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THE **BIG** PONDER

The Farm

By Erica Heilman

Erica Heilman: This is Ira Karp.

Ira Karp: On May 2007, there was a marriage of Maria and Josh.

Erica Heilman: Your parents?

Ira Karp: Yes. And Maria was about to have Ira in her belly. The baby, small Ira, was in the belly of Maria. And then, the midwives came and turned the baby right side out. And they said: "I think he has Down syndrome," means that he can't understand things. And it's hard for him to talk and baby language. And the midwives left.

Erica Heilman: And the midwives left?

Ira Karp: Yeah, yeah. And then, Maria was sad at first, but then, she got excited. And Maria and Joshua was on the sofa. And baby Ira and Maria was pushed her belly, and baby small Ira was out onto the sofa in Maria's hands. Arms. Yes, like that. Yeah. This is the story of Ira being born and the marriage.

Erica Heilman: That's Ira Karp telling the story of his own birth. He knows it by heart. He knows which grandparents showed up to greet the baby first. He knows who brought a lemon cheesecake. He can tell you who held him and where and in what order. Ira Karp collects stories. True stories and fairy tales and stories in songs. Stories with beginnings and middles and ends. Ira Karp is the maker of epic stories of the everyday. [SINGING] These are Ira's parents, Maria and Josh, singing to their sheep in the meadow out behind their barn just before the spring lambing season. They have a small farm in Northeast Vermont, a place we call "The Northeast Kingdom." It's a wild, deeply rural place – even for this rural state. The winters go on forever. Ira's grandfather, Peter Schumann, lives in the next town over. In addition to being Ira's grandfather, Peter Schumann is also the director of Bread and Puppet Theater, which is based in an old farmhouse. Ira spends a lot of time with his grandfather, making apple fritters on an old wood cookstove and telling stories about important things. Things like being born and getting lost and found in the woods and the death of people he loves. Here's Peter Schumann.

[SINGING ENDS]

Peter Schumann: *Grimms' Fairy Tales* is straight out of the guts of populations. Total brutality, total elations, total transformations. Rabbits are at least as big as kings. Mosquitoes are easily bigger than emperors. [LAUGHS] It's his world, you know. It's a huge world. This house for him is full of memories. There are masks here that he remembers from babyhood on as being scary to him that he knows are in that particular place on the wall. And he's afraid of that place. He doesn't want to go there. And he still is. He sees a demonic power in it, and he can't stand it. You know, the gigantic unknown thing that stares at you out of a face or a sculpture, and you don't know what it is. And he sees that.

[IRA AND PETER TELLING FAIRY TALES]

Ira Karp: When the moon was risen, Hansel took his Gretel sister by the hand and showed her how they could follow the pebbles.

Peter Schumann: [AS HANSEL] Oh, I see one!

Peter Schumann: [AS GRETEL] Yeah, I see another one.

Ira Karp: And they followed the pebbles, and they reached their cottage at daybreak.

Erica Heilman: Here's Ira's mom, Maria Schumann.

Maria Schumann: I think everybody loves stories. What's different about him than like a "regular kid" is that he dives deep into a story not for a day, not for week, but for months and maybe even years. Like he just dives deep into these stories. It all started with "Goldilocks." I think that was the first story, you know, and he would tell the "Goldilocks" story, and he just told it the regular old way. And then, he started switching it around. So, he would be like, "Mom, you're Goldilocks. And I'm the little bear." And then, he would have the characters be like his friends in school. And the idea for him that Olivia was going to play Goldilocks would just like bring him so much delight because he would think of this person that he loved being in his story. And that's a big part of it for him, I think.

Erica Heilman: Here's Ira's friend, Clare Dolan.

Clare Dolan: I think telling stories is a way that it's like a super basic human... You know, it's a thing that defines us as humans, the way that we tell stories, and it's our way of making sense of the world. I think it's our way of thinking. It's our way of understanding, by taking sort of sensory input and experience and sort of chaotic inputs and happenings, and we turn them into a sequence of events, and we attach pictures, you know, mental pictures to those sequences of events. And those become thoughts. Those become a way of understanding a thing. I just remember my dad reading *Charlotte's Web* to me when I was a little kid. He would read, he was a great reader, and he would use different voices for the different characters. He was very good at that. And he would get to the end of the chapter, and I would beg him to read another one, you know, "Just one more chapter, Dad! Half more! Three more pages!" You know, and I just remember desperately wanting more of the story. Like food or a drink of water or something like you just want the story. You want it.

Erica Heilman: Again, here's Maria. I mean after, okay, let's say after like four months of one story, do you get tired of the stories?

Maria Schumann: Oh yeah, definitely. I definitely get tired of the stories. But it's also... I have that little thing in my head where I'm like, "Oh, maybe we can make this into a show." So last year, we did that with "Rapunzel." So, every walk that we took was a "Rapunzel" walk for a really long time. And I was like, let's make it into a show, Ira. And so, we made it into a show, and it was really fun to do that. And we've done that with a few other things.

Erica Heilman: Where did you perform "Rapunzel?"

Maria Schumann: At Bread and Puppet, yeah. Outside on the circus field. And again, I was all the boring parts. I was the father and the prince, and he was everybody else.

[SOUND OF "RAPUNZEL" PERFORMANCE]

Ira Karp: Rapunzel, Rapunzel!

Maria Schumann: Use your imagination! He's now playing Rapunzel and the scary witch at the same time.

Ira Karp: Rapunzel, Rapunzel! Let down your hair!

[YOUNG IRA KARP INTERVIEWING PETER SCHUMANN]

Maria Schumann: Go ahead!

Ira Karp: Ok! Where were you born?

Peter Schumann: I was born in a little town called Lüben. L, U – with two dots over it – B, E, N in Silesia. That's in Germany.

Ira Karp: Also there was a big war...

Peter Schumann: It was starting just about then.

Maria Schumann: There is a different thing, though. He likes to talk about... I think because he's had some death – old age and death – in his life. He really, one of his favorite stories is talking about when you were younger. And he loves to talk about everything when you were younger. When you were younger, when we were younger, when grandpa was younger, when granny was younger – what happened and what did we do?

Ira Karp: When you were eleven years old, what was school like?

Peter Schumann: When I was eleven? I was what's called a "refugee." And it was like a refugee school. It was a village school. A one-room schoolhouse.

Ira Karp: What did you eat for breakfast?

[LAUGHTER]

Peter Schumann: When I was eleven years old, I think the main food was turnips. And we were sick and tired because my mom had only turnips. And everything was turnips.

Ira Karp: What did you eat for lunch?

[LAUGHTER]

Peter Schumann: Definitely turnips.

Ira Karp: Next question. What did you eat for supper?

[LAUGHTER]

Peter Schumann: It was called the simple life. It wasn't a good life, but it was a simple life. Turnips.

Ira Karp: What was your favorite subject?

Peter Schumann: Probably fairy tales. *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. [LAUGHTER] We happened to have one Grimms' fairy tale book that we took along as kids. So, we knew them by heart...

Ira Karp: Next question! What activities did you do after school?

Erica Heilman: There was a book.

Peter Schumann: Yes, it's true. It was *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. When we did our various attempts to try to get away by train from Wrocław and didn't succeed and had to go back home because there was no chance, and the next train was no earlier than three hours later. Every time we went back, my parents diminished their luggage that we had. Every time we came back. But the final luggage on the last attempt allowed each kid to have a little bag. And we had bags before. For example, it was a big suitcase of silver spoons that we, my parents, abandoned. They said: "No, that makes no sense. We won't be able to get it on the train. It's too heavy, too big, what have you." So, when we came back, they buried that thing in the garden. Yeah, but the hand puppets – I had a little collection of hand puppets from my parents' puppeteer friends. And my brother had a big volume of Brother Grimm [SIC] fairy tales. And he was allowed that. And the fairy tales, they were our literature, it was the only book we had. And light was restricted to only daytime, it was wintertime, so very short days, long nights up there in the North. And no candles, no nothing. So basically, we kids – five kids in a little room together – we simply learned all the fairy tales by heart. So, when we started telling us a tale, and somebody stopped, another kid would come in and say the rest of it. We virtually knew them by heart, these tales that were in that volume, you know. And that was our literature, instead of NBC, ABC, DBB, bah bah bah, boo boo boo. [LAUGHTER] Lying in the dark and reciting fairy tales to each other. No, that's unforgettable for me. And how powerful that was for me because I still think of that as the greatest literature, way superior to the Bible and the Bible stories and the other mythologies that are being taught as the best mythologies.

[PETER ADDS WOOD TO THE FIRE]

Peter Schumann: Wood, how are you doing? Fire, how are you doing? Ok, ok...

Clare Dolan: Life is harrowing. So, we need to have stories that are harrowing, and it's kind of a rehearsal. It's a way of like rehearsing the experience of tragedy and violence and despair and horror that are part of life. So, you can get it in a story. It's like a mini-rehearsal. And then, you see how it's a thing that can be told. And then, it's less terrifying or something or it's a way of being able to practice managing those things in life, right? Like, "Oh my God, I've been left out in the middle of the woods, abandoned by my parents." I don't know. I feel like it's like dreams. Dreams are sometimes for me, rehearsals for, you know, practices for dealing with the trials and tribulations of daily life. And my dreams are often a lot like *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, like, "Oh, the crow ate my hand off. Now, how will I drive to work?" You know, you've got to prepare for that. Shit happens all the time.

[LAUGHTER]

Ira Karp: And so during the night, when the parents were asleep, Hansel woke up, put on his jacket, and stole outside. The moon was shining brightly, and the pebbles were on the ground like silver pennies. Hansel had to pick them up, and he stuffed his pocket with them. Then, he went back inside and went back to bed.

Peter Schumann: Let's sleep a little more ok? [SNORING]

Ira Karp: In the morning before the rooster crows, the stepmother came to wake the two children. She ordered them to make the kids get up out of bed.

Clare Dolan: I think Ira's a very lucky child because he's surrounded by a lot of people who love him dearly and are interested in having conversations with him and interested in hanging out with him. And perhaps, he sees it as sort of this beautiful smorgasbord of characters who, you know, appear and disappear and show up for dinner. And, you know, who he runs into in the village, you know, general store, and so, we're sort of like this vast cast of characters. And many of us are quite eccentric. [LAUGHTER] And, you know, so I think that's one part of his world. And I also think, you know, living here and the farm – and it's a farm and an orchard. So, there's sheep and, at this time of year, there's new lambs being born. And there's often pigs and chickens and roosters. And you often feel like a tiny human who's been dropped into this enormous landscape. And you become very aware of yourself as a small person against a mountain and a forest and this huge field that you have to walk across. And then, with the weather here, that even becomes more intensified. It's unpredictable. And it can be powerful, like overpowering, you're immersed in an environment that's a little bit closer to the unpredictable, perhaps capricious, natural world, which is the world of fairy tales, I think.

[SINGING]

Maria Schumann: I have been singing my whole life. And I started singing as a little kid with my mom, and she would take me to shape-note sings, and I would sit on her lap. And I learned all these German songs because she knew a lot of German songs from when she was a kid and had lived in Germany and some Russian and Slavic songs. And also Josh, my husband, we actually met each other and fell in love through our love of singing and especially Georgian songs from the country of Georgia. So, we sang these songs together for years, and then, we ended up getting married. And we were like, "Let's start a farm." And we started farming. But as the years went by, I also was suddenly like, "Oh my god, I get where these songs come from." Because I was singing all these traditional Eastern European Georgian songs that were all written, you know, by farmers, by peasants, by people who were living on the land, and maybe, they were singing about their animals or about the season change. This is like where these songs came from. And suddenly, it just seemed to make sense to sing them in this context like on the land, like let's sing to our apple trees, let's sing to our sheep, let's sing at dawn to the grass in the field to mark the passage of the seasons. And so, it was natural that when Ira was born, we would sing to him. And when he plays music on the piano, you might think he's just banging away on the piano, but actually, every single key represents a character in a story. So you know, the C might be Goldilocks, and D might be the littlest bear and the F-sharp might be Papa Bear. So, he'll play for a long time, and you'll ask him, what's going on? He's like: "I'm playing Goldilocks" or "I'm playing Tintin." You know...

[SINGING]

Erica Heilman: You go for walks?

Ira Karp: I do. To visit Granny. To visit Elka.

[PETER AND IRA WALKING AND SINGING]

Maria Schumann: There's a memorial in the pine forest for dead friends and family in our Bread and Puppet community. And it's just pine trees. There's just like tiny little sections where maybe some trees fell down, and there's something else growing. But it's incredibly beautiful because the trees are really tall and have no branches down low. They only have branches like way up high. So, you look up, and you can just see them like swaying in the wind. And you can see little bits of blue sky up there. It's a very beautiful place. And because there's like a little village filled with memorial houses for

people who are part of our community. And so, it has this feeling of, it's just a special place because that's where they are. And that's where people go to think about their dead. And my mother died last summer. And that's just been a big huge event for all of us. And we buried her in the pine forest. So, she has a grave there. And whenever Ira goes over there, at least once a week, sometimes three times a week for a visit. And they always walk there together, across the field, down the driveway, past the Bread and Puppet houses, across the busy road, and then through the field, and then into the forest. He really thinks of Granny being there. Like in that physical place. And that he can actually talk to her. Yeah.

Peter Schumann: But he has also figured out that she lives in that subterranean basement apartment there, but her spirit has flown out of it to somewhere else. He made that connection. I don't know what he imagines with it, but he has used these words.

[PETER AND IRA WALKING AND SINGING]

Ira Karp: Well, the pine forest walk is when you walk down to the farm and across the blacktop. And then on top of that hill, you see the pine forest. You go on the grasses, then you go up a hill, then that's the edge of the pine forest. Then, Grandpa knocks the door of the ravens.

Erica Heilman: He knocks the door of the ravens?

Ira Karp: Yeah.

Erica Heilman: Why?

Ira Karp: Why? To ask permission.

Erica Heilman: To ask permission?

Ira Karp: Yeah. Then after that, we went in the pine forest, and there's Granny's gravesite.

[PETER AND IRA ENTERING THE FOREST]

Ira Karp: Grandpa, go ahead!

Peter Schumann: Yeah? I am going ahead.

Ira Karp: You have to knock on the building doors!

Peter Schumann: Oh, we have to knock at the raven doors, yes.

Ira Karp: That's right. I have to ask their permission to go to the basement.

Peter Schumann: He retells the story of her burial and her decline, her last stroke, and the one stroke before that, in great, great detail. He's obsessed by details of those stories. So, he wants them, he retells them, again and again. He remembers the names of the nurses that came to pick her up. And the ambulance driver. All that. It's all part of his vocabulary. The story of going to the telephone, calling 911, getting somebody to come here, who it is who came, all that. That's his life, these stories. That's his life.

[PETER AND IRA AT ELKA'S GRAVESITE]

Ira Karp: Dear God. Granny, sleep well. I miss Granny so long.

Peter Schumann: Do you think you will get Granny back?

Ira Karp: Yes.

Peter Schumann: Yeah.

Ira Karp: I get Granny back.

Peter Schumann: Maybe. But different, right?

Ira Karp: Different.

Peter Schumann: Different.

Ira Karp: Sleep well in your resting place. But we will still come to visit you at summertime.

Peter Schumann: But also in the springtime too, right?

Ira Karp: Yes. And during your husband's birthday.

Peter Schumann: Yes. We will come here. Yes. I think so.

Ira Karp: Goodbye, Granny! And thank you very much. We'll come back.

[SINGING]

Erica Heilman: That was Ira Karp, his parents Josh Karp and Maria Schumann, his friend Clare Dolan, and his grandfather Peter Schumann. Josh and Maria's farm is called Cate Hill Orchard in Greensboro, Vermont. Ira's friend Clare Dolan is the maker of the Museum of Everyday Life, a beautiful collection of everyday objects, which lives in a barn in Glover, Vermont. The Bread and Puppet Theater was co-founded by Peter and Elka Schumann in the early '60s on the Lower East Side of New York City, and now it lives in Glover. They perform all around the world. Thanks to Jerome Lepani for letting me use a piece of his "Rapunzel" recording from the Bread and Puppet circus. Thanks most of all to Ira for letting me spend some time with him. And thanks to all of you for listening.

[SINGING ENDS]

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