PART ONE

Moments of Strangeness

ONE

On a warm night in early July of that long-evaporated year, the Interestings gathered for the very first time. They were only fifteen, sixteen, and they began to call themselves the name with tentative irony. Julie Jacobson, an outsider and possibly even a freak, had been invited in for obscure reasons, and now she sat in a corner on the unswept floor and attempted to position herself so she would appear unobtrusive yet not pathetic, which was a difficult balance. The teepee, designed ingeniously though built cheaply, was airless on nights like this one, when there was no wind to push in through the screens. Julie Jacobson longed to unfold a leg or do the side-to-side motion with her jaw that sometimes set off a gratifying series of tiny percussive sounds inside her skull. But if she called attention to herself in any way now, someone might start to wonder why she was here; and really, she knew, she had no reason to be here at all. It had been miraculous when Ash Wolf had nodded to her earlier in the night at the row of sinks and asked if she wanted to come join her and some of the others later. *Some of the others.* Even that wording was thrilling.

Julie had looked at her with a dumb, dripping face, which she then quickly dried with a thin towel from home. *Jacobson,* her mother had written along the puckered edge in red laundry marker in a tentative hand that now seemed a little tragic. 'Sure,' she had said, out of instinct. What if she'd said *no*? she liked to wonder afterward in a kind of strangely pleasurable, baroque horror. What if she'd turned down the lightly flung invitation and went about her life, thudding obliviously along like a drunk person, a blind person, a moron, someone who thinks that the small packet of happiness she carries is enough. Yet having said 'sure' at the sinks in the girls' bathroom, here she was now, planted in the corner of this unfamiliar, ironic world. Irony was new to her and tasted oddly good, like a previously unavailable summer fruit. Soon, she and the rest of them would be ironic much of the time, unable to answer an

innocent question without giving their words a snide little adjustment. Fairly soon after that, the snideness would soften, the irony would be mixed in with seriousness, and the years would shorten and fly. Then it wouldn't be long before they all found themselves shocked and sad to be fully grown into their thicker, finalized adult selves, with almost no chance for reinvention.

That night, though, long before the shock and the sadness and the permanence, as they sat in Boys' Teepee 3, their clothes bakery sweet from the very last washer-dryer loads at home, Ash Wolf said, 'Every summer we sit here like this. We should call ourselves something.'

'Why?' said Goodman, her older brother. 'So the world can know just how unbelievably *interesting* we are?'

'We could be called the Unbelievably Interesting Ones,' said Ethan Figman. 'How's that?'

'The Interestings,' said Ash. 'That works.'

So it was decided. 'From this day forward, because we are clearly the most interesting people who ever fucking *lived*,' said Ethan, 'because we are just so fucking *compelling*, our brains swollen with intellectual thoughts, let us be known as the Interestings. And let everyone who meets us fall down dead in our path from just how fucking interesting we are.' In a ludicrously ceremonial moment they lifted paper cups and joints. Julie risked raising her cup of vodka and Tang – 'V&T,' they'd called it – nodding gravely as she did this.

'Clink,' Cathy Kiplinger said.

'Clink,' said all the others.

The name was ironic, and the improvisational christening was jokily pretentious, but still, Julie Jacobson thought, they *were* interesting. These teenagers around her, all of them from New York City, were like royalty and French movie stars, with a touch of something papal. Everyone at this camp was supposedly artistic, but here, as far as she could tell, was the hot little nucleus of the place. She had never met anyone like these people; they were interesting compared not only with the residents of Underhill, the New York suburb where she'd lived since birth, but also compared with what was generally *out there,* which at the moment seemed baggy suited, nefarious, thoroughly repulsive.

Briefly, in that summer of 1974, when she or any of them looked up from the deep, stuporous concentration of their one-act plays and animation cels and dance sequences and acoustic guitars, they found themselves staring into a horrible doorway, and so they quickly turned away. Two boys at camp had copies of *All the President's Men* on the shelves above their beds, beside big aerosol cans of Off! and small bottles of benzoyl peroxide meant to dash flourishing, excitable acne. The book had come out not long before camp began, and at night when the teepee talk wound down into sleep or rhythmic, crickety masturbation, they would read by flashlight. *Can you believe those fuckers?* they thought.

This was the world they were meant to enter: a world of fuckers. Julie Jacobson and the others paused before the doorway to that world, and what were they supposed to do – just walk through it? Later in the summer Nixon would lurch away, leaving his damp slug trail, and the entire camp would watch on an old Panasonic that had been trundled into the dining hall by the owners, Manny and Edie Wunderlich, two aging Socialists who were legendary in the small, diminishing world of aging Socialists.

Now they were gathering because the world was unbearable, and they themselves were not. Julie allowed herself another slight degree of movement, crossing and recrossing her arms. But still no one turned and insisted on knowing who had invited this awkward, redheaded, blotchy girl in. Still no one asked her to leave. She looked around the dim room, where everyone was mostly inert on the bunks and on the wooden slats of the floor, like people in a sauna.

Ethan Figman, thick bodied, unusually ugly, his features appearing a little bit flattened, as if pressed against a mime's invisible glass wall, sat with his mouth slack and a record album in his lap. He was one of the first people she'd noticed after her mother and sister drove her up here days earlier. He had been wearing a floppy denim hat then, and he greeted everyone around him on the lawn, grabbing the ends of trunks, allowing himself to be smashed into platonic hugs with girls and soul handshakes with other boys. People cried out to him, 'Ethan! Ethan!' and he was pulled toward each voice in turn.

'That boy looks ridiculous,' Julie's sister, Ellen, said quietly as they stood

on the lawn, fresh out of their green Dodge Dart and the four-hour drive from Underhill. He did look ridiculous, but Julie already felt the need to be protective of this boy she didn't know.

'No he doesn't,' she said. 'He looks fine.'

They were sisters, only sixteen months apart, but Ellen, the older one, was dark-haired, closed-faced, and held surprisingly condemnatory opinions, which had often been dispensed in the small ranch house where they lived with their mother, Lois, and, until that winter, their father, Warren, who had died of pancreatic cancer. Julie would always remember what sharing close quarters with a dying person had been like; particularly what it had been like sharing the single, peach-colored bathroom that her poor father had apologetically monopolized. She had begun to get her period when she was fourteen and a half – much later than anyone else she knew – and she found herself in need of the bathroom at times when it wasn't available. Huddling in her bedroom with an enormous box of Kotex, she thought of the contrast between herself, 'emerging into womanhood,' according to the movie that the gym teacher had shown the girls much earlier, in sixth grade, and her father, emerging into something else that she didn't want to think about but which was upon her at all times.

In January he was dead, which was a grinding torment and also a relief, impossible to focus on or stop thinking about. Summer approached, still unfilled. Ellen didn't want to go anywhere, but Julie couldn't just sit at home all summer feeling like this and watching her mother and sister feel like this; it would lead to madness, she decided. At the last minute, her English teacher suggested this camp, which had an open spot and agreed to take Julie on scholarship. Nobody in Underhill went to camps like this one; not only wouldn't they have been able to afford it, it wouldn't have occurred to them to go. They all stayed home and went to the local bare-bones day camp, or spent long days oiled up at the town pool or got jobs at Carvel or loafed around their humid houses.

No one really had money, and no one ever seemed to think much about not having money. Warren Jacobson had worked in human resources at Clelland Aerospace; Julie had never understood exactly what his job entailed,

but she knew that the pay wasn't enough to allow the family to build and maintain a pool in their small backyard. Yet when she was suddenly offered a chance to go away to this camp in the summer, her mother insisted she accept. 'Someone should have a little fun in this family,' said Lois Jacobson, a new, shaky widow at age forty-one. 'It's been a while.'

Tonight, in Boys' Teepee 3, Ethan Figman seemed as confident as he'd been on the lawn that first day. Confident, but also probably conscious of his own ugliness, which would never go away over the whole of his life. On the surface of the record album, Ethan began rolling joints with efficiency. It was his job, he'd said, and he clearly liked having something to do with his fingers when there was no pen or pencil held between them. He was an animator, and he spent hours drawing his short animated films and filling the pages of the little spiral notebooks that always bulged from his back pocket. Now he took tender care with the tiny shovelfuls of grain and twig and bud.

'Figman, increase the velocity; the natives are restless,' said Jonah Bay. Julie knew almost nothing yet, but she did know that Jonah, a good-looking boy with blue-black hair that fell to his shoulders, and a leather string around his neck, was the son of the folksinger Susannah Bay. For a long time, his famous mother would be Jonah's primary identifying characteristic. He had taken to indiscriminately using the expression 'the natives are restless,' although this time it did make partial sense. Everyone here was restless, though none of them were native to this place.

That night in July, Nixon was still over a month away from being lifted off the White House lawn like a rotten piece of outdoor furniture. Across from Ethan, Jonah Bay sat with his steel-stringed guitar, wedged between Julie Jacobson and Cathy Kiplinger, a girl who moved and stretched all day in the dance studio. Cathy was big and blond and far more womanly than most girls could be comfortable with at age fifteen. Also she was 'way too emotionally demanding,' as someone bluntly later observed. She was the kind of girl who boys never left alone; they were relentless in their automatic pursuit of her. Sometimes the outline of her nipples would appear through the fabric of a leotard like buttons on a sofa cushion, and they would need to be ignored by everyone, the way nipples often needed to be ignored in their vicissitudes.

Up above them all, on a top bunk, sprawled Goodman Wolf, six feet tall, sun sensitive, big kneed, and hypermasculine in khaki shorts and buffalo sandals. If this group had a leader, he was it. Literally, now, they had to look up to him. Two other boys who actually lived in this teepee had been politely but emphatically asked to go get lost for the night. Goodman wanted to be an architect, Julie had heard, but he never spent time figuring out how buildings stayed up, how suspension bridges withstood the weight of cars. Physically he was not quite as spectacular as his sister, for his good looks were a little muddied by troubled, stubbled skin. But despite his imperfections and his general air of laziness, he was a huge and influential presence here. The previous summer, in the middle of *Waiting for Godot*, Goodman had climbed into the lighting booth and plunged the stage into darkness for a full three minutes just to see what would happen – who would scream, who would laugh, how much trouble he'd get into. Sitting in the dark, more than one girl secretly imagined Goodman lying on top of her. He would be so big, like a lumberjack trying to fuck a girl – or, no, more like a *tree* trying to fuck a girl.

Much later, people who'd been at camp with him agreed that it made sense that Goodman Wolf was the one whose life had such an alarming trajectory. Of course they were surprised, they said – though not, they made sure to qualify, all that surprised.

The Wolfs had been coming to Spirit-in-the-Woods since they were twelve and thirteen; they were central to this place. Goodman was big and blunt and unsettling; Ash was waifish, openhearted, a beauty with long, straight, pale brown hair and sad eyes. Some afternoons in the middle of Improv, when the class was talking in a made-up language, or mooing and baaing, Ash Wolf would suddenly slip away from the theater. She would return to the empty girls' teepee and recline on her bed eating Junior Mints and writing in her journal.

I'm beginning to think I feel too much, Ash wrote. *The feelings flood into me like so much water, and I am helpless against the onslaught.*

Tonight the screen door had winced shut behind the departing, shooed-away boys, and then the three girls from the other side of the pines had

arrived. There were six people altogether in this single-bulb-lit conical wooden structure. They would meet again whenever they could over the rest of the summer, and frequently in New York City over the next year and a half. There would be one more summer for all of them. After that, over the following thirty-odd years, only four of them would meet whenever they could, but of course it would be entirely different.

Julie Jacobson, at the start of that first night, had not yet transformed into the far better sounding Jules Jacobson, a change that would deftly happen a little while later. As Julie, she'd always felt *all wrong*; she was gangling, and her skin went pink and patchy at the least provocation: if she got embarrassed, if she ate hot soup, if she stepped into the sun for half a minute. Her deer-colored hair had been recently permed at the La Beauté salon in Underhill, giving her head a poodle bigness that mortified her. The stinking chemical perm had been her mother's idea. Over the year in which her father was dying, Julie had occupied herself by zealously splitting her split ends, and her hair had become frizzed and wild. Sometimes she discovered a single hair with an uncountable number of splits, and she would tug on the whole thing, listening to the crackle as the hair broke between her fingers like a branch, and experiencing a sensation that resembled a private sigh.

When she looked in the mirror one day, her hair appeared to her as bad as a pillaged nest. A haircut and a perm might help, her mother said. After the perm, when Julie saw herself in the salon mirror, she cried, 'Oh crap,' and ran out into the parking lot, her mother chasing her, saying it would die down, it wouldn't be so big tomorrow.

'Oh honey, it won't be so *dandeliony*!' Lois Jacobson called to her from across the blinding rows of cars.

Now, among these people who had been coming to this teenaged performing-arts and visual-arts summer camp in Belknap, Massachusetts, for two or three years, Julie, a dandeliony, poodly outsider, from an undistinguished town sixty miles east of New York City, was surprisingly compelling to them. Just by being here in this teepee at the designated hour, they all seduced one another with greatness, or with the assumption of eventual greatness. Greatness-in-waiting.

Jonah Bay dragged a cassette tape deck across the floor, as heavy as a nuclear suitcase. 'I've got some new tapes,' he said. 'Really good acoustic stuff. Just listen to this riff, it will amaze you.' The others dutifully listened, because they trusted his taste, even if they didn't understand it. Jonah closed his eyes as the music played, and Julie watched him in his state of transfixion. The batteries were starting to die, and the music that emanated from the tape player seemed to come from a drowning musician. But Jonah, apparently a gifted guitarist, liked this, so Julie did too, and she nodded her head in an approximation of the beat of the music. More V&Ts were served by Cathy Kiplinger, who poured one for herself in a collapsible drinking cup, the kind you took on campouts and which never really got clean, and which, Jonah remarked, looked like a miniature model of the Guggenheim Museum. 'That's not a compliment,' Jonah added. 'A cup isn't supposed to collapse and reconstruct. It's already a perfect object.' Again, Julie found herself nodding in quiet agreement with everything that anyone here said.

During that first hour, books were discussed, mostly ones written by spiky and disaffected European writers. 'Günter Grass is basically *God*,' said Goodman Wolf, and the two other boys agreed. Julie had never actually heard of Günter Grass, but she wasn't going to let on. If anyone asked, she would insist that *she too* loved Günter Grass, although, she would add as protection, 'I haven't read as much of him as I would like.'

'I think Anaïs Nin is God,' Ash said.

'How can you say that?' said her brother. 'She is so full of pretentious, girly shit. I have no idea why people read Anaïs Nin. She's the worst writer who ever lived.'

'Anaïs Nin and Günter Grass both have *umlauts*,' remarked Ethan. 'Maybe that's the key to their success. I'm going to get one for myself.'

'What were you doing reading Anaïs Nin, Goodman?' asked Cathy.

'Ash made me,' he said. 'And I do everything my sister says.'

'Maybe *Ash* is God,' said Jonah with a beautiful smile.

A couple of them said that they had brought paperbacks with them to camp that they needed to read for school; their summer reading lists were all similar, featuring those sturdy, adolescent-friendly writers John Knowles

and William Golding. 'If you think about it,' said Ethan, '*Lord of the Flies* is basically the opposite of Spirit-in-the-Woods. One's a total nightmare, and the other's utopia.'

'Yeah, they're diametrically opposed,' said Jonah, for this was another phrase he liked to use. Although, Julie thought, if someone said 'diametrically,' could 'opposed' be far behind?

Parents got discussed too, though mostly with tolerant disdain. 'I just don't think that my mother and father's separation is any of my business,' said Ethan Figman, taking a wet suck on his joint. 'They are completely wrapped up in themselves, which means they basically pay no attention to me, and I couldn't be happier. Though it would be nice if my father kept some food in the refrigerator once in a while. Feeding your child – I hear it's the latest fad.'

'Come to the Labyrinth,' said Ash. 'You'll be totally taken care of.' Julie had no idea what the Labyrinth was – an exclusive private club in the city with a long, twisting entrance? She couldn't ask and risk showing her ignorance. Even though she didn't know how she had come to be included here, the inclusion of Ethan Figman was equally mysterious. He was so squat and homely, with eczema running along his forearms like a lit fuse. Ethan didn't take his shirt off, ever. He spent free-swim period each day under the boiling tin roof of the animation shed with his teacher, Old Mo Templeton, who had apparently once worked in Hollywood with Walt Disney himself. Old Mo, who looked eerily like Gepetto from Disney's *Pinocchio*.

As Julie felt the effects of Ethan Figman's wet-ended joint, she imagined all their saliva joining on a cellular level, and she was disgusted by the image, then she laughed to herself, thinking: we are all nothing more than a seething, collapsing ball of *cells.* Ethan, she saw, was looking at her intently.

'Hmm,' he said.

'What?'

'Telltale private chuckling. Maybe you want to slow down a little over there.'

'Yeah, maybe I should,' Julie said.

'I'm keeping an eye on you.'

'Thanks,' she said. Ethan turned back to the others, but in her precarious, high state she felt that Ethan had made himself her *protector.* She kept thinking a high person's thoughts, focusing on the collage of human cells that filled this teepee, all of it making up the ugly, kind boy; and the ordinary nothing that was herself; and the beautiful, delicate girl sitting across from her; and the beautiful girl's uncommonly magnetic brother; and the soft-spoken, gentle son of a famous folksinger; and, finally, the sexually confident, slightly unwieldy dancer girl with a sheaf of blond hair. They were all just countless cells that had joined together to make this group in particular – this group that Julie Jacobson, who had no currency whatsoever, suddenly decided she loved. That she was *in love with,* and would stay in love with for the rest of her life.

Ethan said, 'If my mother wants to abandon my father and screw my pediatrician, let's pray he's used soap and water after he's had his hand up some kid's ass.'

'Wait, Figman, so we're supposed to assume that your pediatrician puts his hand up all his patients' asses, including yours?' Goodman said. 'I hate to tell you this, man, but he's not supposed to do that. It's against the Hippocratic oath. You know, "First, do no hand up the ass." '

'No, he doesn't do that. I was just trying to be disgusting to get your attention,' said Ethan. 'It's my way.'

'So, okay, we get it; you are *disgusted* by your parents' separation,' said Cathy.

'Which is not something Ash and I can relate to,' said Goodman, 'because our parents are as happy as clams.'

'Yup. Mom and Dad practically tongue kiss in front of us,' said Ash, pretending to be appalled but sounding proud.

The Wolf parents, glimpsed briefly by Julie on the first day of camp, were vigorous and youthful. Gil was an investment banker at the new firm Drexel Burnham and Betsy his artistically interested, pretty wife who cooked ambitious meals.

'The way you act, Figman,' Goodman continued, 'is all "I don't give a shit about my family," but in fact a shit is *given.* In fact you suffer, I think.'

'Not to move the conversation away from the tragedy of my broken home,' said Ethan, 'but there are far bigger tragedies we could discuss.'

'Like what?' said Goodman. 'Your weird name?'

'Or the My Lai massacre?' said Jonah.

'Oh, the folksinger's son brings up Vietnam whenever he can,' said Ethan.

'Shut up,' said Jonah, but he wasn't angry.

They were all quiet for a moment; it was perplexing to know what to do when atrocity suddenly came up against irony. Mostly, apparently, you were supposed to pause at that juncture. You paused and you waited it out, and then you went on to something else, even though it was awful. Ethan said, 'I'd like to say for the record that Ethan Figman is not such a terrible name. Goodman Wolf is much worse. It's like a name for a Puritan. *"Goodman Humility Wolf, thy presence is requested at the silo."'*

Julie, in her stoned state, had the idea that all this was *banter,* or the closest they could get to banter at their age. The level of actual wit here was low, but the apparatus of wit had been activated, readying itself for later on.

'There's a girl in our cousin's school in Pennsylvania,' Ash said, 'named Crema Seamans.'

'You made that up,' Cathy said.

'No, she didn't,' Goodman said. 'It's the truth.' Ash and Goodman looked suddenly earnest and serious. If they were performing a synchronized, sibling mindfuck, they had worked out a convincing routine.

'Crema Seamans,' Ethan repeated thoughtfully. 'It's like a soup made from . . . various semens. A *medley* of semens. It's a flavor of Campbell's soup that got discontinued immediately.'

'Stop it, Ethan, you're being totally graphic,' said Cathy Kiplinger.

'Well, he *is* a graphic artist,' said Goodman.

Everyone laughed, and then without warning Goodman jumped down from the upper bunk, shuddering the teepee. He planted himself on the bed at Cathy Kiplinger's feet, really *on* her feet, causing her to sit up in annoyance.

'What are you doing?' Cathy said. 'You're crushing me. And you smell. God, what is that, Goodman, *cologne*?'

'Yes. It's Canoe.'

'Well, I hate it.' But she didn't push him off. He lingered, taking her hand.

'Now let's all observe a moment of silence for Crema Seamans,' Julie heard herself say. She hadn't planned to say a word tonight; and as soon as she spoke, she feared she'd made a mistake inserting herself into this. *Into what?* she thought. Into *them.* But maybe she hadn't made a mistake. They were looking at her attentively, assessing her.

'The girl from Long Island speaks,' said Goodman.

'Goodman, that comment makes you seem kind of horrible,' said his sister.

'I am kind of horrible.'

'Well, it makes you seem kind of *Nazi* horrible,' said Ethan. 'As if you're using some sort of code to remind everyone that Julie's Jewish.'

'I'm Jewish too, Figman,' said Goodman. 'Just like you.'

'No, you're not,' said Ethan. 'Because even though your father is Jewish, your mother isn't. You have to have a Jewish mother, or else they will basically throw you off a cliff.'

'The Jews? They aren't a violent people. *They* didn't commit the My Lai massacre. I was just playing around,' Goodman said. 'Jacobson knows that, right? I was just goofing on her a little, right, Jacobson?'

Jacobson. She was excited to hear him call her that, though it was hardly what she'd imagined a boy might ever call her. Goodman looked at her and smiled, and she had to prevent herself from standing up and reaching out to touch the planes of his golden face; she'd never spent so much time this close to a boy who looked as magnificent as he did. Julie didn't even know what she was doing as she lifted her cup again, but he was still watching her, and so were the rest of them.

'O Crema Seamans, wherever thou art,' she said loudly, 'your life will be tragic. It will be cut short by an accident involving . . . animal desemenizing equipment.' This was a suggestive, nonsensical remark that included a made-up word, but there were approval sounds from around the teepee.

'See, I knew there was a reason I invited her in,' said Ash, turning to the others. ''Desemenizing.' Go, Jules!'

Jules. There it was, right there: the effortless shift that made all the difference. Shy, suburban nonentity Julie Jacobson, who had provoked *howls* for the first time in her life, had suddenly, lightly changed into *Jules,* which was a far better name for an awkward-looking fifteen-year-old girl who'd become desperate for people to pay attention to her. These people had no idea of what she was usually called; they'd hardly noticed her in these first days of camp, though of course she'd noticed them. In a new environment, it was possible to transform. *Jules,* Ash had called her, and instantly the others followed Ash's lead. She was Jules now, and would be Jules forever.

Jonah Bay pulled at the strings of his mother's old guitar. Susannah Bay had taught acoustic guitar at this camp in the late 1950s, before her son was born. Every summer since then, even after she became famous, she appeared at some point for an impromptu concert, and apparently this summer would be no exception. She would just show up one day, though no one knew when, not even her son. Now, Jonah began a few prefatory strums, followed by some fancy picking. He barely seemed to be paying attention to what he was doing; he was one of those people whose musical ability seems effortless, careless, ingrained.

'Wow,' Jules said, or just mouthed – she wasn't sure if the word had come out – as she watched him play. She imagined that he would become famous in several years like his mother; Susannah Bay would draw Jonah into her world, call him up onto a stage; it was inevitable. Now, when it seemed as if he might break into one of his mother's songs, like 'The Wind Will Carry Us,' he instead played 'Amazing Grace,' in honor of that girl from Goodman and Ash Wolf's cousin's school in Pennsylvania, who either did or did not exist.

They had only a little over an hour together, and then one of the counselors on coed patrol, a blunt-haired weaving instructor and lifeguard from Iceland named Gudrun Sigurdsdottir, came into the teepee with a bulky, indestructible flashlight that looked as if it were meant to be used during night ice fishing. She peered around and said, 'All right, my young friends, I

can tell that you have been smoking pot. That is not "cool," though you may think it is.'

'You're wrong, Gudrun,' said Goodman. 'It's just the scent of my Canoe.'

'Pardon?'

'My cologne.'

'No, you are having a pot party in here, I think,' she went on.

'Well,' said Goodman, 'it's true that there's been an herbal component. But now that you've made us see the error of our ways, it'll never happen again.'

'That is all well and good. But also, you are consorting with mixed sexes,' said Gudrun.

'We aren't consorting,' said Cathy Kiplinger, who had rearranged herself on the bed right beside Goodman, neither of them appearing flustered to be seen so close together.

'Oh no? Then tell me what you are doing.'

'We're having a meeting,' said Goodman, lifting himself up on one elbow.

'I know when my leg is being pulled on,' said Gudrun.

'No, no, it's true. We've formed this group, and it's going to be a lifelong thing,' said Jonah.

'Well,' said Gudrun, 'I do not want to see you sent home. Please break this up now. And, all you girls, please go back through the pines at once.'

So the three girls left, heading away from the teepee in a slow, easy herd with their flashlights leading them. Jules, walking down the path, heard someone say 'Julie?' so she stopped and turned, training her light on the person, who was revealed to be Ethan Figman, who had followed her. 'I mean, Jules?' he said. 'I wasn't sure which name you preferred.'

'Jules is fine.'

'Okay. Well, Jules?' Ethan came closer and stood so near to her that she felt she could see right into him. The other girls kept walking ahead without her. 'Are you a little less high now?' he asked.

'Yes, thanks.'

'There ought to be a control. A knob on the side of your head that you could turn.'

'That would be good,' she said.

'Can I show you something?' he asked.

'Your head knob?'

'Ha-ha. No. Come with me. I'll be quick.'

She let herself be led down the hill toward the animation shed. Ethan Figman opened the unlocked door; inside, the shed smelled plasticky, slightly scorched, and he threw on the fluorescent lights, which stuttered the room into its full majesty. Drawings were tacked up everywhere, a testament to the work of this freakishly gifted fifteen-year-old boy, with some nominal attention given to the work of other animation students.

Ethan threaded a projector, then shut off the lights. 'See,' he said, 'what I'm about to show you are the contents of my brain. Since I was a little kid, I've been lying in bed at night imagining an animated cartoon that plays in my head. Here's the premise: There's this shy, lonely little kid called Wally Figman. He lives with his parents, who are always fighting, who are basically horrible, and he hates his life. So every night, when he's finally alone in his room, he takes out a shoe box from under his bed, and inside it is this tiny little planet, this parallel world called Figland.' He looked at her. 'Should I go on?'

'Of course,' she said.

'So one night Wally Figman actually finds that he's able to go *into* the shoe box; his body shrinks down and he enters that little world. And instead of being this nobody anymore, he's a grown man who *controls* all of Figland. There's a corrupt government in the Fig House – that's where the president lives – and Wally has to fix it. Oh, and did I say that the cartoon is funny? It's a comedy. Or it's supposed to be, anyway. You get the idea, I think. Or maybe you don't.' Jules started to reply, but Ethan kept talking nervously. 'Anyway, that's what *Figland* is, and I don't even know why I want to show it to you, but I do, and here it is,' he said. 'It just occurred to me in the teepee tonight that there was a slight possibility that you and I had something in common. You know, a sensibility. And that maybe you might like this. But

I'm warning you that you might also really, really hate it. Anyway, be honest. Sort of,' he added with an anxious laugh.

A cartoon sprang up on a sheeted wall. 'FIGLAND,' read the credits, and antic characters began to prance and splat and jabber, speaking in voices that all sounded a little bit like Ethan. The characters on the planet Figland were alternately wormy, phallic, leering, and adorable, while in the excess light from the projector Ethan himself was touchingly ugly, with a raw sheath of arm skin etched with its own ugly dermatological cartoon. On Figland, characters rode trolleys, played the accordion on street corners, and a few of them broke into the Figmangate Hotel. The dialogue was sharp and silly at the same time. Ethan had even created a Figland version of Spirit-in-the-Woods – Figment-in-the-Woods – with younger versions of these same cartoon characters at summer camp. Jules watched as they built a bonfire, then paired off to make out and even, in one case, have sex. She was mortified by the humpy, jerking movements and the sweat that flew in the air, meant to signify *exertion,* but her mortification was immediately painted over by awe. No wonder Ethan was beloved here at camp. He was a genius, she saw now. His cartoon was mesmerizing – very clever, and very funny. It came to an end and the film flip-flapped on its reel.

'God, Ethan,' Jules said to him. 'It's amazing. It's totally original.'

He turned to her, his expression bright and uncomplicated. This was an important moment for him, but she didn't even understand why. Incredibly, her opinion seemed to matter to him. 'You really think it's good?' Ethan asked. 'I mean, not just *technically* good, because a lot of people have that; you should see what Old Mo Templeton can do. He was sort of an honorary member of Disney's Nine Old Men. He was basically the Tenth Old Man.'

'This is probably really stupid of me,' said Jules, 'but I don't know what that means.'

'Oh, no one around here knows. There were nine animators who worked with Walt Disney on the classics – movies like *Snow White.* Mo came in late, but he was apparently in the room a lot too. Every summer since I've been coming here, he's taught me everything, and I mean everything.'

'It shows,' said Jules. 'I love it.'

'I did all the voices too,' Ethan said.

'I can tell. It could be in a movie theater or on TV. The whole thing is wonderful.'

'I'm so glad,' Ethan said. He just stood before her smiling, and she smiled too. 'What do you know,' he said in a softer, husky voice. 'You love it. *Jules Jacobson loves it.*' Just as she was enjoying hearing the strange name said aloud, and realizing that already it had become a far more comfortable name for her than dumb old *Julie Jacobson,* Ethan did the most astonishing thing: he thrust his big head toward hers, bringing his bulky body forward too, pressing himself upon her as if to line up all their parts. His mouth attached itself to hers; she'd already been aware that he smelled of pot, but up against her he smelled worse – mushroomy, feverish, overripe.

She yanked her head back, and said, 'Wait, *what*?' He had probably reasoned that they were at the same level – he was popular here but still a little bit gross; she was unknown and frizzy-headed and plain, but had captured everyone's attention and approval. They could join together, they could *unite.* People would accept them as a couple; it made both logical and aesthetic sense. Though she'd gotten her head free, his body was still pressed against her, and that was when she felt the lump of him – 'a lump of *coal*,' she could say to the other girls in her teepee, eliciting laughs. 'It's like, what's that poem in school – 'My Last Duchess'?' she would tell them, because at least this would demonstrate some knowledge of something. 'This was "My First Penis."' Jules backed up several inches from Ethan so that no part of her was in contact with any part of him. 'I'm really sorry,' she said. Her face was hot; certainly it must have been turning red in various places.

'Oh, forget it,' Ethan said in a hoarse voice, and then she saw his expression simply change, as if he'd made a decision to switch over into the self-protective mode of irony. 'You have nothing to feel sorry about. I think I'll find a way to live. A way not to *commit suicide* because you didn't want to make out with me, Jules.' She didn't say anything, but just looked downward at her feet in their yellow clogs on the dusty shed floor. For a second she thought he was going to turn away furiously and leave her here, and she would have to head back through the trees alone. Jules saw herself

stumbling over exposed tree roots, and eventually Gudrun Sigurdsdottir's sturdy flashlight would be used to find her in the woods, where she would be sitting against a tree, shaking. But then Ethan said, 'I don't want to be a dick about this. I mean, people have been rejected by other people since the dawn of time.'

'I've never rejected anyone before in my life,' Jules said fiercely. 'Although,' she added, 'I've never accepted anyone before either. What I mean is, it's never come up.'

'Oh,' he said. He stayed by her side as they trudged back up the hill together. When they reached the top, Ethan turned to her, and she expected to be met with something sarcastic, but instead he said, 'Maybe the reason you don't want to do this with me isn't even because of *me*.'

'What do you mean?'

'You say you haven't rejected or accepted anyone before,' he said. 'You are one hundred percent inexperienced. So maybe you're just nervous. Your nervousness could be masking your real feelings.'

'You think so?' she asked, doubtful.

'Could be. It happens to girls sometimes,' he added, overstating his worldliness. 'So I have a proposition for you.' Jules waited. '*Reconsider*,' Ethan said. 'Spend more time with me and let's see what happens.'

It was such a reasonable request. She could spend more time with Ethan Figman, experimenting with the idea of being part of a couple. Ethan was special, and she did like being singled out by him. He was a genius, and that counted for a great deal with her, she understood. 'All right,' she finally told him.

'Thank you,' said Ethan. 'To be continued,' he added cheerfully.

Only when he'd dropped her off at her own teepee did he leave her. Jules went inside and stood getting ready for bed, pulling off her T-shirt and unhooking her bra. Across the teepee Ash Wolf was already in bed, encased in her sleeping bag that was red flannel lined, with a repeating pattern of cowboys swinging lariats. Jules intuited that at one point it had probably belonged to her brother.

'So where were you?' Ash asked.

'Oh, Ethan Figman wanted to show me one of his films. And then we started talking, and it just got – it's hard to explain.'

Ash said, 'That sounds mysterious.'

'No, it was nothing,' said Jules. 'I mean, it was something, but it was strange.'

'I know what they're like,' Ash said.

'What what are like?'

'Those moments of strangeness. Life is full of them,' Ash said.

'What do you mean?'

'Well,' said Ash, and she got out of her own bed and came to sit beside Jules. 'I've always sort of felt that you prepare yourself over the course of your whole life for the big moments, you know? But when they happen, you sometimes feel totally unready for them, or even that they're not what you thought. And that's what makes them *strange.* The reality is really different from the fantasy.'

'That's true,' Jules said. 'That's just what happened to me.' She looked with surprise at the pretty girl sitting on her bed; it seemed that this girl understood her, even though Jules had told her nothing. The whole evening was taking on various exquisite meanings.

A first kiss, Jules had thought, was supposed to magnetize you to the other person; the magnet and the metal were meant to fuse and melt on contact into a sizzling brew of silver and red. But this kiss had done nothing like that. Jules would have liked to tell Ash all about it now. She recognized that that is how friendships begin: one person reveals a moment of strangeness, and the other person decides just to listen and not exploit it. Their friendship did begin that night; they talked in this oblique way about themselves, and then Ash began struggling to scratch a mosquito bite on her shoulder blade, but she could hardly reach it, and she asked Jules if she could put some calamine lotion on it for her. Ash yanked down the collar of her nightgown in back, and Jules dotted on some of the bright pink fluid, which had the most recognizable odor imaginable, appetizing and overbearing at the same time.

'Why do you think calamine lotion smells like that?' Jules asked. 'Is it the *real* smell, or did some chemists just come up with this random smell for it in the laboratory, and now everyone thinks it's what it actually has to smell like?'

'Huh,' said Ash. 'No idea.'

'Maybe it's like pineapple Lifesavers,' Jules said.

'What are you talking about?'

'Well, they don't taste like actual pineapple at all. But we've gotten so used to it that we've come to think that that's the *real* taste, you know? And actual pineapple has basically fallen by the wayside. Except maybe in Hawaii.' She paused and said, 'I would give anything to try poi. Ever since I learned the word in fourth grade. You eat it with your hands.'

Ash just looked at her, and began to smile. 'Those are kind of weird observations, Jules,' she said. 'But in a good way. You're funny,' she added in a thoughtful voice, yawning. 'Everyone thought so tonight.' But it seemed as if *funny* was a distinct relief to Ash Wolf. Funny was the thing, other than calamine lotion, that she needed from Jules. Ash's family and her world were high-test, and here was this funny girl who was amusing and soothing and *touching,* really, in her awkwardness and her willingness. Nearby, the other girls in the teepee were having their own involved conversation, but Jules barely heard anything they said. They were just background noise, and the central drama was here between herself and Ash Wolf. 'You definitely make me crack up,' said Ash, 'but promise you won't make me *crack up*.' Jules didn't know what she meant, and then she did: Ash had awkwardly tried to make a joke, a pun. 'You know – don't ever make me go insane,' Ash explained, and Jules politely smiled and promised she wouldn't.

Distantly Jules thought of the girls she'd been friends with at home – their mildness, their loyalty. She saw all of them marching to their lockers at school, their corduroy jeans swishing, their hair fastened with barrettes or rubber bands or let loose in wild perms. All of them together, unnoticed, invisible. It was as though she was saying good-bye to those other girls now, here in the teepee with Ash Wolf sitting on her bed.

But the newly forming friendship was paused briefly by the presence of

Cathy Kiplinger, who moved into the center of the teepee, taking off her own big, complicated bra and unharnessing her duo of woman-sized breasts, distracting Jules with the thought that these spheres inside this conical building were the equivalent of a square peg in a round hole. Jules wished Cathy weren't here at all, and that Jane Zell wasn't here either, or somber-faced Nancy Mangiari, who sometimes played the cello as if she were performing at the funeral of a child.

If it were just Jules and Ash, she would have told her everything. But the other girls were circling, and now Cathy Kiplinger, dressed only in a long pink T-shirt, was passing around a huckleberry crumble purchased at the bakery in town that afternoon, and a warped fork from the dining hall. Someone – could it have been silent Nancy? Or maybe Cathy? – said, 'God, it tastes like sex!' and everyone laughed, including Jules, who wondered if sex, when it was really good, actually offered the pleasures of a huckleberry crumble – all goo and give.

The subject of Ethan Figman was now lost for the night. The crumble went around a few times, and everyone's lips became tribally blue, and then the girls lay down in their separate beds and Jane Zell told them about her twin sister who had a shocking neurological disorder that sometimes caused her to slap herself in the face over and over.

'Oh my God,' said Jules. 'How awful.'

'She'll be sitting there, just totally calm,' said Jane, 'and she suddenly starts to smack herself. Wherever we go, she makes a scene. People freak out when they see it. It's horrible, but I'm used to it by now.'

'You get used to whatever you get,' Cathy said, and they all agreed. 'Like, I'm a dancer,' Cathy continued, 'but I have these enormous boobs. It's like carrying around sacks of mail. But what am I supposed to do? I still want to be a dancer.'

'And you should try to do what you want,' Jules said. 'We should all try to do whatever we want in life,' she added with sudden and unexpected conviction. 'I mean, what is the point otherwise?'

'Nancy, why don't you take out your cello and play us something,' Ash said. 'Something with atmosphere. Mood music.'

Even though it was late, Nancy got her cello from the storage area and sat on the edge of her bed, her bare legs opened wide, intently playing the first movement of a cello suite by Benjamin Britten. As Nancy played, Cathy stood on someone's camp trunk, her head perilously near the slant of the ceiling, and she began to perform a slow, free-form routine like a go-go dancer in a cage. 'This is what guys like,' Cathy said confidently. 'They want to see you move. They want your boobs to swing a little, as if you could hit them in the head with them and knock them unconscious. They want you to behave like you have *power,* but also like you know they'd win the battle if it ever came down to it. They are so predictable; all you have to do is move your hips in a kind of swivel, and get a kind of jiggle rhythm going, and they're completely under the influence. It's like they're cartoon characters with eyeballs popping out of their heads on springs. Like something Ethan would draw.' Beneath the pink T-shirt her body moved in snake segments, and once in a while the shirt would ride up so that the vaguest hint of pubic darkness was revealed.

'We are the modern music and porn teepee!' Nancy cried with glee. 'A full-service teepee, to meet every male's artistic and perverted needs!'

All the girls felt fired up, overstimulated. The stark music and the laughter, drifting from the teepee and scribbling among the trees, headed toward the boys, a message in the darkness before lockdown. Jules thought of how she was nothing like Ethan Figman. But she was nothing like Ash Wolf either. She existed somewhere on the axis *between* Ethan and Ash, slightly disgusting, slightly desirable – not yet claimed by one side or the other. It was right not to have agreed to go over to Ethan's side just because he had wanted her to. As he'd said, she had nothing to feel sorry about.

Over the following few weeks of the eight-week season, Jules and Ethan spent a great deal of time alone together. When she wasn't with Ash, she was with him. Once, sitting with him by the swimming pool at dusk, with a couple of bats soaring around the chimney of the Wunderlichs' big gray house across the road, she told him about her father's death. 'Wow,

he was only forty-two?' Ethan said, shaking his head. 'Jesus, Jules, that's so young. And it's just so sad that you'll never see him again. He was your *dad*. He probably used to sing you all these little songs, am I right?'

'No,' said Jules. She let her fingers drape through the cold water. But then suddenly she remembered that her father had sung her one song, once. 'Yes,' she said, surprised. 'One. It was a folk song.'

'Which one?'

She began to sing in an unsteady voice:

' Just a little rain falling all around,
The grass lifts its head to the heavenly sound,
Just a little rain, just a little rain,
What have they done to the rain?'

She stopped abruptly. 'Go on,' Ethan said, and so, embarrassed, Jules continued:

' Just a little boy standing in the rain,
The gentle rain that falls for years.
And the grass is gone,
The boy disappears,
And rain keeps falling like helpless tears,
And what have they done to the rain?'

When she was finished, Ethan just kept looking at her. 'That killed me,' he said. 'Your voice, the lyrics, the whole thing. You know what that song's about, right?'

'Acid rain, I think?' she said.

He shook his head. 'Nuclear testing.'

'Do you know *everything*?'

He shrugged, pleased. 'See,' he told her, 'I heard that back when it was written, when Kennedy was president, the government had been doing all this aboveground nuclear testing, which put strontium ninety into the air.

And the rain washed it down into the ground, and it got into the grass, where all the cows ate it and then gave milk, which children drank. Little radioactive children. So this was a protest song. Your dad was political? A lefty?' he said. 'That's very cool. My dad is a bitter slug ever since my mom left. You know the fighting that Wally Figman's parents do in my cartoons? The shrieking and wailing? I think you can guess where I get my ideas.'

'My father wasn't political,' said Jules. 'And he definitely wasn't a lefty, at least not in a big way. I mean, he was a Democrat, but he certainly wasn't radical,' she said, with a laugh at the absurdity of this idea. But she clipped off her own laugh as she thought of how she hadn't known her father all that well. He had been Warren Jacobson, a quiet man, a ten-year employee of Clelland Aerospace. He'd once told his daughters, without their having asked, 'My job does not define me.' But Jules hadn't asked him what did define him. She had almost never asked him anything about himself. He was thin, fair-haired, burdened, and now he was dead at forty-two. So she began to get stirred up thinking of how she would never know him very well. And then she and Ethan were crying together, which led to inevitable kissing, which wasn't nearly as bad this time, because they both tasted identically of mucus, and it didn't matter to Jules that she didn't feel excited. Instead, she felt mostly desperate thinking about her father being dead. Ethan intuited that this was the exact kind of foreplay Jules Jacobson required.

They went along like this, and she came to expect that they would sometimes go off together and have such moments. In this and other ways, Jules's life was changing rapidly here, advancing like a flip-book. She'd been *no one*, and now she was right in the middle of this group of friends, admired for her previously unknown sly humor. Jules was a source of interest to all of them, and she was Ash's great friend and Ethan's object of worship. Also, since she'd been here, she'd instantly become an *actress,* trying out for plays and getting parts. She hadn't even wanted to audition at first. 'I'm not nearly as good as you,' she'd said to Ash, but Ash had advised, 'You know the way you are when you're with all of us? How great it is? Just be that way onstage. Come out of yourself. You have nothing to lose, Jules. I mean, if not now, when?'

The theater department would be putting on Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*, and Jules was given the part of Grandma. She played the role as an ancient but lively crone, talking in a voice that she didn't know she had. Ethan had given her voice lessons, telling her how he came up with voices for *Figland*. 'What you want to do,' he'd said, 'is speak it exactly the way you hear it in your head.' She played a woman older than anyone she'd ever known; at the performance, two actors carried her onstage and set her down gently. Even before Jules started speaking, but just made vague cud-chewing facial movements, the audience began to laugh, and the laughter fed upon itself in the way it sometimes did, so that by the time she spoke her first line, a couple of people in the audience were snorting in laughter, and one excitable counselor almost seemed to be shrieking. Jules *killed,* everyone said when it was over. She absolutely killed.

The laughter seduced her that time and every time afterward. It made her stronger, more serious, poker-faced, determined. Later, Jules would think that the rolling, appreciative laughter of the audience at Spirit-in-the-Woods had cured her of the sad year she'd just gotten through. But it wasn't the only element that had cured her; the whole place had done that, as though it was one of those nineteenth-century European mineral spas.

One night, the entire camp was instructed to gather on the lawn; no other information was given. 'I bet the Wunderlichs are going to announce that there's been an outbreak of syphilis,' someone said.

'Or maybe it's a tribute to Mama Cass,' someone else said. The singer Cass Elliot of the Mamas and the Papas had died a few days earlier, supposedly having choked to death on a ham sandwich. The ham sandwich would turn out to be a rumor, but the death was real.

'When is it going to start? The natives are restless,' said Jonah as they all waited.

Ethan and Jules sat together on a blanket on the hill and waited. He leaned his head against her shoulder, wanting to see what she would do; at first, she did nothing. Then he moved his head down into her lap, settling himself in and looking up at the darkening sky and the jumpy Japanese lanterns strung on wires between trees. As if cued to do so, Jules began to

stroke his head of curls, and each time she did, his eyes closed in happiness.

Manny Wunderlich appeared before everyone and said, 'Hello, hello! I know you're all wondering what's going on, and so without further ado I'd like to introduce our very special surprise guest.'

'Look,' said Ash from down the row, and Jules craned between the people in front of her to see a woman in a sunset-colored poncho carrying a guitar by its neck, picking her way across the grass to take her place on a platform. It was Jonah's famous folksinger mother, Susannah Bay! In person she was beautiful in the way of very few mothers, her hair long and black and straight – the opposite of Jules's mother with her acorn-cap hairdo and Dacron pantsuits. The crowd cheered her.

'Good evening, Spirit-in-the-Woods,' said the folksinger into a microphone when everyone was quiet. 'Are you having a great summer?' A series of affirmative calls rose up. 'Believe me, I know this is the best place on earth. I spent a couple of summers here too. Nothing is as close to heaven as this little patch of land.' Then she strummed hard on her guitar and began to sing. In person her voice was as strong as it sounded on her albums. She sang several songs that everyone knew, and some folk standards to which the audience was invited to sing along. Before her last song, she said, 'I've brought an old friend with me tonight who happened to be in the neighborhood, and I'd like to invite him to join me now. Barry, would you come on up? Barry Claimes, everybody!'

To applause, the terrier-bearded folksinger Barry Claimes, formerly of the sixties trio the Whistlers, and, as it happened, briefly Susannah Bay's boyfriend back in the summer of '66, came up beside her with a banjo strapped around him. 'Hello, my lads and ladies!' he called out to the crowd. Though the Whistlers had all worn peaked caps and turtlenecks in concert and on their album covers, Barry had abandoned both when he struck out on his own in 1971. These days, he tucked his wavy brown hair behind his ears and wore soft, checkered shirts that made him look like a mild mountaineer. He waved modestly to the campers and then began to play his banjo while Susannah played her guitar. The two instruments came together and

then backed off shyly, then came together again, finally forming the preamble to Susannah's signature song. Quietly at first, then more forcefully, she began to sing:

'I've been walkin' through the valley, and I've been walkin' through the weeds
And I've been tryin' to understand just why I could not meet your needs.
Did you want me to be like she was?
Is that all that was in your heart?
A prayer that the wind would carry us . . .
Carry us . . . apart . . .'

After the performance, which was full of feeling and warmly received, everyone stood around and ladled up pink punch from a big metal bowl. Tiny fruit flies twittered on the surface of the punch, but mostly no one could see the rest of the bugs in the descending dark. The number of them ingested that summer was formidable: bugs in punch bowls, in salads, even scarfed down on the inhale in openmouthed sleep at night. Susannah Bay and Barry Claimes mingled with the campers. The two old friends and ex-lovers, moving among the crowd of teenagers, looked happy, flushed, natural – elder-statesman countercultural figures who were treated with appreciation.

'Where's Jonah?' someone asked. A girl said she'd heard he'd slipped out during his mother's concert and gone to his teepee, complaining of nausea; several people said it was a shame he didn't feel well on this night of all nights. Looking at Susannah, it was easy to see the origins of Jonah's beauty, though it was more tentative and unassuming in its boy form.

Jules felt excited and stiff standing not too far from Jonah's mother. 'I've never been near someone *famous*,' she whispered to Ethan, knowing that she sounded like a hick but not minding. She was relaxed around Ethan by now, and she was also relaxed around Ash. It still shocked Jules that the lovely, delicate, sophisticated girl in her teepee chose to spend so much time with

her, but their friendship was indisputably easy, open, and real. At night Ash sat at the foot of Jules's bed before they went to sleep; Jules cracked her up often but listened well to her too; Ash was observant and offered guidance about a range of subjects, though never bossily. They sometimes whispered for so long after lights-out that the other girls had to shush them.

Now, after the concert, Ethan sipped his punch like it was brandy from a snifter, and when he was done he tossed his paper cup into a bin, and dropped his arm upon Jules's shoulder. 'The way Susannah sings "The Wind Will Carry Us" is so sad,' he murmured.

'Yeah, it really is.'

'It makes me think of the way people devote their lives to each other, and then one of them just leaves, or even dies.'

'I hadn't thought of it that way,' said Jules, who had never understood those lyrics, in particular how a single wind could carry two people apart. 'I know this sounds picky, but wouldn't the wind carry them *together*?' she asked. 'It's *one* breeze. It just blows one way, not two.'

'Huh. Let me think about it.' He thought briefly. 'You're right. It doesn't make sense. But still, it's very melancholy.'

He was somber, watching her, seeing if the melancholy mood could make her respond to him again. When he kissed her moments later as they stood slightly away from everyone else, she didn't stop him. He was ready, like a doctor who's given his patient a little bit of an allergen in the hopes of triggering a reaction. He wrapped his arms around her, and Jules willed herself to want him as her boyfriend, for he was brilliant and funny and would always be kind to her and would always be ardent. But all she could feel was that he was her *friend*, her wonderful and gifted friend. She had tried so hard to respond to him, but she knew now that it probably wouldn't ever happen. 'I can't keep trying,' she said all in a flood, unplanned. 'It's too hard. It's not what I want to do.'

'You don't know what you want,' said Ethan. 'You're confused, Jules. You've had a major loss this year. You're still feeling it in stages – Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and all that. Hey,' he added, 'she's got an umlaut too.'

'This isn't about my father, okay, Ethan?' Jules said, a little too loud, and a few people looked over at them in curiosity.

'Okay,' Ethan said. 'I hear what you're saying.'

Galloping into the lantern light at that moment came Goodman Wolf, along with a pouting ceramicist from Girls' Teepee 4 who always had clay under her fingernails. They stopped on the edge of the circle and the girl tipped her head up toward his, and Goodman leaned down and then they kissed, their faces both dramatically lit. Jules watched as Goodman's mouth pulled away with what she could swear, even from a distance, was a smear of the girl's colorless lip gloss on his lips, like butter, like a prize. Jules imagined exchanging Ethan's face and body parts with those of Goodman. She even imagined debasing herself with Goodman in some crude, Figland-type way. She pictured cartoon drops of sweat flying out from their joined and suddenly naked selves. Thinking about this, she was suffused with a blast of sensation like the light from Ethan's projector. Feelings could come over you in a sudden wild sweep; this was something she was learning at Spirit-in-the-Woods. She could never be Ethan Figman's girlfriend, and she was right to have told him she would no longer try. It would have been exciting to be Goodman Wolf's girlfriend, of course, but that wasn't going to happen either, ever. There would be no pairing off this summer, no passionate subsets formed, and though in some ways this was sad, in other ways it was such a relief, for now they could return to the boys' teepee, the six of them, and take their places in that perfect, unbroken, lifelong circle. The whole teepee would quake, as though their kind of irony, and their kind of conversation and friendship, was so strong it could actually make a small wooden building chug and sway in preparation for liftoff.

TWO

Talent, that slippery thing, had been the frequent subject of dinner conversation between Edie and Manny Wunderlich for over half a century. They never tired of it, and if someone studied word frequency in the dialogue of this now elderly couple, they might note that *talent* kept appearing; though really, Manny Wunderlich thought as he sat in the underheated dining room of the big gray house off-season, occasionally when they said it, they meant 'success.'

'She became a great talent,' his wife was saying as she served him a spoonful of potato, banging the spoon against his plate to release it, though it apparently did not want to be released. When they first met in Greenwich Village at a party in 1946, she was a modern dancer, and she leapt around her bedroom on Perry Street wearing just a bedsheet, with ivy twined in her hair. In bed, the callused bottoms of her feet were sharp against his legs. Edie was a gorgeous, avant-garde girl back in the day when that could be a full-time occupation, but in marriage she slowly became less wild. To Manny's great disappointment, though, her domestic skills didn't rise to the fore as her sexual and artistic ones receded. Edie proved to be a dreadful cook, and throughout their life together the food she prepared was often like poison. When they opened Spirit-in-the-Woods in 1952, they both knew that finding an excellent cook would be essential to the enterprise. If the food wasn't good, then no one would want to come. Edie's shy second cousin Ida Steinberg, a survivor of 'that other kind of camp,' as someone had tastelessly said, was hired; and in the summertime the Wunderlichs ate like royalty, but in the off-season, when Ida only worked occasionally, for special events, they generally ate like two people in a gulag. Glutinous stews, potatoes in various iterations. The food was bad but the conversation was vigorous as they sat and talked about many of the campers who had come through these stone gates and slept in these teepees.

Lately, as the year 2009 came to a close, they could no longer remember all of them, or even most of them, but the coin-bright ones shone through the murk of the Wunderlichs' memory.

Manny had unconsciously begun grouping the campers over the decades into categories. All he needed was a name, and then the thought process and classification could begin. '*Who* became a great talent?' he asked.

'Mona Vandersteen. You remember her. She came for three summers.'

Mona Vandersteen? *Dance*, he suddenly thought. 'Dance?' he said tentatively.

His wife looked at him, frowning. Her hair was as white as his hair and his out-of-control eyebrows, and he could not believe that this thick, tough old pigeon was the same girl who'd loved him the way she had done back on Perry Street just after the Second World War. The girl who'd sat on a bed with a white iron headboard and parted her labia in front of him; he had never before *seen* such a sight, and his knees had almost given out. She had sat there, opening herself like little curtains and smiling at him as though this was the most natural behavior in the world. He'd just stared at her, and she'd said, 'Well? Come on!' without any indication of shyness.

Like a giant Manny had crossed the room in one big step, throwing himself upon her, his hands trying to part her further, to split her and yet own her at the same time – conflicting goals that somehow got worked out over the next hour in that bed. She grasped the rails of the headboard; she opened and closed her legs upon him. He thought she might kill him accidentally or on purpose. She was wild that day and for a long time afterward, but then eventually the wildness faded.

The only part that now remained of that slight, flexible girl was the cheese-grater texture of the heels of her feet. Her body had been stocky since the early 1960s, and it wasn't childbirth that had done this; the Wunderlichs had been unable to conceive, and though there was pain in this fact, it had been blunted over time by all the teenagers who came through Spirit-in-the-Woods. Edie, back in late middle age, seemed to have been physically rebuilt in the image of a pyramid; no, she was built, Manny realized one day, like one of the teepees they could see out their window across the road – one

of the teepees that had lasted all this time and never needed repair, never needed *anything*, because they were so primitive and basic and self-contained.

'Mona Vandersteen was not a dancer,' Edie said now. 'Think again.'

Manny closed his eyes and thought. Various girls from camp obediently appeared before him like the Muses: dancers, actresses, musicians, weavers, glassblowers, printmakers. He pictured one particular girl with her arms thrust into a bucket of purple dye. Now he felt an old twitch and stir in his hiked-up trousers, though this was only phantom-limb arousal, since he was on hormones for prostate cancer and had budding breasts like a girl and hot flashes of the kind that his fairly stupid mother used to complain about as she fanned herself with a copy of *Silver Screen* magazine in their Brooklyn apartment. Manny was a physical disaster now, chemically *castrated* – his young doctor had actually, cheerfully used that word – and almost nothing got him going anymore. He thought of the name Mona Vandersteen, and a new image rushed to meet him.

'Yes, she had wavy blond hair,' he said to his wife with false certainty. 'Back in the 1950s, she was one of the earliest group of campers. Played flute and went on to join . . . the Boston Symphony Orchestra.'

'It was the sixties,' Edie said, seeming a little annoyed. 'And oboe.'

'What?'

'She played the oboe, not the flute. I remember this, because she had reed breath.'

'What is reed breath?'

'Didn't you ever notice that the woodwind players who use reeds always have a certain kind of bad breath? You never noticed this, Manny? Really?'

'No, Edie, I did not. I never noticed her breath, or anyone else's,' he said piously. 'I just remember that she was so talented.' Also he remembered that she'd had narrow hips and a big, pleasing ass, but this he did not add.

'Yes,' Edie said, 'she was very talented.' Together they ate their potatoes under a shimmer of brown sauce and individually thought of Mona Vandersteen, who had been so talented and who had gone on to greatness for a while. Though if she'd been in the Boston Symphony Orchestra all the way

back in the 1960s, then who knew what she did now, or if what she did was lie in her grave.

The Wunderlichs were older than everyone; they hovered like God and God's wife, white-headed, still living in the house across the road from the camp. The collapsing economy was terrible for all summer camps – who had seven thousand dollars to spend now so their kids could throw pots? A couple of years earlier they had hired a young, energetic man to do planning and run the day-to-day operations, but the sessions remained pitifully undersubscribed. They didn't know what they were going to do now, but they knew the situation wasn't good and that eventually it would reach a crisis.

Whatever happened, they would not sell the camp. They loved it too much for that; it was a little utopia, and the kids who came to it were self-selecting, always the same type – utopians themselves, in a way. The camp needed to remain intact, serving its valuable purpose of bringing art into the world, generation after generation.

Each Christmas, former campers crammed the Wunderlichs' mailbox with letters from their lives, and Edie or Manny walked slowly to the end of the driveway, opened the stiff door of the silver box, then brought the mail back inside the house, where Edie read the letters aloud to her husband. Sometimes she skipped lines or whole paragraphs when they grew too boring. Neither of them was particularly interested in the family lives of these former campers: where their children had been accepted to college; who had had a coronary bypass – *oh boo hoo,* everyone's life was hard, and if you'd survived the hardship, why write about it? Survival itself was enough. Sometimes Manny thought that the campers should have sent the Wunderlichs a pared-down, expurgated version of a Christmas letter, and all it would contain would be evidence of the great talent of that person. Slides, audio samples, manuscripts. Examples of what he or she had gone on to accomplish in the years and decades after leaving Spirit-in-the-Woods.

But here was where the question of talent became slippery, for who could say whether Spirit-in-the-Woods had ever pulled incipient talent out of a kid and activated it, or whether the talent had been there all along and would have come out even without this place. Most of the time Manny

Wunderlich took the former view, though lately, as his head and eyebrows gathered even more white hairs, giving him a snowy and deceptively mellow appearance, he thought that he and his wife had merely been like railroad conductors on a talent train, collecting the tickets of many brilliantly able kids as they passed through Belknap, Massachusetts, on their way to somewhere even better. He thought dispiritedly that the main thing Spirit-in-the-Woods had created in anyone was nostalgia. At the bottom of a card, a camper would write lines like:

> Dear Manny and Edie,
>
> I wanted you to know that I think about my summers at camp every day of my life. Though I have performed in Paris, Berlin, you name it, and though the Barranti Fellowship last year gave me the freedom to really concentrate on my libretto and not have to teach at the conservatory anymore, nothing has been as wonderful as Spirit-in-the-Woods. Nothing! I send you my love.

Whenever Manny Wunderlich became despondent, he sank into himself and felt his heart working hard, and he looked across the road and out over the winter lawn, where the tips of the teepees poked up. He felt himself falling, and only his wife's voice could pull him back, as though she were yanking him by his suspenders, or as though an earlier, sexually devilish version of her were bringing him back into vitality. 'Manny,' she said from across time. 'Manny.'

He looked up from behind the glaze of his failing eyes, into her eyes that were hard and blue. 'What?' he said.

'I saw you disappear,' she said. 'Let's talk about someone else. We received a very interesting card today. With one of those Christmas letters inside.'

'All right,' he said, waiting. Which former camper would he have to try and remember now? Would it be a flutist, a dancer, a singer, a designer of

surreal theater sets? All of them had passed through here at some point or another.

'You'll like this one,' said his wife. Then she smiled, her mouth appearing soft in a way it rarely did anymore. 'It's from Ethan and Ash.'

'Oh!' he said, and he was silent, appropriately reverent.

'I will read it to you,' she said.