

The Bigness of the World

the year that Ilsa Maria Lumpkin took care of us, Martin was ten going on eleven and I, eleven going on twelve. We considered ourselves almost adults, on the cusp of no longer requiring supervision, but because our days were far more interesting with Ilsa in them, we did not force the issue. Her job was to be there waiting when we arrived home from school, to prepare snacks and help with homework and ask about our days, for our parents were deeply involved at that time with what they referred to as their "careers," both of them spending long hours engaged in activities that seemed to Martin and me nebulous at best. We understood, of course, that our mother did something at our grandfather's bank, but when our father overheard us describing her job in this way to Ilsa, he admonished us later, saying, "Your mother is vice president of the bank. That is not just *something*."

Then, perhaps suspecting that his job seemed to us equally vague, he took out his wallet and handed Martin and me one of his business cards, on which was inscribed his name, Matthew Koeppe, and the words *PR Czar*. For several long seconds, Martin and I stared down at the card, and our father stared at us. I believe that he wanted to understand us, wanted to know, for example, how we viewed the world, what interested or frightened or perplexed us, but this required patience, something that our father lacked, for he simply did not have enough time at his disposal to be patient, to stand there and puzzle out what it was about his business card that we did not understand. Instead, he went quietly off to his study to make telephone calls, and the next day, I asked Ilsa what a *czar* was, spelling the word out because I could not imagine how to pronounce a *c* and *z* together, but she said that they were people who lived in Russia, royalty, which made no sense.

Ilsa often spent evenings with us as well, for our parents kept an intense social calendar, attending dinners that were, my mother explained, an extension of what she did all day long, but in more elegant clothing. Ilsa wore perfume when she came at night, and while neither Martin nor I liked the smell, we appreciated the gesture, the implication that she thought of being with us as an evening out. She also brought popsicles, which she hid in her purse because our parents did not approve of popsicles, though often she forgot about them until long after they had melted, and when she finally did remember and pulled them out, the seams of the packages oozing blue or red, our two favorite flavors, she would look dismayed for just a moment before announcing, “Not to worry, my young charges. We shall pop them in the freezer, and they will be as good as new.” Of course, they never were as good as new but were instead like popsicles that had melted and been refrozen—shapeless with a thick, gummy coating. We ate them anyway because we did not want to hurt Ilsa’s feelings, which we thought of as more real, more fragile, than other people’s feelings.

Most afternoons, the three of us visited the park near our house. Though it was only four blocks away, Ilsa inevitably began to cry at some point during the walk, her emotions stirred by any number of things, which she loosely identified as *death*, *beauty*, and *inhumanity*: the bugs caught in the grilles of the cars that we passed (death); two loose dogs humping on the sidewalk across our path (beauty); and the owners who finally caught up with them and forced them apart before they were finished (inhumanity). We were not used to adults who cried freely or openly, for this was Minnesota, where people guarded their emotions, a tradition in which Martin and I had been well schooled. Ilsa, while she was from here, was not, as my mother was fond of saying, *of* here, which meant that she did not become impatient or embarrassed when we occasionally cried as well. In fact, she encouraged it. Still, I was never comfortable when it happened

and did not want attention paid me over it—unlike Ilsa, who sank to the ground and sobbed while Martin and I sat on either side of her, holding her hands or resting ours on her back.

We also liked Ilsa because she was afraid of things, though not the normal things that we expected adults to be afraid of and certainly not the kinds of things that Martin and I had been taught to fear—strangers, candy found on the ground, accidentally poking out an eye. We kept careful track of her fears and divided them into two categories, the first comprising things of which she claimed to be “absolutely petrified,” her euphemism for those things that she deeply disliked, among them abbreviated language of any sort. Ilsa frequently professed her disdain for what she called “the American compulsion toward brevity.” She did not use contractions and scolded us when we did, claiming that they brought down the level of the conversation. Furthermore, when referring to people, she employed their full names: the first, what she called the “Christian” name although she was not, to my knowledge, actively religious; the middle, which she once described as a person’s essence; and the surname, the name that, for better or worse, bound them to their families.

Ilsa eschewed all acronyms and initialisms, even those so entrenched in our vocabularies that we could not recall what the initials stood for. She once left the following message on my parents’ answering machine: “I am very sorry that I will be unavailable to stay with the children Saturday evening, October 24, as I have been invited by a dear friend to spend the weekend in Washington, District of Columbia.” My parents listened to this message repeatedly, always maintaining a breathless silence until the very end, at which point they exploded into laughter. I did not understand what was funny about the message, but when I asked my mother to explain, she gave one of her typically vague responses. “That Ilsa,” she said. “She’s just such a pistol.” Something else must have occurred to her then, for a moment later she turned back to add, “We shouldn’t

mention this to Ilsa, Veronica. Sometimes families have their little jokes.” Of course, I had no intention of telling Ilsa, a decision based not on family allegiance but on my growing sense that laughter was rarely a straightforward matter.

My mother and Ilsa first met at Weight Brigade, to which my mother had belonged for years, certainly as long as I could remember, though she had never been fat, not even plump. She was fond of saying that she had no “love relationship” with food, lingo that she had picked up at her meetings, sitting amidst women who had not just love relationships with food but desperate, passionate affairs on the side. My mother, who kept track of numbers for a living, liked that Weight Brigade promoted a strict policy of calorie counting and exercise, which she thought of in terms of debits and credits, though I suspect that what she liked most of all was the easy sense of achievement that she felt there among women who struggled terribly, and often unsuccessfully, with their weight.

She rarely missed the weekly meetings, but because she preferred to compartmentalize the various areas of her life, she disapproved greatly of Weight Brigade’s phone-buddy system, under which she was paired with another member who might call her at any time, day or night, to discuss temptation. I once heard her tell my father that these conversations, mostly breathy descriptions of ice cream that only served to work her phone partner into a frenzy of desire, were akin to phone sex. After several minutes of listening to her phone buddy’s chatter, she would hear the freezer door open and the rattle of a cutlery drawer, and then her phone buddy would bid her an unintelligible goodbye, speaking through, as my mother liked to put it, “a mouthful of shame.”

Over the years, my mother was paired with numerous women (as well as one man), all of whom she alienated quickly, unable to sympathize with their constant cravings or the ease with which they capitulated. Furthermore, when they sobbed hysterically dur-

ing weigh-ins, she dealt with them sternly, even harshly, explaining that they knew the consequences of gorging themselves on potato chips and cookies, which made their responses to the weight gain disingenuous as far as she was concerned. My mother was always very clear in her opinions; she said that in banking one had to be, that she needed to be able to size people up quickly and then carry through on her assessment without hesitation or regret, a policy that she applied at home as well, which meant that if I failed to unload the dishwasher within two hours after it finished running or lied about completing a school assignment, she moved swiftly into punishment mode and became indignant when I feigned surprise. Among the members of Weight Brigade, her approach won her no few enemies. Eventually, she was no longer assigned phone buddies, and by the time she met Ilsa, the other members were refusing even to sit near my mother at meetings, though she claimed to be unbothered by this, citing envy as their sole motivation.

Ilsa was plump when we knew her but had not always been. This we learned from photographs of her holding animals from the pound where she volunteered, a variety of cats and dogs and birds for which she had provided temporary care. She went to Weight Brigade only that one time, the time that she met my mother, and never went back because she said that she could not bear to listen to the vilification of butter and sugar, but Martin and I had seen the lists that our mother kept of her own daily caloric intake, and we suspected that Ilsa had simply been overwhelmed by the math that belonging to Weight Brigade involved, for math was another thing that “absolutely petrified” Ilsa. When my parents asked how much they owed her, she always replied, “I am sure that you must know far better than I, for I have not the remotest idea.” And when Martin or I required help with our math homework, she answered in the high, quivery voice that she used when she sang opera: “Mathematics is an entirely useless subject, and we shall not waste our precious time on it.” Perhaps we

appeared skeptical, for she often added, “Really, my dear children, I cannot remember the last time that I used mathematics.”

Ilsa’s fear of math stemmed, I suspect, from the fact that she seemed unable to grasp even the basic tenets upon which math rested. Once, for example, after we had made a pizza together and taken it from the oven, she suggested that we cut it into very small pieces because she was ravenous and that way, she said, there would be more of it to go around.

“More pieces you mean?” we clarified tentatively.

“No, my silly billies. More pizza,” she replied confidently, and though we tried to convince her of the impossibility of such a thing, explaining that the pizza *was* the size it was, she had laughed in a way that suggested that she was charmed by our ignorance.

Ilsa wore colorful, flowing dresses and large hats that she did not take off, even when she opened the oven door to slide a pizza inside or sat eating refrozen popsicles with us on the back deck. Her evening hats were more complicated than the daytime hats, involving not just bows but flowers and actual feathers and even, on the hat that Martin and I privately referred to as “Noah’s Ark,” a simple diorama of three-dimensional animals made of pressed felt. Martin and I considered Ilsa’s hats extremely *tasteful*, a word that we had heard our parents use often enough to have developed a feel for. That is, she did not wear holiday-themed hats decked with Christmas tree balls or blinking Halloween pumpkins, although she did favor pastels at Easter. Still, Ilsa’s hats really only seemed appropriate on the nights that she sang opera, belting out arias while we sat on the sofa and listened. Once, she performed Chinese opera for us, which was like nothing that we had ever heard before and which we both found startling and a little frightening.

Later, when we told our parents that Ilsa had sung Chinese opera for us, our mother looked perplexed and said, “I didn’t know that Ilsa knew Chinese.”

“She doesn’t,” we replied. “She just makes it up.” And then Martin and I proceeded to demonstrate, imitating the sounds that Ilsa had made, high-pitched, nasally sounds that resembled the word *sure*. Our parents looked troubled by this and said that they did not want us making fun of Chinese opera, which they called an ancient and respected art form.

“But we aren’t making fun of it,” I replied. “We like it.” This was true, but they explained that if we really liked it, we wouldn’t feel compelled to imitate it, which Martin and I later agreed made no sense. We did not say so to my parents because about some things there was simply no arguing. We knew that they had spoken to Ilsa as well, for she did not sing Chinese opera again, sticking instead with Puccini and Wagner though she did not know Italian or German either.

My mother, in sartorial contrast to Ilsa, favored tailored trousers, blazers, and crisply ironed shirts, and when my father occasionally teased her about her wardrobe, pointing out that it was possible to look vice presidential without completely hiding her figure, my mother sternly reminded him that the only figures she wanted her clients thinking about were the ones that she calculated for their loans. My mother liked clothes well enough but shopped mainly by catalog in order to save time, which meant that the ups driver visited our house frequently. His name was Bruce, and Martin and I had always known him as a sullen man who did not respond to questions about his well-being, the weather, or his day, which were the sorts of questions that our parents and the babysitters prior to Ilsa tended to ask. Ilsa, however, was not interested in such things. Rather, she offered him milk on overcast days and pomegranate juice, which my parents stocked for her, on sunny, and then, as Bruce stood on the front step drinking his milk or pomegranate juice, she asked him whether he had ever stolen a package (no) and whether he had ever opened a package out of curiosity (yes, one time, but the contents had disappointed him greatly).

Martin and I generally stood behind Ilsa during these conversations, peering around her and staring at Bruce, in awe of his transformation into a pleasant human being, but when we heard her soliciting tips on how to pack her hats so that they would not be damaged during shipping, we both stepped forward, alarmed. "Are you moving?" we asked, for we lived in fear of losing Ilsa, believing, I suppose, that we did not really deserve her.

"No, my dears. I'm simply gathering information." She clasped her hands in front of her as she did when she sang opera, the right one curled down over the left as though her fingers were engaged in a tug-of-war. "It is a very sad thing that nowadays there is so little useless information," she declaimed, affecting even more of a British accent than she normally did. "That is our beloved Oscar, of course," she added, referring to Oscar Wilde, whom she was fond of quoting.

When Bruce left, she first washed his glass and then phoned my mother at work to let her know of the package's arrival, despite the fact that packages were delivered almost daily. My mother, who was fond of prefacing comments with the words, "I'm a busy woman," rarely took these calls. Instead, Ilsa left messages with my mother's secretary, Kenneth Bloomquist, their conversation generally evolving as follows: "Hello, Mr. Bloomquist. This is Ilsa Maria Lumpkin. Would you be so kind as to let Mrs. Koepe know that the United Parcel Service driver has left a package?" She ended each call with neither a *goodbye* nor a *thank you* but with a statement of the time. "It is precisely 4:17 post meridiem," she would say, for even when it came to time, abbreviations were unacceptable.

Then there were the things of which Ilsa truly was afraid, but they, too, were things that I had never known adults to be afraid of. One night, as Martin and I sat at the dining room table completing our homework while Ilsa prepared grilled cheese sandwiches with pick-

les, she began to scream from the kitchen, a loud, continuous ejection of sound not unlike the honking of a car horn. Martin and I leapt up as one and rushed to her, both of us, I suspect, secretly wanting to be the one to calm her, though in those days he and I were rarely competitive.

“What is it?” we cried out in unison, and she pointed mutely to the bread, but when Martin examined the loaf, he found nothing odd save for a bit of green mold that had formed along the top crust. Ilsa would not go near the bread and begged him to take it into the garage and dispose of it immediately. He did not, for we both knew that my parents would not approve of such wastefulness, not when the mold could be scraped off and the bread eaten. I do not mean to suggest that my parents were in any way stingy, for they were not. However, they did not want money to stand between us and common sense, did not want us growing up under what my father was fond of calling “the tutelage of wastefulness.” They were no longer churchgoers, either one of them, but Martin and I were raised according to the tenets of their residual Protestantism.

Ilsa was also deeply afraid to ride in cars with power windows, which both of ours had and which meant that she would not accept a ride home, even at the end of a very late evening. “What would happen if you were to drive into a lake?” she asked my father each time he suggested it. “However would we escape?” When my father explained to her that there were no lakes, no bodies of water of any sort, along the twelve blocks that lay between our house and her apartment, which was actually a tiny guest cottage behind another house, she laughed at him the way that she had laughed at Martin and me when we tried to explain about the pizza.

Our neighborhood was quite safe, but my father still felt obligated to walk Ilsa home, and while he complained mightily about having to do so, he always returned disheveled and laughing, and eventually my mother suggested that she walk Ilsa home sometimes instead,

not because she distrusted my father, for she did not, but because she too wanted to return humming and laughing, her clothing wrinkled and covered with twigs. Martin and I encouraged this as well because we were worried about our mother, who had become increasingly distracted and often yelled at us for small things, for counting too slowly when she asked us to check how many eggs were left in the carton or forgetting to throw both dirty socks into the hamper. Of course most people will hear “twigs” and “clothing wrinkled” and think sex, and while I cannot absolutely rule this out, I am fairly sure that these outings did not involve anything as mundane as sex in the park. My certainty is based not on the child’s inability to imagine her parents engaged in such things; they were probably not swingers in the classic sense of the word, but they were products of the time and just conservative enough on the surface to suggest the possibility. No, my conviction lies entirely with Ilsa.

It was my fault that things with Ilsa came to an end. One evening, after my father returned from walking her home, he went into the bathroom to brush his teeth and noticed that his toothbrush was wet. “Has one of you been playing with my toothbrush?” he asked from the hallway outside our bedrooms.

“No, Ilsa used it,” I said at last, but only after he had come into my bedroom and turned on the light. “We had carrots, and she needs to brush her teeth immediately after she eats colorful foods.”

My father stared at me for a moment. “Does Ilsa always use my toothbrush?”

“No,” I said patiently. “Only when we have colorful foods.” This was true. She had not used it since we had radishes the week before.

The next morning behind closed doors, he and my mother discussed Ilsa while Martin and I attempted, unsuccessfully, to eavesdrop. In the end, neither of them wanted to confront Ilsa about the toothbrush because they found it embarrassing. Instead, they decided to tell Ilsa that Martin and I had become old enough to

supervise ourselves. We protested, suggesting that we simply buy Ilsa her own toothbrush, but my father and mother said that it was more than the toothbrush and that we really were old enough to stay alone. We insisted that we were not, but the call to Ilsa was made.

Nonetheless, for the next several weeks, my father was there waiting for us when we returned from school each day. He told us that he had made some scheduling changes at work, called in some favors, but we did not know what this meant because we still did not understand what our father did. He spent most afternoons on the telephone, talking in a jovial voice that became louder when he wanted something and louder again when the other party agreed. He did not make snacks for us, so Martin and I usually peeled carrots and then sat on my bed eating them as we talked about Ilsa, primarily concerning ourselves with two questions: whether she missed us and how we might manage to see her again. The latter was answered soon enough, for during the third week of this new arrangement, my father announced that he and my mother needed to go somewhere the next afternoon and that we would be left alone in order to prove our maturity.

The next day, we watched our parents drive away. Once they were out of sight, I began counting to two hundred and eighty, for that, Ilsa had once explained, was the amount of time that it took the average person to realize that he or she had left something behind. "Two hundred and eighty," I announced several minutes later, and since our parents had not reappeared, we went into our bedrooms and put on our dress clothes, Martin a suit and tie, which he loved having the opportunity to wear, and I, a pair of dress slacks and a sweater, which is what I generally wore for holidays and events that my parents deemed worthy of something beyond jeans. Then, because we did not have a key, we locked the door of the house from the inside and climbed out a side window, leaving it slightly ajar behind us. We knew where Ilsa lived, for our parents had pointed it

out on numerous occasions, and we set off running toward her in our dress shoes, but when we were halfway there, Martin stopped suddenly.

“We don’t have anything for her,” he said. “We can’t go without something. It wouldn’t be right.”

Martin was what some of the boys in his class called a *sissy* because he did not like games that involved pushing or hitting, preferring to jump rope during recess, and because he always considered the feelings of others. Though I wanted to think that I too considered the feelings of others, I often fell short, particularly when it was not convenient to do so or when my temper dictated otherwise. When it came to pushing and hitting, Martin and I fully parted ways, for I was fond of both activities. Thus, several months earlier, when I heard that three of Martin’s classmates had called him a *sissy*, I waited for them after school and threatened to punch the next one who used the word. I should mention that while Martin had inherited my mother’s slender build, I took after my father, a man who had once picked up our old refrigerator by himself and carried it out to the garage, and so the three boys had looked down at the ground for a moment and then, one by one, slunk away. When we got home, I told Ilsa what had happened, and Martin stood nearby, listening to me relate the story with a thoughtful expression on his face. He had a habit of standing erectly, like a dancer, and when I finished, she turned to him and said, “Why, it is a marvelous thing to be a *sissy*, Martin. You will enjoy your life much more than those boys. You will be able to cook and enjoy flowers and appreciate all sorts of music. I absolutely adore *sissies*.”

Thus, when Martin insisted that we could not visit Ilsa without a gift, I did not argue, for I trusted Martin about such things. We turned and ran back home, re-entering through the window, and Martin went into the kitchen and put together a variety of spices—cloves, a stick of cinnamon, and a large nutmeg pit—which he wrapped in cheesecloth and tied carefully with a piece of ribbon.

“That’s not a gift,” I said, but Martin explained to me patiently that it was, was, in fact, the sort of gift Ilsa would love.

Fifteen minutes later, we stood on the porch of Ilsa’s cottage, waiting for her to answer the door. We had already knocked three times, and I knocked twice more before I finally turned to Martin and asked fretfully, “What if she’s not home?” To be honest, it had never occurred to us that Ilsa might not be home, for we could only think of Ilsa in regard to ourselves, which meant that when she was not with us, she was here, at her cottage, because we were incapable of imagining her elsewhere—certainly not with another family, caring for children who were not us.

“She must be at the pound,” I said suddenly and with great relief.

But Ilsa was home. As we were about to leave, she opened her door and stared at us for several distressing seconds before pulling us to her tightly. “My bunnies!” she cried out, and we thought that she meant us, but she pulled us inside and shut the door, saying, “Quickly now, before their simple little minds plot an escape,” and we realized then that she truly meant rabbits.

“Martin,” she said, looking him up and down, her voice low and unsteady, and then she turned and scrutinized me as well. Her hair was pulled back in a very loose French braid, and she was not wearing a hat, the first time that either of us had seen her without one. It felt strange to be standing there in her tiny cottage, stranger yet to be seeing her without a hat, intimate in a way that seemed almost unbearable.

“You’re not wearing a hat,” Martin said matter-of-factly.

“I was just taking a wee nap,” she replied. I could see that this was true, for her face was flushed and deeply creased from the pillow, her eyes dull with slumber, as though she had been sleeping for some time.

“We brought you something,” said Martin, holding up the knotted cheesecloth.

“How lovely,” she exclaimed, clapping her hands together clumsily

before taking the ball of spices and holding it to her nose with both hands. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, but the moment went on and on, becoming uncomfortable.

“Kikes!” screamed a voice from a corner of the room, and Ilsa’s eyes snapped open. “Kikes and dykes!” screamed the voice again.

“Martin, I will not tolerate such language,” Ilsa said firmly.

“It wasn’t me,” said Martin, horrified, for we both knew what the words meant.

“I think it was him,” I said, pointing to the corner where a large cage hung, inside of which perched a shabby-looking green parrot. The bird regarded us for a moment, screeched, “Ass pirates and muff divers!” leaned over, and tossed a beakful of seeds into the air like confetti.

“Of course it was him,” said Ilsa. “The foul-mouthed rascal. I saved his life, but he hardly seems grateful. His name is Martin.”

“Martin?” said Martin happily. “Like me?”

“Yes, I named him after you, my dear, though it was wishful thinking on my part. I dare say you could teach him a thing or two about manners.”

“Why does he say those things?” asked Martin.

“Martin ended up at the pound a few months ago after his former owner, a thoroughly odious man, died in a house fire—he fell asleep smoking a cigar. Martin escaped through a window, but it seems there is no undoing the former owner’s work, which made adoption terribly unlikely. They were going to put him down, so I have taken him instead.” She sighed. “The bunnies—poor souls—are absolutely terrified of him.”

Martin and I looked around Ilsa’s living room, trying to spot the bunnies, but the only indication of them lay in the fact that Ilsa had covered her small sofa and arm chair with plastic wrap as though she were about to paint the walls. “Where are the bunnies?” I asked. I did not say so, but I was afraid of rabbits, for I had been bitten by

one at an Easter event at the shopping mall several years earlier. In truth, it had been nothing more than a nibble, but it had startled me enough that I had dropped the rabbit and then been scolded by the teenage attendant for my carelessness.

“I should imagine that they are in the *escritoire*,” she said, and Martin nodded as though he knew what the *escritoire* was.

“Come,” said Ilsa. “Let us go into the kitchen, away from this bad-mannered fellow. We shall mull some cider using your extraordinarily thoughtful gift.”

We huddled at a square yellow table inside her small, dreary kitchen, watching her pour cider from a jug into a saucepan, focusing as deeply on this task as someone charged with splitting a neutron. “How are you, Ilsa?” asked Martin, sounding strangely grown up. She dropped the spice ball into the pan, adjusted the flame, and only then turned to answer.

“I am positively exuberant,” she replied. “Indeed, Martin, things could not be better here at 53 Ridgecrest Drive.” She paused, as though considering what topic we might discuss next, and then she asked how we were and, after we had both answered that we were well, she asked about our parents. We were in the habit of answering Ilsa honestly, and so I told her that our parents seemed strange lately.

“Strange?” she said, her mouth curling up as though the word had a taste attached to it that she did not care for.

“Yes,” I said. “For one thing, our father is home every day when we arrive from school”—Martin looked at me, for on the way over we had agreed that we would not tell Ilsa this, lest it hurt her feelings to know that our parents had lied, so I went on quickly—“and our mother is gone until very late most nights, and when she is home, she hardly speaks, even to our father.”

“I see,” said Ilsa, but not as though she really did, and then she stood and ladled up three cups of cider, which she placed on saucers

and carried to the table, one cup at a time. She fished out the soggy bundle of spices and placed that on a fourth saucer, which she set in the middle of the table as though it were a centerpiece, something aesthetically pleasing for us to consider as we sipped our cider.

“I may presume that your parents are aware of your visit to me?” she said, and we both held our cups to our mouths and blew across the surface of the cider, watching as it rippled slightly, and finally Martin replied that they were not.

“Children,” Ilsa said, “that will not do.” This was the closest that Ilsa had ever come to actually scolding us, though her tone spoke more of exhaustion than disapproval, and we both looked up at her sadly.

“I shall ring them immediately,” she said.

“They aren’t home,” I told her.

Ilsa consulted her watch, holding it up very close to her eyes in order to make out the numbers because the watch was tiny, the face no larger than a dime. Once I had asked Ilsa why she did not get a bigger watch, one that she could simply glance at the way that other people did, but she said that that was precisely the reason—that one should never get into the habit of glancing at one’s watch. “Please excuse me, my dears. I see that it is time to visit my apothecary,” she said, and she stood and left the room.

“What is her apothecary?” I asked Martin, whispering, and he whispered back that he did not know but that perhaps she was referring to the bathroom.

We were quiet then, studying Ilsa’s kitchen in a way that we had not been able to do when she was present. There was only one window, a single pane that faced a cement wall. This accounted for the dreariness, this and the fact that the room was tiny, three or even four times smaller than our kitchen. When I commented on this to Martin, he said, “I think that Ilsa’s kitchen is the perfect size. You know what she always says—that she gets lost in our kitchen.” But his tone was defensive, and I knew that he was disappointed as well.

“There’s no island,” I said suddenly. Our parents’ kitchen had not one island but two, which Ilsa had given names. The one nearest the stove she called Jamaica and the other, Haiti, and when we helped her cook, she would hand us things, saying, “Ferry this cutting board over to Haiti,” and “Tomatoes at the south end of Jamaica, please.” Once, during a period when she had been enamored of religious dietary restrictions, she had announced, “Dairy on Jamaica, my young sous chefs. Meat on Haiti,” and we had cooked the entire meal according to her notions of kosher, though when it came time to eat, she had forgotten about the rules, stacking cheese and bacon on our hamburgers and pouring us each a large glass of milk.

From the other room, we heard a sound like maracas being rattled, which made me think of our birthdays because our parents always took us to Mexican Village, where a mariachi band came to our table and sang “Happy Birthday” in Spanish. We heard water running and then the parrot screaming obscenities again as Ilsa passed through the living room and back into the kitchen. She had put on a hat, one that we had not seen before, white with a bit of peacock feather glued to one side.

“This has been an absolutely splendid visit, but I must be getting the two of you home,” she said. “Gather your things, my goslings.” But we had come with nothing save the spices, which now sat in a pool of brown liquid, and so we had no things to gather.

When we arrived home that afternoon, our father was already there, waiting for us at the dining room table, where he sat with the tips of his hands pressed together forming a peak. He did not ask where we had been but instead told us to sit down because he needed to explain something to us, something about our mother, who would not be coming home that day. “You know that your mother works for your grandfather?” he began, and we nodded and waited. “Well, your grandfather has done something wrong. He’s taken money from the bank.”

“But it’s his bank,” I replied.

“Yes,” said my father. “But the money is not his. It belongs to the people who use the bank, who put their money there so that it will be safe.”

Again, we nodded, for we understood this about banks. In fact, we both had our own accounts at the bank, where we kept the money that we received for our birthdays. “He stole money?” I asked, for that is how it sounded, and I wanted to be sure.

“Well,” said my father. “It’s called embezzling.” But when I looked up embezzling that evening, I discovered that our grandfather had indeed stolen money.

“And what about our mother?” Martin asked.

“It’s complicated,” said our father, “but they’ve arrested her also.”

“Arrested?” I said, for there had been no talk of arresting before this.

“Yes,” said my father, and then he began to cry.

We had never seen our father cry. He was, I learned that day, a silent crier. He laid his head on the table, his arms forming a nest around it, and we knew that he was crying only because his shoulders heaved up and down. I sat very still, not looking at him because I did not know how to think of him as anything but my father, instead focusing on the overhead light, waiting for it to click, which it generally did every thirty seconds or so. The sound was actually somewhere between a click and a scratch, easy to hear but apparently difficult to fix, for numerous electricians had been called in to do so and had failed. I had always complained mightily about the clicking, which prevented me from concentrating on my homework, but that day as I sat at the table with my weeping father and Martin, the light was silent, unexpectedly and overwhelmingly silent.

Then, without first consulting me with his eyes, our custom in matters relating to our parents, Martin slipped from his chair and stood next to my father, and, after a moment, placed a hand on

my father's shoulder. In those days, Martin's hands were unusually plump, at odds with the rest of his body, and from where I sat, directly across from my father, Martin's hand looked like a fat, white bullfrog perched on my father's shoulder. My father's sobbing turned audible, a high-pitched whimper like a dog makes when left alone in a car, and then quickly flattened out and stopped.

"It will be okay," Martin said, rubbing my father's shoulder with his fat, white hand, and my father sat up and nodded several times in rapid succession, gulping as though he had been underwater.

But it would not be okay. After a very long trial, my mother went to jail, eight years with the possibility of parole after six. My grandfather was put on trial as well, but he died of a heart attack on the second day, leaving my mother to face the jury and crowded courtroom alone. Her lawyers wanted to blame everything on him, arguing that he was dead and thus unable to deny the charges or be punished, advice that my mother resisted until it became clear that she might be facing an even longer sentence. Martin and I learned all of this from the newspaper, which we were not supposed to read but did, and from the taunts hurled at us by children who used to be our friends but were no longer allowed to play with us because many of their parents had money in my grandfather's bank and even those who didn't felt that my mother had betrayed the entire community.

We missed her terribly in the beginning, my father most of all, though I believe that he grieved not at being separated from her but because the person she was, or that he had thought she was, no longer existed, which meant that he grieved almost as though she were dead. There was some speculation in the newspaper about my father, about what was referred to as his "possible complicity," but I remain convinced to this day that my father knew nothing about what had been going on at the bank, though whether it was true that it was all my grandfather's doing, that my mother had been nothing more than a loyal daughter as her lawyers claimed—this I will never know. Martin was of the opinion that it shouldn't matter, not to us,

but I felt otherwise, particularly when he came home from school with scratches and bruises and black eyes that I knew were given to him because of her, though he always shrugged his shoulders when my father asked what had happened to him and, with a small smile, gave the same reply: "Such is the life of a fairy." My father did not know how to respond to words like *sissy* and *fairy*, nor to the matter-of-fact manner in which Martin uttered them, and so he said nothing, rubbing his ear vigorously for a moment and then turning away, as was his habit when presented with something that he would rather not hear.

Of course, as Ilsa walked us home from her cottage that day, we had no inkling of what lay ahead, no way of knowing that the familiar terrain of our childhoods would soon become a vast, unmarked landscape in which we would be left to wander, motherless and, it seemed to us at times, fatherless as well. Rather, as we walked along holding hands with Ilsa, our concerns were immediate. I fretted aloud that our parents would be angry, but Ilsa assured me that they were more likely to be worried, and though I did not like the idea of worrying them, it seemed far preferable to their anger. There was also the matter of Ilsa herself, Ilsa, who, even with her hat on, seemed unfamiliar, and so Martin and I worked desperately to interest her in the things that we saw around us, things that would have normally moved her to tears but which she now seemed hardly to notice. Across our path was a snail that had presumably been wooed out onto the sidewalk during the previous day's rain and crushed to bits by passersby. I stopped and pointed to it, waiting for her to cry out, "Death, be not proud!" and then to squeeze her eyes shut while allowing us to lead her safely past it, but she glanced at the crushed bits with no more interest than she would have shown a discarded candy wrapper.

As we neared our house, I could see my father's car in the driveway. "Can we visit you again, Ilsa?" I asked, turning to her.

“I am afraid that that will not be possible, children,” she said. “You see, I will be setting off very soon—really any day now—on a long journey. I suspect that I may be gone for quite some time.”

“Are you going to see the ocean?” I asked. At that time in my life I could not imagine anything more terrifying than the ocean, which I knew about only from maps and school and movies.

“Yes,” she said after giving the question some thought. “As a matter of fact, I believe that I will see the ocean. Have you ever seen the ocean, children?” Martin and I replied that we had not.

“But you must,” she said gravely. “You absolutely must see the ocean.”

“Why?” I asked, both frightened and encouraged by her tone. “Why must we?”

“Well,” she said after a moment. “However can you expect to understand the bigness of the world if you do not see the ocean?”

“Is there no other way?” Martin asked.

“I suppose there are other ways,” Ilsa conceded. “Though certainly the ocean is the most effective.”

“But why must we understand the bigness of the world?” I asked.

We were in front of our house by then, and Ilsa stopped and looked at us. “My dear Martin and Veronica,” she said in the high, quivery voice that we had been longing for. “I know it may sound frightening, yet I assure you that there have been times in my life when the bigness of the world was my only consolation.”

Then, she gave us each a small kiss on the forehead, and we watched her go, her gait unsteady like that of someone thinking too much about the simple act of walking, her white hat bobbing like a sail. At the corner she stopped and turned, and seeing us there still, called, “In you go, children. Your parents will be waiting,” so that these were Ilsa’s final words to us—ordinary and rushed and, as we would soon discover, untrue.