about your friend coming.’

‘Not really,’ she lied. Jess had been her best friend since second grade. Up until the breakdown, they’d seen each other almost every day. Now when Jess called on the pay phone, Angie sometimes whispered, ‘Tell her I’m not here.’

Hannah yawned, covering her mouth with the back of one hand, blinking as her eyes watered. The yawn went on so long she looked embarrassed by it. Gesturing toward the long table behind her, she said, ‘I’ve been up since four making bread. It’s still hot, if anyone wants some.’

‘I fed on dead red bread, she said. She said, come to Club Meds in my head.’ Doug rocked forward, then back. ‘Is it lemon bread?’

‘Just regular bread. Wheat bread.’

Doug shook his head, making a face. He was too tall to sit at the table without hunching, and his knees hit against the underside, making the plates jump. ‘Sorry, sorry.’ He hunched even more. His scalp showed, waxy, through his hair.

Nurse Dave had the meds box. He poured three pills into Doug’s cupped palm: Klonopin, a green pill Angie didn’t recognize, and the same yellow and gray capsule of lithium she took three times a day. She looked away. Their movements were shadowed on the wall behind them, Nurse Dave straightening up, Doug remaining stooped as he reached for his water. The nurse watched Doug swallow his pills, then handed Angie her envelope, which she tucked beneath the edge of her plate. She’d only just gone from monitored to unmonitored meds, which meant no one watched her

take them. She wanted to wait a few minutes, to make being unmonitored matter.

'An engine is a thing of beauty,' Doug said.

A Resident muttered, 'Here we go.'

Hannah kept her voice casual. 'What did you do last night, Doug? Did you watch the movie?'

'An engine is a thing of beauty, a thing, a thing, thing of *beauty*. In*jec*tor, *in*take *man*ifold valve spring *timing* belt *cam*shaft *inlet* valve com*bus*tion chamber *pis*ton skirt alternator *cool*ing fan *crank*shaft *fan* belt *oil* pan gasket oil *drain* plug oil *pan air* conditioner com*pres*sor—'

Hannah glanced at the clock. It was only six-forty, but she said, 'Do you want some more bacon, Doug?'

'*Fly*wheel *en*gine block ex*haust* manifold exhaust *valve* spark plug *rocker* arm spark plug *cable* cylinder *head* cover vacuum diaphragm, distributor *cap,* in*jec*tor, *in*take manifold valve *spring,* timing *belt,* camshaft, *inlet* valve, com*bus*tion chamber, *piston* skirt *al*ternator *cool*ing fan crankshaft.' When someone rose, their shadow – huge and flickering – leapt up and slid across the east wall, stooped as they scraped their plate, straightened to set the plate in the sink. Doug rocked forward in his chair. 'Fan *belt* oil pan gasket oil drain plug oil pan air compressor – con*dit*ioner – compressor flywheel engine block exhaust manifold. Inlet *valve*. Combustion *chamber*. *Piston*.'

At seven, they went in to Morning Meeting. Everyone wore jeans and work boots at the farm – Residents' usually newer and nicer, Staff's more likely to be worn and mended. Angie and Sam found seats together. Across from them, a Resident in a denim hat licked his chapped-to-bleeding lips, over and over. Staff whispered something to him and he stopped for a moment. Aside from the attendance sheets balanced on the Resident advisers' knees, Morning Meeting reminded Angie of Unitarian Church services she'd gone to a few times with Jess: folding chairs, announcements, singing with guitars.

To the east, against the mountains, the sky was purple with dawn. Some Staff were knitting, needles clicking softly. It would be nice to have something to do with her hands. Sitting here left too much room to think, so that Morning Meeting often turned into a half-hour meditation on ways she'd fucked up. The last time she'd gone to Jess's church hadn't been long before she jumped

into the pool, maybe a week. She'd gulped vodka in her room before church, trying to calm down – she'd been awake for days – and the combination of mania and alcohol meant she didn't remember much of the morning now. She did remember banners made of felt on felt, JOY, PEACE, an abstract chalice. She remembered screaming with laughter at the stupid banners, she remembered during the service talking loudly to Jess, she remembered falling down after the service, suddenly surrounded by legs. The way the noise was sucked out of the room. By her face was Jess's mother's ankle, stubbled with hair. The silence after her fall had probably only lasted a couple of seconds, but it had seemed much longer. On Mrs. Salter's ankle, she saw each black hair sprouting sharp from its follicle, each follicle a pale lavender indent, and under the skin the hair continuing down, ghostly, toward its root. Above the ankle bone was a small scar, white as a chalk mark. Angie could see Mrs. Salter in the shower, rushing a pink razor up her calf; the sharp, coppery taste that came into your mouth even before you consciously knew you were cut; the way that for a minute the area around the cut would have flinched back, and then the cut would have flooded with blood, not red but pink because her skin was wet, washing in a pale, wide stream down her ankle bone and foot; the way she would have cursed and pressed the cut with her fingers. Angie reached out and touched the scar. In the moment before Mrs. Salter reacted, Angie could feel a tiny seam beneath the tip of her finger, as though someone had taken two neat stitches there with white thread. Inside the scar was Mrs. Salter's soul. The soul was just that small, tiny and white as a star. For one moment she understood the realness of Mrs. Salter to herself, how to Mrs. Salter the world radiated out from her own body. Angie could feel that for every person in the room at once; she felt the room's hundred centers.

Mrs. Salter jerked her leg away.

The noise of the room had flooded back in. One of the noises was someone laughing, yelping, wildly. Someone had said, 'Is that girl okay?' Someone, Jess, had said, 'Stop it, Angie, stop it, *stop* it.'

Sam put his hand on her arm. 'Angie? We're supposed to be going out to the truck.'

Angie was bent over, arms around herself, face against her thighs. When they'd pulled her out of the pool, she'd been raving

about the Olympics and breathing on the moon. Nothing, she was thinking – nothing, nothing – could make her fall apart in front of Jess again. She would be okay as long as she was careful, as long as she kept her hands out of sight, as long as she kept her thoughts on track. As long as she focused on the small details, as long as she made that be enough, as long as she made that be everything.

They rode the half mile to the barns in the back of a rattling Ford pickup. On sharp turns the key sometimes fell out of the ignition. The wind had died down to an occasional blast, sharp enough to pierce through Angie's coat. Though the sun was weak, the snow on the ground shone. They jolted slowly down the road, past the residences – Yellow House, White House, Ivy House – past the director's house, past the orchard, which in the summer held beehives. Sheep lifted masked, unsurprised faces to watch them. The llama had matted hair and a narrow, haughty expression. He detached from the flock and jogged mincingly toward the fence.

At the cowshed, the driver turned off the ignition; the truck continued to shake for a minute longer. Angie climbed up onto the rusty ledge of the truck bed, jumped heavily down. Pulling her scarf over her nose and mouth – as she breathed she tasted ice crystals and damp wool – she went around to the passenger-side door. Her hands were clumsy in her leather gloves, and it took three tries to unhook the baling wire that held the door closed. When the wire finally slipped free, she took a few awkward steps backward in the high snow, holding the door open. Sam Manning had been riding in the cab. He clambered down, and then together he and Angie wired the door shut again.

After the snow's glare, the inside of the barn seemed dim. Written above each stall were the names of the cow's sire, her dam, the bull she'd been mated with, and then the cow's own name: MOLLY, MAGGIE, JENNY. Angie helped unclip the cows from their long chains and herd them out into the frozen side yard. Jenny went uncomplainingly, but when Angie went back for Maggie, she balked at the doorway. Angie hit her, then set her shoulder against the cow's heavy haunch and pushed. Maggie set her hooves, tensing back. Her huge eye rolled wildly. Beneath Angie's cheek, the cow's coarse hair smelled of rumen, straw, and manure, at once pleasing and abrasive. 'Come *on,*' Angie said, banging the cow with her shoulder. Maggie didn't budge, and then all at once she gave in and came unstuck. As though it were what she'd

intended all along, she trotted out. In the yard, the cows crowded together, standing head to rump, their breath rising in dense white clouds. Angie unzipped her jacket and stood, hands on hips. Clouds of her breath – smaller than the cows' and more transparent – rose in the icy air.

Back inside, she pitchforked up yesterday's matted straw. Mixed in were crumpled paper towels, stained purple with teat disinfectant the milkers used. The barn was warm and close; Angie took off her jacket, hanging it on a nail. Another Resident, Betsy, turned on the radio, an ancient black Realistic balanced between two exposed wall studs, dialing until she found a faint heavy-metal song, fuzzed with static.

'No voices,' said Sam Manning.

'No voices,' the team leader agreed. Betsy rolled her eyes, tried to find another station. Finally she turned off the radio.

'They're all going to talk *sometime,*' she said. 'There's going to be *commercials*.'

In silence, they used brooms to sweep the floor clear of the last chaff. Then Sam Manning hosed down the concrete. Sam was more than twice Angie's age, someone whom – outside the farm – she would never have even known. In this new life, though, he was her friend, her only real one, the only person who laughed when she made a joke instead of looking worried. They'd first found each other on Movie Night because they both voted for videos that lost. They wanted *Chinatown* instead of *Crocodile Dundee, Witness* instead of *Top Gun,* anything instead of *Three Men and a Baby*. Angie went to the Movie Nights anyway; she had nothing better to do. She and Sam sat in back and made fun of the dialogue.

When Sam was twenty, voices had told him to kill his twin sister, then himself. He'd come to her college dorm and stabbed her in the stomach. She screamed and rolled away and his second thrust went wild, tearing open her arm. He managed to stab her a third time, in the thigh, before the resident adviser's boyfriend ran in and wrenched the knife away. Sundays, Sam's sister came to the farm, and they sat together smoking. She was also burly, also iron-haired. Her limp was barely noticeable, but if she pushed up her sleeve, a knotty scar ran from her right elbow down her forearm, almost to the wrist. There had been such extensive nerve damage that she couldn't use her right hand. It stunned Angie what could be lived around in a family: Surely it shouldn't be possible, their

sitting together on the stone wall by the sheep barn. She'd seen the sister reach for Sam's lighter, dipping her left hand into his shirt pocket as naturally as if it were her own.

At nine-thirty, they took a break. Hannah drove down from the kitchen, swinging herself out of the truck cab. Her jeans were made up more of patches than the original denim. She reached back into the truck for chocolate chip cookies and a thermos of cider.

The cookies were hot from the oven. The Residents and Staff stood in the lee of the barn, eating the cookies and smoking, ashing into a coffee can of sand. Angie, not a smoker, wandered over to the fence and watched the cows.

Hannah came up beside her. 'Why do you think everyone here smokes?'

'Everyone did at the hospital, too. I don't know why.' Angie wiped the corners of her mouth to make sure she didn't have chocolate smeared there.

'It drives me—' Hannah cut herself off. 'It's annoying.'

Angie said shyly, 'I like your jeans.'

'Yeah?' Hannah looked down, considering them.

Angie's sweater snagged on the fence. She pulled it free, leaving a wisp of green wool in the rough wood. She rubbed her mouth again, in case there really was chocolate there. Hannah sometimes hung out with her like this for a few minutes when she delivered Morning Snack. Suggesting to herself things she might say to Hannah and then rejecting them, Angie pretended to be wholly absorbed in watching the cows. They looked miserable in the field, barely grazing. Melting ice dripped from the undersides of branches. If she closed her eyes, she could hear the drops all around her, running together into a sound like tap water. She probably looked crazy, standing with her eyes closed. She opened them and said, 'It's almost spring.'

'People say spring's a hard time at the farm. A lot of people have breaks.'

Angie glanced at her, but Hannah didn't seem to be remembering Angie as one of the group at risk for breaks. Trying to use the same casual tone, Angie asked, 'I wonder why in the spring? I'd think, like, a month ago, when it was so gray all the time. And, you know, cold.'

'Apparently the change does it. In winter people hold together as long as it seems things are going to get better. Then when things

do start getting better – I can't explain it well. We had a training on it. They said until things stabilize again midsummer, April's the last good month.'

All through lunch, she talked to Hannah in her head. She imagined telling how parts of her past seemed to belong to another person, a crazy girl who broke stuff, tore books apart. After the pool thing, when she'd been admitted to the hospital, they'd thought she was schizophrenic. The first antipsychotic they put her on, Mellaril, had made her more psychotic. It had also made her neck and jaw muscles stiffen so tight that she could barely talk. Sometimes she'd fallen out and been put into Isolation, where she threw herself against the wall until aides arrived to sedate her and the world stretched out thick and flat.

Hannah would say, *I can't imagine you like that. You're right, that's totally not you.*

Sitting in the TV room, waiting for the Town Trip, she told Hannah silently about her younger brother, the way he sulked and snapped on visits. She said, *You've seen him, right?* and in her head Hannah said, *I think maybe. Reddish hair?* She confided to Hannah that she hadn't taken her meds this morning; she hoped it would make her shake less. She was going to take a double dose tonight, as soon as Jess left.

Jess.

She was too wired to sit here. She had half an hour before the van left for Town Trip. Out on the front porch, she pulled her parka tighter around her body and started walking. Wind stirred up small eddies from the surface of the snow. She turned and cut up into the woods.

In the woods, the snow was deeper. Trees' black branches rubbed together, moaning. The high snow made walking hard; she stopped to unzip her parka. She thought about lying down to make a snow angel, then – as she started to lower herself – thought maybe there was something crazy about lying down in the snow and straightened and went on.

Hannah lived in one of the small Staff cabins out here in the woods, little houses without plumbing. In the winter Angie had helped deliver wood to these cottages. She'd still been on anti-psychotics, but Klonopin at least hadn't made her crazier like Mellaril had. Her few memories of the insides of the cabins had a

dreamy, unanchored quality: a red blanket, a shelf of books, a propped-up postcard of a painting.

The clearing between Angie and Hannah's cabin was wide and very still. Thin smoke twisted from the chimney. She saw a small brown hawk the moment before it launched itself from a tree into the air. There was the soft thump of snow falling onto snow, the *hush, hush* of wings. Walking through snow had soaked Angie's pants to the knees, and she shivered.

Just as she was turning to go, the cabin door opened. Hannah emerged, walked a few feet, drew down her jeans, and crouched. In the woods, everything looked like a pen-and-ink drawing: white snow, gray smoke, black trees and the cold blue wash of shadows at their bases. Hannah seemed drawn with ink too, as she stood again, pulling up her jeans. Short dark hair, the white undershirt she wore, then the closing of the cabin door behind her.

The wind paused. Angie walked toward the cabin. From inside came the chirrup of the woodstove door. A log thrown on the fire, and then a silence that stretched over the clearing to its edge, where the snow disappeared in the bases of trees. Where Hannah had been, the snow was pocked yellow. Angie felt oddly exhilarated. She crouched, using her teeth to pull off her mitten and put her hand above the surface, feeling warmth mixed with the cold air rising against her palm.

The Town Trip was to Sheepskill, thirty miles from the farm. Hannah parked the old van behind the health food store. Hitting the parking lot, the Residents were like a clump of fish being released into a tank, turning disoriented in place for a moment, then separating. Two of the lowest functioners headed together toward Sheepskill's supermarket. Others walked in the direction of the drugstore, the record store.

Angie lingered near the van. Kicking snow from her boot sole, she said, 'Today's the day I'm meeting Jess.'

'I remember.' Hannah finished writing the names of Residents who had come to town, then tossed the checklist onto the front seat. 'Are you nervous?'

Angie's stomach kept twisting, like a rag being wrung out. 'No. I guess a little. I haven't seen her in a long time.'

'It'll be fine,' Hannah said, pulling the van door shut. She reached and touched Angie's arm briefly. Then she took two steps

backward, waved. 'Go on. It will be fun.'

As a meeting place, Angie had chosen the Daily Grind, Sheepskill's less popular coffee shop, where they weren't as likely to run into other Residents. Walking down Main Street, she tried to see the town as Jess might. The stores had high square fronts and faux nineteenth-century signs, or else real 1950s ones. The banked snow was melting, filling the street with gray slush. In front of the gas station was a boy her age with a smudgy mustache, jaw raw with acne. He lifted a mop from a bucket of hot water, rolling the handle between his ungloved hands so the strings flared into a circle, then bent to swab the sidewalk. His body, beneath the blue-gray jacket, was beautiful. In the cold air, clouds of steam rose from the bucket. A handmade sign advertised free maps with a full tank of gas.

The Daily Grind was at the top of a steep hill. The slush made walking difficult; with every step, Angie slid half a step back, arms out to her sides for balance. Even with the hard physical barn work, she'd gained weight on lithium, and she reached the top of the hill breathing heavily. On the café's porch, while she tried to pull her clothes straight, a woman came out, holding the hand of a little boy. He had hockey-player hair, cut very short on top and left long in back. The boy said, 'Mom, I want—' and the mother yanked his arm, hard. 'I told you, don't say *I want,*' she hissed.

Jess stood as Angie came in. Angie's fear that she wouldn't recognize Jess had been crazy; she looked more familiar than Angie's own reflection would have.

Jess's long hair was pulled back in a ponytail. As she stepped forward, Angie stepped back, then realized Jess had meant to hug her. They bumped together awkwardly, Angie's hands still in her pockets.

'You look great!' Jess said.

'The coffee's pretty good here.'

'It's been so long since I've seen you!'

'Do you want some coffee? I'll get it.'

'No, I'll get it.' Jess reached back for her purse. 'My treat.'

Once, Angie would have said – what? Something sarcastic about Jess's generosity. She sat, then looked quickly around the café, relaxing when she saw she'd been right: no other Residents. Inside her pockets, Angie's hands were trembling, despite skipping her meds. She needed to calm down or she'd sound like a mental

patient: the response to *you look great* was not *the coffee here's pretty good*.

'Here,' Jess said. 'I got you a muffin too.'

If she gripped the cup hard enough, it stilled her hands. The coffee was black, bitter and delicious. The farm didn't have coffee. On town trips, Residents bought jars of instant and brought them back. At the farm, tablespoons of dried coffee were a currency as valuable as cigarettes, more valuable than real money.

There hadn't been coffee in the hospital either. The first morning last fall that she'd woken up on the locked ward, she had such a bad caffeine headache she'd shivered and vomited. She'd told the nurses she was dying, she had a brain tumor, she was descended from Scottish kings and she was dying on a shitty filthy motherfucking ward. She took off her clothes and lay down on the floor of the bathroom. The small cold tiles under her cheek had, for a moment, brought her shockingly back – she said her own name to anchor herself, 'Angie, Angie, Angie' – but then the nursing aides tried to move her and she'd become terrified, scratching and biting, and that was the first time she'd ended up in Isolation.

Jess said, 'Your brother probably tells you everything about school.'

Angie shook her head. Luke didn't tell her much.

Jess visibly relaxed. She began talking about who had broken up, who had gotten into what college, the swim team. In the café were two geeky junior-high boys playing chess, a woman with a sleeping baby, a middle-aged man sketching. No one had any reason to think Angie was anything other than what she appeared, a girl in jeans, drinking coffee with a friend on a Saturday. She tried to listen to Jess, but her attention was on the street outside the door, willing Residents to stay away. So she wouldn't turn to look, she held herself stiff. Each time the door opened, she felt herself jerk in her seat. Jess smiled at something she was saying and Angie told herself, *Smile*. She was relieved to realize that Jess, in her narration of the last three months, wasn't going to mention why Angie hadn't been at school. Jess said some of the cheerleaders had been booted off the squad for coming to a game drunk. She laughed. Late, Angie laughed too.

Jess looked down at her cup. She picked it up and swirled it.

Outside, a car moved carefully up the street, headlights on. In the slushy snow, its tires made a sound like ripping silk. It was

three-thirty in the afternoon, the light beginning to fade. Jess at last looked up. They smiled at each other helplessly. 'More coffee?' Jess asked.

If she drank more coffee she would be sick. She could just hold the cup and not drink. 'Sure. I'll get it.'

'Sit down, sit down.'

She sat down. Her hands were too trembly, anyway, to carry two mugs without spilling.

Jess bustled over to the counter, joked with the girl working. It was Angie, not Jess, who was usually good with strangers, but suddenly Jess had taken on the role of Competent Friend. On the way back to the table, she raised one hand – holding a full cup of coffee! – and used the back of her thumb to push hair out of her eyes. She sat down, saying, 'I'm so tired.' She bent her head, resting it on her arms.

While her head was lowered, Angie said quickly, 'The farm's like – my parents think I have to be there. The doctor doesn't even think I have what the first doctor thought I had. No one has a clue, really.' It seemed true as she said it.

Jess sat up. 'You must be so pissed.'

'It's not so bad. People are pretty normal.'

'In your letter you said they were pretty crazy.'

What had she written Jess? 'Well, some people. Not most people, though. I'm friends with this girl, Hannah, she's just taking a semester off from school.'

'So it's like that? I mean, some people are – some people need to be there, but other people are just . . .'

'Just there.' For the first time all afternoon, her footing began to feel sure, not just because she'd found a softened, not totally untrue, way to describe the farm but also because, next to Hannah, Jess would seem awkward and unremarkable. 'I mean, I wasn't going to come back to school in the middle of the *semester*. I think what I had before was a nervous breakdown, trying to do too many things at once. Everyone freaked out, but that was pretty much all it was.'

'You know, that's what I thought. I mean, it's not like you're psycho.'

'The hospital will make you psycho, though.' You weren't allowed to say words like *psycho* or *crazy* at the farm; using them felt like throwing off heavy blankets. 'When I was in there, at the

hospital, everyone was treating me like I was really sick. My parents were all—' She made her face pinched and solemn. 'And everyone was saying I'd have to take meds, *medication,* forever. You begin believing it.'

'In the hospital, I should've come see you.'

'No, you shouldn't have.'

Angie felt the conversation set its hooves and stall. She said one of the things she'd said to Hannah in her head: 'When I think of the hospital, I don't know who I am.'

'What's that supposed to mean, you don't know who you are?'

'I mean it's confusing. I think about things I . . . Jesus. I mean, it's the world that's fucked up.'

Jess pushed some crumbs into a line.

'I mean, isn't it?'

'I don't know. I guess so. I don't know.'

The door opened and shut. This time, they both turned. Sam Manning, stomping ice from his boots, raised his hand in greeting.

'Who's that?'

'A Res— someone from the farm.' At least Sam was normal. Wasn't he? She had the time he was in line to think what to say about him to Jess, but her brain felt slow. She raised her coffee and found she'd drunk it all.

Near them, a little girl was kneeling on the floor. Two women talked at the table above. Periodically, one of them called down, 'Are you okay, Liza?'

The girl didn't respond. She had straight bangs that fell into her eyes and a wind-up toy, an alien with arms hugged to its body and three eyes across its forehead. The little girl wound a key in its side and it ran awkwardly, body pitched forward so that with each step it teetered and seemed barely to catch itself from falling.

Angie said, 'They always make aliens look just like humans with one thing different.'

'What?'

Angie's hands were jumping on the mug. She put them between her knees, pressing to still them. 'Do you mean what did I say or what did I mean?'

'Which thing is different?'

'I don't mean there's a specific thing, I mean they change something.'

'What are you talking about?' Jess looked suddenly on the verge

of tears. 'You're not even acting like you're happy to see me. I don't know what's wrong with you.'

'Nothing's wrong with me!'

Jess flinched and looked away.

Sam was making his way over. He had a shambling walk – was that weird? – and blue down vest – weird? – and carried his mug carefully, watching to make sure it didn't spill. 'Hey, Angie.'

'Hey.'

There was a silence, then Jess introduced herself.

'I know,' said Sam. 'I've heard a lot about you.'

'You have.' Jess raised an eyebrow at Angie, who looked away. Jess asked Sam, 'Do you want to sit down?'

'I guess, for a minute.' Sitting, he looked around the café, cracking his knuckles. On his right hand, the fingers were stained dark yellow with nicotine. 'How long was your drive?'

'Four hours,' Jess said. 'The roads were pretty good.'

'You were lucky. Last night we had a windstorm.'

'In New Hampshire, we had a windstorm last year that killed two people. A tree came down on their car.'

Angie relaxed a little. This was a normal conversation. She was pretty sure. Sam asked about the colleges Jess had applied to, and Jess listed the places she'd gotten in and the places she hadn't. She thought she'd go to Bates. Had he gone to college? He had. Tufts University. 'But I didn't—'

Angie blurted, 'What do you think Hannah does on these trips?'

'Hannah?' Sam turned toward her. He was so big and so slow-moving. He said, 'Are you okay?'

'No. No. I just – right.' She lifted her mug – no, all gone; she put it down. Too hard: it skipped and started to totter and Jess grabbed to steady it. Jess and Sam had identical expressions on their faces. They looked like her parents had begun looking at her last fall, wary and assessing. She laughed loudly. 'You don't have to look like that.'

'Like what?' Sam asked.

'Like I've just run over your dog.'

'I don't have a dog.'

Angie laughed again. She rolled her eyes at Jess, then saw that Sam was watching her. She froze, halfway through the motion, mouth still open, eyes wide.

'Okay,' he said. He pushed back from the table and smiled

weakly. 'I guess you girls need time alone. I forgot how long it's been since you saw each other.'

Jess said, 'Stay, it's okay, we've had forever to talk.'

Sam shook his head. Angie remembered how he'd said his sister was his only real friend. She hated the emptiness of his life. When he stood and said, 'Well . . .' she let him walk away.

At four, ten minutes before the van would leave, Angie and Jess stood outside the café saying goodbye. The light had become grainy; in a half hour it would be dark. Low above the latched black branches of trees, the moon was barely visible against the equally pale sky. A parked car, finned and low, its headlights left on, floated at the curb like a blind fish.

'I have to go,' Angie said.

Suddenly, too late, she felt how much she'd missed Jess. They used to say goodbye like this, lingering at a corner. They'd call each other sometimes ten times a night. For a moment, it seemed homesickness would knock her down.

'Well, bye,' Jess said.

'You have a long drive.'

Jess shrugged. She bounced her keys in her gloved hand, looking off. Then she looked at Angie. 'You're okay, right? Are you okay?'

How many times removed was she from okay? She nodded, tightening her coat.

As she started down the hill from Jess, she could see – spread out through Sheepskill – other Residents, straggling back singly and in pairs. She saw the whole town as a pattern of streets, glazed with late-afternoon light, leading to the van. When she turned, Jess was still standing in front of the café, watching her. Angie gave a hearty whole-arm wave, the kind people on boats gave to people on shore.

At the van, a few people still milled around, taking advantage of the last few minutes off-farm. She put her hand into her pocket and found, still unopened, the envelope holding her meds.

Pretending to cough, she bent and dropped the crumpled packet in the snow, quickly burying it with her foot. As she straightened, her face burned, but no one seemed to have seen. Ahead of her in line, Doug chanted, 'Thing of beauty, thing of beauty.' Someone else – low, so Hannah wouldn't hear – said, 'Shut up, Doug,' and he did.

Angie walked hunched over through the van to a seat in the back. Two Residents talked loudly. Hannah asked, 'Julie, is your seat belt on?'

'Yup.'

'Angie? Seat belt?'

Out the window, the air was lined, as though with sleet: the last few moments between dusk and true evening.

'She's got it on,' someone said.

Hannah backed and feinted, backed and feinted, turning the van around. They drove slowly out of the lot. Angie leaned her head against the cold, rattling window glass. She felt like a small child, as though it were years ago and she was riding the school bus. In second grade, Jess had had a brown rabbit coat, so soft that Angie had found excuses – the bus going over a bump – for her hand to brush Jess's sleeve. They'd been best friends, by then, four months. During math time, they drew insulting pictures of each other naked. 'This is you,' Jess whispered, drawing salami-shaped breasts on a straight-sided woman. 'Well, this is *you,*' Angie whispered, and scrawled armpit hair onto her own picture, pressing so hard the pencil lines shone silver.

The van turned a corner and Angie saw the real Jess, head down, walking to her car. Angie started to duck, but Jess wasn't looking her way. She had her parka hood up and her arms around herself for warmth. As Angie watched, she broke suddenly into a run. Still hugging herself, she ran awkwardly, body pitched forward so that with each step she teetered, seeming barely to catch herself from falling.